UNPACKING EXCESSIVE GAMING: A POLITICAL ECONOMY AND IDEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF GAME NOGADA

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This study examines a particular form of excessive gaming, that is, game nogada. Game nogada is a Korean game culture term that refers to repetitive, monotonous, labor-like game activities, which I define in this study as excessive game labor induced by the game reward system (or what I call nogada game system) and voluntarily done by gamers as ideological subjects. In order to provide an alternative approach to the psychological game addiction discourse, which deals with excessive gaming from the perspective of individualist-reductionism, this dissertation integrates a political economy approach with a cultural studies approach. From a political economy perspective, on the one hand, this study examines the relationship between game nogada and the nogada game system of *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). From a cultural studies perspective, this study analyzes how the ideology reflected in Korean *WoW* gamers' game culture encourages players to engage in excessive game labor.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In South Korea, where the game industry functions as an advanced guard for economic prosperity, what is described as excessive online gaming is considered to be a serious social problem. The dominant Korean academic approach to excessive gaming is a psychological one that understands excessive gaming as a form of addiction and thus defines it in terms of the negative effects it has on a "normal" person's life.

This perspective tends to locate the cause of game addiction in the "abnormality" of the individual gamer's self or individualized contexts—gaming, like gambling or alcoholism is considered a disease. Understanding excessive gaming as a disease suggests a limited solution by "normalizing" or correcting individual abnormality or deviance. Korean psychological game addiction discourse provides only a limited framework for understanding the phenomenon of excessive play. By taking an individualist-reductionist approach, it reduces game addiction to a matter of individual problems and ignores the various contexts in which play takes place, including the inner world of the human being, family situation, characteristics of online games, and competitive relationships among civil society, the state and capitalism (Kim, 2010). The limitations of the individualist-reductionism of psychological game addiction discourse suggest the necessity of understanding excessive gaming in its broader economic and socio-cultural contexts and providing an analysis that does not reduce excessive gaming to a matter of individual pathology, removed from both political economic and ideological contexts.

1. Research Objectives and Motivation

My own gaming experience as a hardcore *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) gamer was a key motivation for undertaking this research, since it defied the individualistic-reductionism of the dominant game addiction discourse. *World of Warcraft* is a massively multiplayer online game (MMO) developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment (or Blizzard), an American video game developer and publisher based in Irvine, California, and the game at various times has had between around 4.88 million and 12 million subscribers across the globe. During my summer break 2009, when I was pursuing my master's degree in South Korea, I played *WoW* for 10 to 12 hours per day and spent about $600 (U.S.) buying gold, the in-game currency of *WoW*.

My gaming experience as a hardcore gamer in *WoW* was not always pleasurable. I spent a fair amount of time repeating monotonous and repetitive gaming activities to obtain game items I needed to advance my game characters, which often was a tedious, unpleasant, and sometimes laborious experience. This boring and repetitive gaming experience is called "game nogada" in Korean game culture. In Korean, "nogada" refers to hard manual labor. Game nogada is a term used by Korean gamers to describe the monotonous gaming play induced by the game system itself, and it roughly (as we will see) corresponds to "grinding" in North American game culture. Korean gamers compare the game activity associated with such negative emotions with hard labor (or nogada) rather than play. From that point of view, game nogada can be defined as "game labor" with negative characteristics.

I began playing *WoW* in 2009 as a social experience, when a friend of mine recommended it. At the time, I was an experienced gamer who was skilled at other games (such as *Starcraft*). Thus, when my friend suggested we play *WoW* together, I thought I

would be good at this game without much effort. However, when I started playing this game, I was initially puzzled; unfamiliar with the user interface of *WoW*, I did not know what to do with my level one game character. My friend suggested I join the guild (guilds are groups of players who join together to share resources and conquer higher-level quests and raids in which players must defeat high-level monsters) to which he belonged. The guild members welcomed me and advised me to set a goal to reach the maximum character level by performing quests.[1] They also advised me that I needed to achieve the max character level before I could participate in raids with them.[2]

Leveling up my game character was an exciting new experience at first, but the novelty soon began to wear off. As I leveled up, I noticed that the quests I performed had the same structure, and basically, the game demanded me to perform nearly identical activities repeatedly. Gradually, the process of leveling up my game character became boring. My guild members advised me to be patient, since a new game world would open up if I reach the max character level, and after about two and a half months, I finally achieved the max level (level 80 at that time). However, that joy began to dissipate when my guild members told me that "*WoW* starts from max character level," meaning that all the labor I had performed so far was just the beginning. In fact, I needed to replace all the gear I had acquired with better gear in order to be allowed to participate in raids. Thus began another tedious process in which I had to obtain gear items in five-player dungeons

[1]A quest refers to an in-game task of *WoW* given to a gamer's game character, which yields in-game rewards (such as gold, game items, and experience points required to level up a game character) when completed.

[2]Raid is the end-game content of *WoW* in which a group of gamers (more than five and up to 30) attempt to defeat another number of non-player characters (NPCs) in a player-vs-environment (PvE) battlefield area called raid dungeons.

and then acquire some raid items in lower level raids to participate in the higher difficulty raids my guild was playing at that time. Such a process was not as easy as they made it sound. I had to keep playing the same five-players dungeons over and over again until I could obtain the right game items for my game character. In addition, after acquiring all the items I could get from the five-player dungeons, I tried to participate in lower level raids suitable for my character, but it was difficult to find a raid group that would accept a novice gamer with no raid experience.

At that point my guild members advised me to participate in a raid called the "Sa-Jang Party" as a "Sa-Jang" with the gold I had accumulated so far. In the Sa-Jang Party, the role given to me in the process of raid battle as a Sa-Jang was that of a spectator who did nothing but watched other gamers, called "Seon-Su," who defeated raid boss monsters one by one on behalf of Sa-Jang gamers like myself. After the raid combats were over, and when the raid items were distributed among raid participants in the form of gold auction (which is the raid item distribution rule used in a raid group called the "Gold Party" in Korea), as a Sa-Jang, I was allowed to buy the raid items with my own gold. (All gold collected through the raid item auction was evenly distributed among the Seon-Su gamers).

My first raid experience ended after spending all the hard-earned 5,000 gold I had accumulated over two months to buy five raid items. I had to participate at least three or four more times as a Sa-Jang in order to go to high difficulty raids dungeons with my guild members, which would cost a lot of additional gold. Since the ordinary methods of producing gold in the game (hunting monsters, performing quests, etc.) required too much time to accumulate enough gold to buy high-priced raid items, I ended up buying

gold with real money. After buying raid items with the gold I purchased with real money, I was finally able to participate in raids with my guild members. Still, I kept doing real money trading (RMT) of gold to obtain better raid items essential to making my game character stronger.

Unlike the U.S. context, where engaging in RMT is broadly considered to be cheating, engaging in RMT of gold was a common phenomenon among Korean raid gamers. Korean players cared less about process than outcomes. They did not care where the gold came from, but only how to earn as much gold as possible in order to enhance their status in the game. Participating in high level difficulty raids not only immersed me in *WoW*, it also provided an immersive experience in Korean raid gamers' culture. Korean raid gamers tend to look up to those who conquered the highest difficulty raid, envy the raid items that those top raid gamers had, and consider conquering high difficulty raids faster than others as the game's primary goal—conquering most difficult raids faster than others indicated that one possessed superior game skills. However, gamers did not necessarily have to conquer the most difficult raid dungeons to show their in-game prowess. For example, game characters' combat power is marked as a numerical point in the game, so Korean players competed to get the highest possible number. The key way to gain a competitive edge is to acquire better raid items more quickly than anyone else. Because Korean raid gamers attach a significant value to raid items and compete to acquire better raid items, when high-end raid items were auctioned in a Gold Party, the gold prices were very high.

Playing *WoW* as a Korean raid gamer means being part of this highly competitive culture, where gamers compete to make their game character more powerful. Like other

Korean raid gamers, I tried to conquer high difficulty raid dungeons by making my game character more powerful, and to that end, I invested much time in various kinds of game nogada that could help enhance my game character's power. This drive to enhance power and status in the game is one of the factors that induces Korean raid gamers including me to do excessive gaming in *WoW*.

As my raid experience gradually accumulated and my game character became strong enough to participate in raids as a Seon-Su gamer, I started to receive the gold distribution in the Sa-Jang Party I participated in. Receiving gold distribution as a Seon-Su gamer was a quick way to earn a fairly large amount of gold in a short period. However, since I only had the chance to participate in the Sa-Jang Party once a week with one game character, I started advancing alternative characters (or "Alts") to the point that I could participate in the Sa-Jang Party as a Seon-Su gamer with my Alts so that I could earn more gold. This process was far more tedious than when I advanced my first character because I had to repeat exactly the same actions I had already performed. Nevertheless, I endured this process in the interests of earning the gold necessary to continue to increase my characters' power. In this way, I advanced 10 different game characters with which I could participate in the Sa-Jang Party as a Seon-Su gamer. From then on, I was able to earn enough gold to buy high-end raid items, and I stopped doing RMT.

However, in return, I conquered the same raid dungeons at least 10 times a week. Raiding was no longer a challenging experience for me. It did not provide new experiences and instead offered the experience of doing the same quests repeatedly to earn gold. However, I kept participating in raids to earn gold from them and, above all, to

show off my game characters' power to other gamers. In the end, I kept doing game nogada, excessive gaming, and also RMT to make my game characters more powerful than others. In the process, I gradually realized that in such competitive raid gamers culture, even my friend and other guild members were my competitors. During this period, I became a hardcore gamer who did excessive gaming in *WoW*, but this experience ended when I had to stop playing the game to write my master's thesis.

While completing my Ph.D. coursework, I played the game intermittently without participating in any raids, instead observing what was happening in the community of Korean *WoW* gamers. Several new expansion packs of *WoW* were released during this time, and the game contents changed somewhat dramatically as Blizzard (the game's developer) attempted to maintain a shrinking player base. However, there were no noticeable changes in terms of the game culture, except that Korean *WoW* gamers needed much more gold to obtain raid items in the Gold Party because of ongoing gold inflation.

When I restarted playing the game in 2018, I noticed a significant change had occurred in Korean raid gamers' culture. Korean raid gamers were no longer selecting raid participants on the basis of gear, a primary method to select eligible raid gamers when I played the game before. Instead, they were selecting raid participants according to individual gamers' Log Score, which is the ranking score of each gamer based on their past gaming performance they have shown in a particular raid dungeon. This was a more rigid approach to selecting raid participants than the former method of checking the level of game items with which their game characters are equipped. It meant that gamers were no longer eligible to participate in high level difficulty raids only by purchasing raid items through RMT. Gamers still needed a large amount of gold to buy raid items, but

they also needed a high Log Score to challenge the high difficulty raids. Also, in the past, if the final goal of raid gamers was to acquire high level items by conquering high level difficulty raid dungeons, their ultimate goal, at that time, was to get the highest possible Log Score. Such a change in goal meant that the endpoint they strive to reach no longer exists, so the game time they need to invest to achieve their goal has no end. Equipping one's game character with only high-end raid items is possible, although it requires a tremendous amount of time. However, getting a higher Log Score is a goal without limit and thus requires endless game time because gamers not only compete with other gamers for a higher Log Score but also compete with themselves to break their own records.

In short, as a hardcore gamer in *WoW* until I stopped playing the game to earn my master's degree, I spent a significant amount of time and money on *WoW*, which would be enough to be considered the excessive gaming characteristic of game addiction. For example, the excessive spending on the RMT of game items or RMT itself has been framed under the Korean game addiction discourse as being both the cause and effect of game addictions. For those who do not play games or are not invested in game cultures, gamers who spend $600 to purchase a virtual sword in a MMO would be easily regarded as game addicts or naïve consumers, while those same critics may willingly pay the same amount of money to purchase high-priced brand-name sunglasses, bags or shoes, consumer behaviors considered "normal."

Contrary to the claims of game addiction discourse, I did not suffer from mental illness, social isolation, or serious problems with my family and peer groups because of my excessive gaming. Instead, I had a great desire for raid items, a desire I shared with

other raid gamers.[3] Since raid items were a means of enhancing my game characters and climbing up the social hierarchy in the virtual society, activities that drove me to spend so much time on *WoW* to get them, this preoccupation with raid items was shared by many others. My experiences as a hardcore raid gamer made me skeptical about the criteria used in game addiction discourse to define excessive gaming.

Game addiction discourse typically understands excessive (online) gaming in terms of the amount of time spent in gaming that is considered "too much" by researchers (Hellström et al., 2015) or by survey respondents (Haagsma et al., 2012), because it is considered to create "adverse personal and social consequences in a person's life" (King & Delfabbro, 2009, p. 62). While excessive playing of online games, like the excessive use of any media, may have negative consequences for individual wellbeing, such a definition of excessive gaming inhibits critical analysis by pathologizing the activity.

In addition, defining excessive gaming in terms of time spent in gaming and its negative consequences in a person's life creates highly subjective criteria for evaluation. In other words, the game addiction discourse's definition of excessive gaming not only tends to justify the status quo of the current (time) regime of South Koreans' lives, but is also based upon a relative notion of "too much" that can vary depending on social and individual contexts.

Two fundamental problems inhere in such a definition of excessive (online) gaming. In the first place, such a definition of excessive gaming is based upon the premise that there exists a moderate gaming time or gaming hours that are considered

[3]Raid items are the game items (gears, tokens, mounts, etc.) given to *WoW* gamers as loot when they have won raid combat or killed a raid (boss) monster.

"normal," which is never explicitly defined within game addiction studies. Instead, "normal" gaming time (or more broadly "normal" leisure time) is defined in relation to its contrary concept of labor time (including time for self-development and time required for the reproduction of labor power), and it is considered "normal" only if it does not disturb the latter time, which is understood as productive and culturally valued. Such a definition of excessive gaming has the effect of justifying the status quo by accepting the time regime, particularly the labor time, as "normal," which is still an object of class struggle.

Second, what is considered "too much" varies depending on social and individual contexts. For example, playing over three hours a day can be considered excessive for Korean high school students whose norm is to spend most of their time at school or private institutes, while the same amount of playing time might not be considered excessive for Korean university students or North American teenagers who are culturally allowed to have relatively more free time than Korean high school students. In other words, "the same kind of consumption defined as excessive in one setting may be considered perfectly normal in others" (Wilk, 2011, p. 97). Thus, what is excessive in one context may not be so in another.

Outside of the explanation provided by game addition studies, how do we better understand why gamers (especially hardcore raid gamers like myself) endure so many hours of game nogada and do excessive gaming? Why do they invest real money to purchase in-game gold? Questions like these raise a more general and fundamental question about the broader factors that lead (or even force) gamers to engage in game nogada and RMT. To address this, we must first approach the elements of online gaming from an integrated perspective: that is, the game system, the gamers, and the game

culture. As an alternative approach to excessive gaming, this project shows how excessive gaming, particularly game nogada in MMOs such as *WoW*, is encouraged both by the nature of online games and gaming as commodities that generate corporate profits as well as by the cultural and ideological context in which online gaming occurs. To achieve this, I will use the tools of political economy and cultural studies (particularly, a concept of ideology that operates in the social practices of gamers). In other words, through the analysis of the *WoW* game system and the socio-cultural context of gamers, this dissertation examines the phenomenon of excessive gaming resulting from game nogada in Korean *WoW* culture.

2. Definition of Key Concepts

2.1. Game Nogada

The word nogada is a vestige of Japanese colonialism (1910–1945), derived from the Japanese "dokata," which refers to a manual laborer who engages in the construction of public works. The term gradually became a commonly used loan word that is now included in Korean dictionaries. The Standard Korean Language Dictionary (https://stdict.korean.go.kr/main/main.do) defines nogada (노가다) as a noun referring to: (a) a vulgar term for a person whose conducts and characters are rough, coarse and bad; (b) "mak-il (막일)." (physical) work chosen by a worker indiscriminately and randomly without careful selection; (c) a person whose job is mak-il.

As these dictionary definitions of nogada show, in the Korean context, the meaning of nogada has been expanded from referring to a construction worker or manual laborer to a word that: (a) describes a person's personality and behavior in a pejorative

sense, implying an uneducated, uncultured, impolite, and even violent character; (b) indicates indiscriminate physical labors, including the hard labor of construction workers; (c) refers to the workers who do hard, manual labor as a profession.

Although the corresponding term of game nogada used in North American game culture is grinding, game nogada has culturally specific origins. In Korean game culture, it is the second meaning of nogada, in the sense of hard work, repetition of meaningless tasks, unnecessary toil, or arduous work that generates the meaning of game nogada. In other words, the meaning of game nogada seems to derive from the stereotypical image of construction workers' labor, which is often regarded as the repetition of mindless and simple physical labor compensated with little pay. I define game nogada as a term used in Korean game culture to describe the process of continuously engaging in monotonous and repetitive tasks, often accompanied by boredom and tediousness, in order to achieve particular goals or reap in-game rewards. In Korean game culture, the term game nogada (or "level nogada") was first used in the late 1990s to criticize the game feature of Japanese role-playing games (RPGs) in the *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* series, games that required repetitive hunting to raise characters' levels in order to finish the game. In the context of MMOs like *Lineage* and *WoW*, the core goal of the game is to advance one's character by repeatedly killing AI-controlled monsters in order to obtain experience points to advance a character's level or acquire necessary items to make the character more powerful. In games like these, game nogada usually refers to the hard, arduous gameplay styles of general gamers rather than professional workers like gold farmers, who do game nogada to earn their livelihood (Dibbell, 2007). As the in-game rewards include in-game currency, experience points, items, game scores, etc., gold

farming, the repetitive gaming activity done by gamers to gain in-game currency such as gold, can be categorized as a type of game nogada. This means that the gold (game) nogada (or gold farming) actors are both regular gamers and gold farmers, while the term gold farmer usually refers to the workers who play the game mainly—or only—to collect gold to earn real money through RMT.

Game nogada thus refers to game activities performed or experienced as hard game labor for both gold farmers and general gamers. For gold farmers, it is hard real-life labor performed to earn a living. For general gamers, it is game activity as metaphorical labor, experienced as boring and unpleasant game labor resulting from the similar or homogeneous game patterns that they engage repeatedly and continuously.

2.2. Game Nogada as Excessive Gaming

Game nogada is thus the driving force that induces gamers' excessive gaming, and game nogada itself is a form of excessive gaming. As opposed to game addiction studies, this study is not interested in establishing standards to define excessive gaming in terms of playing time or the negative effects it has on a "normal" person's life, as some game addiction scholars have attempted (Hellström et al., 2015; Haagsma et al., 2012; King & Delfabbro, 2009). Instead of pathologizing excessive gaming, I define it more neutrally, as a gaming experience that is more than necessary or desirable to achieve the normative (or ideal) purpose of playing games, first asserted by Huizinga (1944/1980): the fun of gameplay itself. Based on such a definition, game nogada can be considered a form of excessive gaming insofar as it refers to a psychological state of gamers where they feel they are not playing the game for the fun of gameplay itself anymore but are doing repetitive and tedious labor. Within this definition of excessive gaming, where the

gamers' subjective experience of boredom serves as a criterion of excess, the time investment of a gamer in a particular game might be considered an important prerequisite for the excess, but the specific time investment of a gamer (for example, more than three hours per day) does not serve as an objective standard for defining excessive gaming. For example, high-level *WoW* gamers might consider one hour of clearing quests as game nogada, while novice gamers might not qualify three hours of clearing quests to level up their game characters as nogada, since everything in *WoW* would be a new experience for them. This means that game nogada is a qualitative experience of a game rather than a quantitative one measured in terms of time investments. Following from this, I define game nogada as a form of excessive gaming that causes two types of excesses: an excess of game time investments that cannot be objectively measured, and a psychological and gamers' subjective experience of excess caused by game nogada.

2.3. Other Key Concepts and Main Objects of Study

In the following pages, I use the term gamer as a neutral expression referring to people who participate in online games and perform gaming activities without specifying how they play games. Gamers who perform game activities as play under the goal of experiencing fun in the sheer process of performing game activities are called "game players." On the other hand, gamers who perform their game activities like labor (or work) under the goal of experiencing the fun of achievement are called "game laborers."

In this dissertation, the main research objects are Korean *WoW* raid gamers who engage in excessive gaming. They are a specific group of gamers I identify as game laborers in this study. According to Bartle's (1996) taxonomy of player types, these gamers are achievers who are competitive and pursue elite status in the game's built-in

level hierarchy. In contrast to them, the gamers I define as game players are not subject to analysis in my research. Therefore, except for Chapter III, which conceptually divides gamers into game players and game laborers, the term gamers used in Chapters IV and V refers to game laborers.

Online gaming is essentially a leisure activity for those who enjoy playing games for fun. However, the fun—or ludic activity—each gamer pursues may differ depending on the goal they want to achieve in the game activity. In this dissertation, I describe two kinds of fun, namely, the fun that can be obtained while enjoying the game process itself (called autotelic fun) and the status-seeking fun of achievement that relies on the outcome of the game activity rather than the process of the game activity itself.

The nature of game activities changes depending on what goals and pleasures the gamer pursues. If their goal is to pursue fun in the process of playing games itself, the activity they are engaging in can be called "game activity as play." On the other hand, the game activity can be called "game labor" when it is performed like work by gamers, as if it were their duty to experience the fun of achievement by gaining a high status in the virtual world of online games rather than enjoying the process of playing the game.

Following from this, game labor refers to game activities persistently performed by gamers as if they were a task that needs to be done in order to achieve the desired in-game results. Game nogada is thus a sub-concept of game labor that denotes only negative game experiences (boredom, arduousness, frustration, etc.). I define repetitive game activities of the same or similar pattern that induces gamers to do excessive gaming as "game nogada activities," while the negative psychological experiences are defined as "game nogada experience." As we will see, the intrinsic rule of *WoW* that induces gamers

to do game nogada activity by delaying rewards for game labor might best be described as the "nogada game system." And reflecting another meaning of nogada, in the sense of incompetent lower working class who do hard physical nogada labor for a living, I define incompetent low-level game laborers who have nothing to do except game nogada activities within a game as "nogada gamers." Finally, this study tries to explain game nogada (as a form of excessive gaming) through the concept of "excessive game labor." Game nogada, as a sub-concept of game labor, is excessive game labor induced by the nogada game system and voluntarily done by game laborers as ideological subjects, and it is excessive game labor for gamer laborers because it has no end or limit.

3. Research Questions

This dissertation takes an integrated approach to excessive gaming by adopting both political economy and cultural studies perspectives. From a political economy perspective, game nogada needs to be understood as an effect of corporate ownership, and the fact that *WoW* is a commodity is designed to encourage gamers to invest a substantial amount of time in doing game nogada. Game nogada and excessive gaming, in short, are necessary parts of MMOs as commodities, since these games are heavily dependent on subscription fees. Understanding the monetization strategies that Blizzard (the game's developer, publisher, and copyright holder) uses to create conditions requiring game nogada provides a political economy analysis of game nogada.

Nevertheless, realizing how game developers use game nogada to generate or maximize corporate profits does not sufficiently account for why gamers engage in game nogada, and what motivates them—hour after hour—to endure the tedium of game nogada. Game nogada is also a cultural phenomenon that needs to be understood in the

context of game culture as well as the ideology of gamer culture, in connection to broader non-virtual socio-cultural contexts. Therefore, this dissertation considers political economic factors alongside the ideology reflected in the game culture and social practices of gamers surrounding game nogada. I define online game culture as the norms, values, social rules, and language that are created and shared by gamers. This definition of game culture focuses more on the macro-patterns that emerge out of the social interactions of gamers rather than the individualized gaming practices of a particular gamer or small groups of people. Ideology is a system of thought or belief reflected in the pattern of social practices of members of society. In this sense, ideology is not merely an abstract idea but an idea that has materiality in the social practices of ideological subjects. By focusing on the ideology that underlies the gaming practices of gamers (or game culture) as these relate to game nogada, I propose to shed light on the broader socio-cultural factors that influence gamers to endure game nogada. Moreover, the ideological analysis of gaming practices of gamers will not only be useful in providing some explanations regarding the motivation underlying game nogada and RMT but also in examining the ideological roots of gaming environments that encourage gamers to do more game nogada and RMT. By bringing these two approaches together, this study explores the following questions:

- What is the political economy of game nogada in *WoW*? How does Blizzard use game nogada to create profits, or to put it another way, how does Blizzard commodify the game nogada of general gamers?
- What is the socio-cultural context of game nogada of *WoW* that motivates gamers to do game nogada and submit to its tedious regime? What ideologies

operate in the game culture surrounding game nogada? What are the social rules and gaming practices specific to Korean *WoW* gamers that require gamers to do more game nogada?

4. Chapter Outline

This dissertation consists of six chapters. This first chapter provides the research rationale, key concepts, and research questions. Chapter II discusses theoretical contexts, methodology, and limitations of this study.

The aim of Chapter III is to theoretically define game nogada as a sub-concept of gamer labor and introduce some concepts related to game nogada used in this study. To define game labor first, I distinguish between game activity as play and game activity as labor, and based on such a distinction, types of gamers are divided into game players and game laborers. Then, after critically reviewing Huizinga's (1944/1980) definition of play as autotelic activity and his distinction between play and labor, game nogada is discussed, based on the flow theory, as an interrupting factor of the enjoyment of flow, an autotelic enjoyment that gamers might experience during the process of playing games. Then, the definition of game labor is suggested based on its characteristics and goal. And after looking at the types of game nogada as a game activity, the nogada game system, the experience and perception of game nogada, and game nogada as game labor are discussed. Finally, I examine the implications of the term game nogada in the socio-cultural contexts of Korea and discuss the meaning of nogada gamer.

Chapter IV focuses on one of the fundamental reasons *WoW* gamers cannot avoid game nogada: the nogada game system. In this chapter, I analyze this issue from a political economy perspective, focusing on Blizzard's strategy to generate or maximize

profits using gamers' audience labor. I discuss how gamers' game labor turned into audience labor exploited by *WoW*'s nogada game system. To that end, I first discuss what game labor (seeks to) produce and then define game nogada as a form of unpaid audience labor by reviewing earlier studies of audience labor. Then, I examine game items as rewards for game labor, which are subject to control by the nogada game system, and the values, roles, and meanings of game items from the perspective of gamers. This chapter then provides a detailed analysis of the nogada game system of *WoW* and examines how Blizzard uses this system to commodify the game nogada time itself to make gamers' audience labor create surplus-value for the corporation. However, my research in this chapter is not limited to analyzing how audience labor is used by Blizzard's monetization strategy from a political economy perspective but also deals with gaming practices such as the Gold Party, a raid item distribution rule that emerged as Korean *WoW* gamers' backlash against the nogada game system of *WoW*, which facilitated the practice of RMT among Korean *WoW* gamers. Since gamers' game nogada activities and the nogada game system have a mutual causal relationship, this will be discussed in terms of the interaction relationship between game companies and gamers in relation to game nogada.

Chapter V explores the socio-cultural factors that influence Korean *WoW* gamers to voluntarily do game nogada, despite its tediousness, focusing on the ideology reflected in the gaming practices and game culture of Korean raid gamers. To that end, this chapter first discusses the values and ideology that serve as the basis of gaming practices such as RMT or the Gold Party. It then analyzes the structure and characteristics of the Korean raid gamers' society, focusing on the norms shared by gamers and their competitive social relations. Finally, this chapter reveals the ideology that operates in the various

gaming practices of Korean raid gamers: the myth of the American Dream based on the ideology of meritocracy.

The last chapter concludes the central findings of the study, provides a summary of each chapter, and discusses the theoretical contribution of the study and its limitation. Directions for future research are also discussed.

CHAPTER II

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO STUDYING GAME NOGADA

Huws (2014) notes that capitalism has an "extraordinary ability to survive the crises that periodically threaten to destroy it by generating new commodities." The nature of capitalist expansion is "destined to generate a saturation of markets and a consequent crisis of profitability."[4] However, capitalism is sustained by the constant movement of capital in search of new areas from which more profits can be extracted. In other words, the movement of capital generates "new forms of production of new goods and services for which new markets can be created," which in turn creates new forms of consumption (pp. 7–9).

In Korea, the online game industry is one of the new market areas that have attracted huge investments of capital since the late 1990s. Jin (2010) describes the diverse political economic factors that have contributed to the swift growth of the Korean online game industry. The Korean government tried to change the domestic industrial structure from heavy industries to IT-oriented industries as a strategy for economic recovery after the financial crisis of 1997. With the emergence of a huge online game culture fueled by the tremendous popularity in *Starcraft* (a real-time strategy PC game published by Blizzard in 1998), the Korean government recognized the importance of the game

[4]Since the purpose of corporate investments does not lie in the general growth of the economy and the distribution of wealth but in the expansion of surplus and concentration of wealth, the system is doomed to secular stagnation. When the market becomes saturated, giant corporations tend to not invest anymore until they find profitable investment outlets under the purpose of protecting their profit margin, thereby slow down the economic growth. This process is devastating itself as monopoly capital survives at the cost of the general degradation of labor and working conditions.

industry as a major business sector and began providing financial subsidies and legal incentives to the game industry. Recognizing the potential profitability of the game industry and game culture, major telecommunication companies (such as SK Telecom, KT, CJ Internet, and LG International Corporation) started to invest in the game industry.

On the face of it, various online gaming companies are producing different forms of games that vary in terms of their rules, stories, and genres in an effort to reach as many consumers as possible. However, a distinct pattern shapes common characteristics of popular games. Use of violent content and sexualized bodies is the most noticeable, pattern, but there are also interactive and economic patterns, such as game nogada and the monetization strategies of games, all of which limit the scope of emergent game cultures and cultural practices of gamers.

From a political economy perspective, game nogada could be explained as a strategy that game companies such as Blizzard have used to extract profit from their customers. Thus, the gamer's game nogada is transformed into a form of audience labor used by a game company. However, until now, scholars have mainly paid attention to excessive gaming (or excessive work time) of paid game workers such as professional gamers and game testers and provided some explanations as to why such excess is taking place and sustained over time. These scholars have not paid attention to the excessive online gaming of the majority of non-professional gamers. For example, Jin (2010) points out that professional gamers usually spend up to 13 hours a day practicing games they specialize in, due to the competitive nature of the eSports ecosystem in which professional gamers not only compete with other teams' players but also amateurs, intern

players, and semi-professional gamers who want to be professional gamers.[5] In his view, their excessive gaming (or practicing) is also caused by the volatility of the eSports industry: Online games teams change hands rapidly, and for professional gamers, "being a good commodity through winning competitions is one way to secure their job in the midst of the change of the owners of their teams; therefore, they have to work hard" (p. 98). On the other hand, several scholars explore the excessive gaming (working) hours of game testers, whose works consist of playing a game to evaluate its bugs or playability. These game testers are often on a precarious short-term contract and paid minimum wage (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2006) and endure the tedium of excessive gaming (working) hours "for the uncertain possibility of promotion" (Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005).

Since Korean game studies has been dominated by the clinical psychological perspective characteristic of addiction studies, it is a small wonder that game nogada has received scant scholarly attention. Indeed, in Korea, only a handful of game scholars (Kang, et al., 2008; Yoon, 2016) have addressed the cultural dimensions of online gaming, and with the exception of Jin (2010) almost no one has tried to explain online games and game culture from a political economy perspective.

Park (2011) was the only Korean scholar who paid attention to the phenomenon of game nogada even though the purpose of his study was to offer a practical classification scheme for game design and game marketing. He defines game nogada, or more exactly nogada game, as a term commonly used among gamers to refer in a

[5]For more detailed information about the eSports industry, its business aspects, the structure and culture of professional gaming, the gamer's path from amateur to a professional gamer, how their hoppy becomes work, etc., see: Taylor, 2012.

somewhat derogatory manner to a game in which gameplay mechanics consist mainly of killing monsters. He suggests five specific features that characterize a nogada game: (a) leveling up only through killing monsters; (b) leveling up slowly; (c) intuitive interface; (d) simple types of game characters or professions; (e) the game is played by hard-core gamers. Such features, according to Park (2011), have historical origins in the earlier contexts of Korean game development in which game designers consisted of young students or amateurs fresh out of college who lacked game designing experiences and capital, which are both considered to be crucial elements in designing an MMO. He argues that such poor game development conditions necessarily led game designers to make games with simplified play mechanics. The results were *Nexus: The Kingdom of the Winds*, the first commercially released MMO in the world in 1996, and *Lineage*, an MMO released in 1998 which became one of the most successful games in the genre to date and popularized the term game nogada in Korean game culture (Park, 2011).

However, Park's (2011) rigid definition of nogada, focusing more on the simplistic play mechanics of games, overlooks not only the fact that game nogada may appear in various modes in diverse games but also that game nogada cannot be fully understood without accounting for the game culture and gaming subject of game nogada. Park characterizes *WoW* as a non-nogada game that shows stark differences in game mechanics from those of *Lineage*: (a) leveling up not through killing monsters but through various quests and events; (b) easy to level up characters; (c) interface is complex rather than intuitive; (d) various types of game characters. However, in contrast to Park's appraisal of *WoW*, the game has been considered by Korean gamers as well as

North American gamers and scholars as a game that features boring and repetitive game elements and play styles that could be described as game nogada.

1. Cultural Studies of Online Games

Although understanding gamers and their gaming activities within broad socio-cultural contexts has been a main tenet of game studies (which takes a broadly cultural studies approach to the study of games), the problem of excessive gaming has not been directly addressed by game studies scholars. Instead, arguments against game addiction made by cultural studies scholars have provided only a more or less passive defense. For example, the dismissal of gaming practices as pathological forms of addiction has been criticized by several game studies scholars (for examples see: Chee, 2012; Bryce & Rutter, 2003), who often identify themselves as avid gamers and participants in gaming culture and have highlighted the positive cultural values of online gaming against game addiction discourses. From their point of view, the social aspects of gamers, particularly the intense social relationships they form in cyberspace, are omitted from or neglected in game addiction discourses intent on painting gamers as solitary, unstable individuals. They argue that the discourse of game addiction does not consider games as a means of communication but simply as substances that cause addiction, ignoring the cultural meanings and significance of gaming cultures which merit investigation and analysis.

Behrenshausen (2012) situates studies critical of the pathologization of gamers as part of an active audience tradition in media and cultural studies. According to him, this is a player-centric tradition that posits active gamers and celebrates interactivity and the participatory nature of gaming, particularly gamers' resistive, creative capacity for negotiating and appropriating game structures that often reflect and (re)produce dominant

ideologies. Devoting their academic energy and capital to fighting against a prevailing cultural hierarchy that understands games as addictive, passive activities, active gamer researchers thus have focused on justifying or celebrating game culture.

2. Game Studies

Since Aarseth (2001) declared 2001 as "year one of game studies" in *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, the first peer-reviewed journal dedicated to research on games, game studies has been an interdisciplinary field of study. The research on games has been broadly studied from diverse academic disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, economy, sociology, education, film studies, and literature, to name a few. Because of its interdisciplinarity, game studies is not a single unified discipline with an independent academic structure but rather a subfield of existing fields. Scholars have brought diverse theories based on their different academic backgrounds and have highlighted different aspects of games. In general, there have been two central research trends within game studies. Some game studies scholars have been "primarily interested in games as artifacts or texts, while others tend to emphasize the activity of gaming" (Williams & Smith, 2007, p. 7). The former has focused on "games themselves," the structure and narrative of the game, while the latter "studied either gamers or the activity of gaming (or both)" or "gaming culture" (pp. 7–8). Behrenshausen (2012) calls the former study "formalist or structural game studies," including ludology and narratology, and the latter "player-centric game studies."

These two areas of study tend to be independent of each other. According to Juul (2011), "it would be perfectly possible to propose that we look exclusively at the games 'themselves,' while ignoring the fact that they are played by people. We can then at least

imagine the reverse argument that declares the rules of a game unimportant compared to the way they are actually used" (p. 11). Staking out these countervailing subfields has sometimes led to clashes. For example, in the player-centric approach, Consalvo (2009) states that "games are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on acts by players" (p. 415). In a similar vein, Ermi and Mäyrä (2011) claim that "the essence of a game is rooted in its interactive nature, and there is no game without a player" (p. 90). In contrast, Björk & Juul (2012), scholars in the formalistic approach of games, argue that player-centric approaches insist "that games are products of player actions, perhaps to the exclusion of being understandable as designed objects" (p. 2).

Both positions convey important insights about online gaming. Gamers do not just play the way game designers want them to. They can play the game by changing the rules of the game to the extent that they can be modified, as in the case of the Gold Party discussed in Chapter IV. In this example, their gaming practices cannot be reduced to the rules of the game.

Of course, gamers do not have complete freedom: Their game activity is constrained by the rules of the game. The freedom they enjoy within a game is either freedom of choice within the scope allowed by the rules of the game or freedom to slightly modify the rules of the game if possible. The game culture formed by gamers is also formed on the basis of the rules of the game proposed by the game designer. Therefore, to more comprehensively analyze online gaming, it is necessary to look at the rules of the game proposed by game designers and gamers' gaming practices that are based on such rules at the same time.

3. Bridging Political Economy and Cultural studies

To provide a broader context of online (excessive) gaming, I adopt the perspective of political economy and cultural studies. One might think that such a combined approach would be difficult, considering longstanding mutual criticisms between political economy and cultural studies. However, Fuchs (2012) argues that the tension between cultural studies and political economy is based on selective readings of each side.

In keeping with Fuchs's (2012) argument the so-called convergence paradigm seeks to integrate the two approaches. According to Jenkins and Deuze (2008), the convergence paradigm should rely on "both political economy and cultural studies perspectives, trying to deal with the shifting relations between media production and consumption" (p. 7). In the convergence paradigm, the political economy model, on the one hand, serves as a tool to understand "a top-down corporate-driven process," which focuses on the tendency of media companies in "merging, co-opting, converging and synergizing their brands and intellectual properties across all of these channels" (p. 6). On the other hand, the cultural studies framework helps us understand "a bottom-up consumer-driven process" of participatory culture (p. 6).

Other prominent scholars have recognized the need to integrate the two approaches (see Wasko & Meehan, 2013). Fenton (2007) also proposes an integrated approach that considers "production" and "act of reception" of particular media texts to be both "determined by their place in a wider social, political, economic, and cultural context and both of which are subject to constraints" (p. 21).

For Fenton (2007), "ideology remains a crucial reference point" when analyzing audiences' interpretation or act of reception of a particular text (p. 18). Placing the concept of ideology at the center of the analysis Fenton suggests replacing the conception

of an active audience that "possesses an unlimited potential to read any meaning at will from a given text" with a more "circumscribed" version of an active audience (pp. 17–18). In other words, "although audiences are active, their activity is still subject to a number of structural constraints" (p. 21). Following such an attempt to bridge political economy and cultural studies, I argue that the concept of unrestricted, autonomous active agency should be replaced with a theory that takes into account the subject of ideology, as a strategy for bridging the epistemological division between political economy and cultural studies.

This dissertation builds on previous studies in political economy that pertain to my research on game nogada, namely audience labor studies, as well as cultural studies scholarship that discusses the ideology of online games.

4. Political Economy of Game Nogada as Audience Labor

When political economists studied (online) video games, their objects of study were generally not a single game but the game industry itself that produces games as a commodity. In addition, even though these scholars discussed labor related to the production process of games and the labor of those who make a living by playing games, they did not view general gamers' game activity as labor that creates profits for the game company. For example, they have focused on the following points: the globalized process of video game hardware production (Nichols, 2011), market structure and consolidation of ownership in the game industry (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005; Jin, 2010; Nichols, 2005), ties between the game industry and other media industries (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Nichols, 2005; Jin, 2010), the influence of neoliberal capitalism on the emergence and growth of the game industry

(Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Jin, 2010), and the exploitative aspects of the labor of hardware and software producers (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Nichols, 2011), game testers (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2006; Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005), professional gamers (Jin, 2010), and that of gold farmers (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

Instead of focusing on the relationship between the game industry and game nogada, this study aims to show how gamers' game nogada as game labor turns into audience labor that creates profits for the copyright owner of a game through a case study of *WoW*. Gamers are essentially consumers of game content, but their game activity (consumption) is converted into labor that generates corporate profits through the game company's monetization strategy. I analyze how this shift occurs in Chapter IV. In order to focus on game labor as audience labor, the following section examines how previous studies have understood audience labor.

4.1. Audience Labor

The idea that audience labor is used for generating corporate profits is not new. Such a view of audience labor was first addressed by Smythe (1977; 1981/2006). According to Nixon (2014), what Smythe and others call audience labor refers to those "audience activities of reading, listening, and viewing," which are "recognized as constituting a specific type of labor" considered simultaneously as a consumption activity (the consumption of meaning) and as productive activities (p. 714). Smythe conceptualized audience labor by "highlighting the productivist role of audience in the creation of media value, both as a commodity and as labour power" (Fisher, 2012, p. 172). The concept of

audience labor was controversial insofar as it contradicted the traditional Marxist views that only labor in the process of production can create value (Im, 2015).

Smythe (1977; 1981/2006) sees the commodification of audience labor as an intrinsic feature of monopoly capitalism. According to him, the mass media audience is a commodity, while at the same time, audiences labor on behalf of corporations. These two arguments are interconnected. In the first place, advertisers buy the attention of their target customers from mass media in the audience market; thus, audiences, or their attention (e.g., eyeballs), are commodities sold to advertisers. In the second place, advertisers' ultimate goal is to make audiences buy their products. In order for audiences to buy goods, according to Smythe, audiences are forced to do unpaid labor for the advertisers. The audience labor includes learning to buy goods or brands through advertisements, laboring to solve problems created by advertisers and spend their income accordingly.[6] In short, according to Smythe's theory of audience commodity, TV viewers watch advertisements, which becomes an important driver of consumption for them, attached to the TV shows regardless of their will, and it is in this sense that the media sell audience-commodities to advertisers.

While Smythe (1977; 1981/2006) and Jhally and Livant (1986) mainly examined audience labor as TV viewing activities, in the twenty-first century, scholars such as Nixon (2013; 2014) and Fuchs (2012; 2014; 2015; Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013) discuss the exploitation of audience labor in the digital realm. On the one hand, Nixon (2014)

[6]"In economic terms, the audience commodity is a nondurable producer's good which is bought and used in the marketing of the advertiser's product. The work which audience members perform for the advertiser to whom they have been sold is learning to buy goods and to spend their income accordingly" (Smythe, 1981/2006, p. 243).

attempted to develop further the concept of audience labor that began with Smythe's study and examine fundamental aspects of the relationship between audience labor and "communicative capital."[7] According to Nixon, audience labor is exploited by communicative capital in the digital age. Nixon argued that Smythe "opened the way to consider how capital circulates and accumulates through the exploitation of audience labor, but he did not pursue that path" (p. 715). He also argued that Jhally and Livant "did not advance much beyond Smythe in considering the specificity of audience labour" (p. 715). According to Nixon, neither Smythe nor Jhally and Livant have precisely explained how audience labor is commodified or exploited.

Nixon (2014) attempts to show "what audience activity is and how that activity is exploited by communicative capitalists" (p. 717). Considering communication as capital, he contends that the communicative capital that owns culture (or cultural products) exploits the audience labor that produces surplus-value for it as a kind of "extraction of rent" (p. 730). According to him, "culture is like land, and the use of culture as a means of production in communicative production creates a process of exploitation that, like the process in relation to land, occurs in distribution, through the appropriation of (surplus-)value as rent" (p. 729). Nixon's argument is useful in explaining how Blizzard commodifies game nogada time and exploits the surplus-value produced through gamers' game nogada.

On the other hand, the digital labor debate has also extended the analysis of audience labor to examine the complex relationship of audiences (or social media users)

[7]What Nixon (2014) calls "communicative capital" refers to the "capital that circulates and accumulates specifically through the communication processes" (p. 725).

to the corporate internet platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, etc. In this "digital labor debate," the main argument is that "the dominant capital accumulation model of contemporary corporate Internet platforms is based on the exploitation of users' unpaid labour, who engage in the creation of content and the use of blogs, social networking sites, wikis, microblogs, content sharing sites for fun and in these activities create value that is at the heart of profit generation" (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013, p. 237). "Playbour," a concept coined by Kücklich (2005), has also been the subject of discussion from that point of view. "Playbour" is a hybrid concept referring to audience labor exploited by the game industry, in which the boundary between work and play is blurred, as it is in game nogada.

4.2. Game Nogada as Audience Labor

Game studies research has also explored the relationship between play and labor. For example, adopting Terranova's (2000) notion of "free labor," Postigo (2003, 2007) and Kücklich (2005) have argued that the work of modders (who modify particular games by creating open source add-ons and other tools) is a form of exploited, unpaid labor extracted by game companies. However, as many modders create modifications for their own pleasure rather than to gain profit, Kücklich used the term "playbour" to indicate the ambivalent state of the modification practices; modders are creating modifications for their own fun (play), but their modifications are used by game companies for increasing their profits without compensation for the creators (free labor).[8] Meanwhile, Jenkins

[8]According to Kücklich (2005), "the precarious status of modding as a form of unpaid labour is veiled by the perception of modding as a leisure activity, or simply as an extension of play. This draws attention to the fact that in the entertainment industries, the relationship between work and play is changing, leading, as it were, to a hybrid form of 'playbour'" (para. 4).

(2006) suggests we see modding practices as an example of participatory culture, which seeks to "reprogram the code so as to enable new kinds of interactions with the game," while he also points out top-down corporate constraints that limit these interactions (p. 163). For example, one has to actually buy the original game protected by a license in order to play the mod. Also, these amateur-produced works, which prolong the shelf life of the game and "increase consumer loyalty," are "taken up directly by commercial companies," serving as "free labor" for corporations (pp. 164–165).

However, Kücklich (2005) emphasizes that "the perception of modding as play is the basis of the exploitative relationship between modders and the games industry" (Modding as "Playbour" section, para. 5). He points out that although the digital games industry actually benefits from the modders' activity, it is particularly important that it benefits from the perception that it is a voluntary, non-profit-oriented activity: "It benefits from a perception that everything to do with digital games is a form of play" (para. 6).

The study of game labor as audience labor is usually linked to the discussion of "playbour," and the problems raised by game labor seem similar to the debates surrounding "playbour." However, the game labor associated with game nogada is not identical to an activity like modding. I do not use the concept of "playbour" to explain game nogada because it poses several problems in understanding the relationship between play and labor and is thus insufficient in explaining game nogada. Indeed, it is hard to see how creating modifications is part of playing games, and doing something for pleasure does not necessarily mean playing (a game). Creating modifications and playing games are obviously different phenomena, which should be distinguished from each other. Modding could be properly considered as labor since it is an act of producing

modification software, whether it is marketed or not, while playing games, in the fundamental sense, is an act of consumption. Moreover, play (or playing games) is not necessarily always fun; it can be boring and tedious, as is the case with game nogada. In short, in game studies, the "playbour" of modders is an example that reflects the conflicting interests between game modders and game corporations. In order to explain game nogada in terms of play (consumption) and labor (production), I think it is important to highlight first the metaphoric characteristic of the term and then the way in which game nogada is turned into (free) labor. Although gamers tend to describe their gaming activities as something equivalent to work, game nogada itself is by no means real labor. Game nogada does not produce use-value in Marxist terms; game items, for example, do not have use-value outside the gaming world, and the purpose of game nogada is not to fulfill the particular needs of a given society. The verb "produce" might even be confusing as game nogada (or grinding) only indicates the act of gaining items or scores from a reward system embedded in a particular game. In this sense, game nogada is part of gamers' consumption of online (video) games that are produced by game companies, which neither create new content nor are enjoyed through freely given labor. Instead, game nogada is part of gameplay imposed by game companies; thus, game nogada is not a type of labor that empowers the gamers to be part of creating participatory culture.

However, RMT and monetization strategies (both subscription and micro-transaction model) of online games force us to think about game nogada in terms of labor not only in its metaphorical sense but also in an economic sense. Both turn game nogada into exchange-value and thereby into a commodity. The difference between the two

depends on who derives profit from it and who are the actual laborers. The labor of gold farmers has already drawn much scholarly attention (Goggin, 2011; Heeks, 2009; Nakamura, 2009). Gold farmers, allegedly consisting of young Chinese gamers, who work in sweatshops earning as little as $40 per shift from games like *WoW*, are paid laborers, and their bosses who own the gold farms are both the employers and the capitalists who exploit the labor of gold farmers. The labor of general gamers, however, is an area that has not yet been studied.

5. Ideology of (Online) Video Games

The conception of audiences as active producers of meaning, who often engage in "ideologically resistant readings," rather than as passive recipients of a dominant ideology embedded in media messages, is nothing new in media research.[9] Such a view of audiences has been further reinforced by the distinctive conceptualization of online games as interactive. Interactivity as a mechanical or physical quality of video games is said to allow gamers to interact with other people or with the media textually, semantically, and physically. Unlike film or television audiences, gamers engage with games and see direct and immediate effects of their actions on the screen and the virtual world within which they interact through interface systems.

The concept of interactivity has often been associated with the notion of "active gamers." Behrenshausen (2012), for example, describes these studies as being part of an active audience tradition in media and cultural studies. He categorizes them as player-centric, active gamer research grounded in the participatory nature of gaming,

[9]For the intellectual history of active audience theory, see: Livingstone, 1998; 2000.

particularly gamers' resistive, creative capacity for negotiating and appropriating game structures that often reflect and (re)produce dominant ideologies.

In contrast, other scholars view players' relationship with video games more passively as vehicles for the imposition of ideology. Some scholars argue that various forms of ideology, such as capitalist, patriarchal, racial, and colonialist, are transmitted by video games (Rettberg, 2008; Magnet, 2006; Leonard, 2003) through the procedural system, sets of rules that constrain and structure the behaviors of gamers (Bogost, 2008), in the narrative and visual representations of game characters (Leonard, 2003), and in certain kinds of roles that gamers perform in game worlds (Squire, 2006).

Such viewpoints derive from traditional ideological analyses of media, which identify ideology in the content and forms of media. As mass media are assumed to produce cultural goods charged with dominant ideology, so game designers are generally considered responsible for the ideology that operates within a game (Frasca, 2001). This perspective assumes that the ideologies of games are embedded by producers in the games' representations of events, people, or things or in the narrative, similar to the way television or films represent them, or the ideological effects of games can be produced by the inherent rules of the games assigned by game designers. Although much active gamer research and studies of game ideology seem to be opposed, in actuality, they share a common premise. They both regard ideology as a set of ideas that operate in the subject's consciousness and are embedded in the texts or images (the contents) and the rules (the form) of games. As a result, the possible compromise drawn from these two viewpoints here would regard the game as one sort of ideological apparatus, but their ideological effects can be at least resisted by the gamers' interactive intervention. For example,

modification (the alteration of content from a video game) could be regarded as an example of cultural resistance performed by (active) gamers (Cassar, 2013).

However, the ideology of games does not operate only through the meanings generated by texts or rules created by game designers. Ideology can be reflected in the activities of gamers and the culture constructed by gamers' social interactions. It is clear that the virtual world in an online game is changed and formed by the (inter)active participation of gamers, and gamers create, share, and maintain their own game culture based on (or often constrained by) a given game environment. By analyzing gamers' gaming practices and their culture, it is possible to uncover the characteristics of ideological social structure of gamers' society and of gamers as subjects of ideology who enact the ideology. Here, ideology is related to the activities of gamers and their culture newly created by the voluntary and "active" participation of gamers, not merely to those implanted into the game text via code and design. My argument that ideology can operate in the way gamers voluntarily and actively change game rules will be supported by an ideological analysis of the Gold Party in Chapter V.

6. Methodology

As the previous sections show, this study focuses on how ideology influences gamers' gaming practices rather than on the autonomous and active agency that resists ideology. It means that gamers are assumed to be subjected to the dominant ideology not only in their daily life activities but also in their gaming activities. In other words, this study shares the idea of critical ethnography in a sense that "critical ethnography is a particular approach to ethnography which attempts to link the detailed analysis of ethnography to wider social structures and systems of power relationships" (Harvey, 1990, p. 11).

Ethnographic studies of media emerged in the late 1980s along with research on media consumption in Britain (Horst et al, 2012). In U.S. communication studies, ethnographic methods have been adopted in media and cultural studies not only in response to the deep criticism of the dominant positivist-quantitative paradigm but also in response to the prevailing image of passive audiences in communication and cultural studies (Horst et al., 2012). Here, the passivity of audiences implied that media audiences were uncritically absorbing the meanings imposed by a text loaded with dominant ideologies that constantly (re)produce and legitimize unequal structure of society.

The criticism of passive audiences, accompanied by an attempt to integrate ethnographic methods in media studies, created a new trend of audience studies known as reception analysis of media. Reception analysis is characterized by its effort to unearth the differentiated subtleties of people's engagement with media, highlighting how audiences actively make their own meanings and create their own culture against dominant, ideological meanings provided by mass media (Ang, 1991/2001). The goal of such research could be similarly found in ethnographic studies of particular games and gaming culture that are categorized by Behrenshausen (2012) as active game research.

However, emphasizing only the particularity of meanings that emerge from distinct contexts and culture, while neglecting elements that broadly affect individuals' behaviors, does not offer a holistic account of a culture. Indeed, the holistic view of culture from an ethnographic perspective requires the understanding of historical and environmental circumstances that affect the particular contexts in which individuals operate (Whitehead, 2004). Therefore, ideology could still be an important concept to have in mind while studying media audiences (gamers as well) and their culture via

ethnography. As I have argued throughout this chapter, ideology has materiality; it is not just a set of abstract, biased ideas, but it operates in the subjects' ideological social practices, including gamers' social interactions.

My reflections and writing on game culture and the ideologies reflected in the gaming practices of the gamers surrounding game nogada are, in principle, based on my analysis and interpretation of various data collected from my participant observation over a considerable period of time in *WoW*. According to Strangelove (2007), a "study of online culture can be said to be ethnographic when the researcher becomes a participant observer of the daily behaviour of an online community" (p. 2).[10] From that point of view, the key method for my ideological analysis is the participant observation method of (digital) ethnography.

Digital ethnography is online ethnography research that applies classical ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviews, to the study of online communities and culture. "Ethnography is typically conducted over extended periods of time through participant observations with communities and deep interactions with community members. In the process, rich, 'thick descriptions' of a community's lived realities are produced in the form of journaled field notes" (Kaur-gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 1). Ethnography "gains its understanding of the social world" by engaging in "the daily practice of human agents," typically based on a set of methods including "participant observation, in-depth interviews, and conversations" (O'Reilly, 2012, p. 10).

[10]Strangelove (2007) defines his research as "virtual video ethnography," analyzing "human interaction from within virtual realms such as online war games, fantasy role-playing games, and virtual social networking games" (p. 1). According to him, video ethnography is "used to explore human action within Internet-based video game communities" (p. 3).

As a branch of ethnography, digital ethnography is "a method for representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story" (Underberg & Zorn, 2013, p. 10). It is "a method used to address questions of the social on digitized spaces," which "encompasses ethnography of virtual spaces (virtual ethnography), cyberspace ethnography, ethnography of new media, online ethnography, and social media/new media ethnography" (Kaur-gill & Dutta, 2017, p. 1). Kozinets (2010) argues that over a decade "different researchers have used different terms to describe it" and that "ethnography is ethnography, prefixing it with digital, online, network, internet or web is entirely optional" (p. 5).

According to Boellstorff et al. (2012), ethnographic research "has long been of particular interest for those working in computer-mediated communication, social media, and game studies" (p. 3). The authors argue that virtual worlds themselves, like the physical world, are "vital places of social interaction and cultural activity" and that ethnography "provides powerful resources for the study of the cultures of virtual worlds" (pp. 1–2). From that perspective, they seek to study online virtual worlds, including both game and nongame environments, as valid places for cultural practice, using "ethnographic methods, originally designed for studying cultures in the physical world" (p. 2). In comparison, Malaby (2009), who conducted ethnographic research at Linden Lab, corporate creator of the famous virtual world *Second Life*, focuses on the people who design and control the virtual world and "illuminates ethnographically complex processes of governance, games, and creativity" (p. 4).

According to O'Reilly (2012), although "data collection, analysis, and writing are not discrete phases but inextricably linked" in ethnographic research, "the main method

of ethnography is known as participant observation" (pp. 4–5). Participant observation can be a useful as well as indispensable method, especially when studying game culture, because it "would be impossible to penetrate the game without becoming engaged as a player" (Nardi, 2010, p. 28). As Nardi (2010) argues, I would not have been able to study Korean raid gamers' culture "without playing as well as at least an average player and fully participating in raids" (p. 34). In short, the research method I adopted to understand the game culture of Korean *WoW* gamers was participant observation based on gameplay.

To that end, I devoted a considerable amount of time in *WoW* to participate in raids to observe the gaming practices of Korean *WoW* gamers, read hundreds of posts from online communities such as WoW Inven (https://wow.inven.co.kr) to understand the thoughts of gamers, and gathered other data that could illuminate my research questions in different angles. When playing the game, I was a complete participant of the game culture, a gamer who learned and followed the shared norms and social rules interacting with other gamers. As a researcher, I focused on analyzing and interpreting data observed during game activities and writing my reflections derived from it. However, I did not attempt to directly interview other gamers on the subject to obtain information on my core research topic, ideology reflected in Korean *WoW* gamers' gaming practices related to game nogada.

Isabella (2007), in an article analyzing "certain social challenges associated with computer mediated communication (CMC), specifically with respect to the concept of the game" (para. 1), argues that "using ethnography as a research method in an online context has some limits" ("the physical contexts", para. 4). For example, "although it allows a researcher to understand how a medium works—in the case of MUDs [Multi-User

Dungeon], how people play and how MUDs work—it doesn't allow the researcher to understand what people think about that medium" and "how they perceive themselves through the use of such medium" (para. 4). To overcome such limitations, digital ethnologists may use methods such as face-to-face interviews (or surveys if necessary), but there are practical difficulties in conducting such methods online.

In my personal experience, it was difficult for me to find gamers who would grant a formal interview for research purposes. Some people rejected my request for an interview on the excuse of being busy, and others demanded excessive monetary compensation in return. In the often frantic world of raid culture, gamers simply do not want to devote game time to anything but playing.

However, there was another reason why I decided not to do the interview gamers. I considered that there is no guarantee that what gamers say would necessarily match what they actually do. Therefore, instead of conducting (face-to-face) interviews, I immersed myself in the game as a participant, and in the process, I tried to know and understand their thoughts in relation to my research topic through in-game chatting and voice chatting programs such as Discord. According to O'Reilly (2012), interviews can be conducted in a variety of ways, such as "opportunistic chats," "one-on-one in-depth interviews, and group interviews, and all sorts of ways of asking questions and learning about people that fall in between" (p. 4). From that point of view, although I did not ask questions about my research topic (such as "What is your ultimate reason for playing this game?" Or, "Why do you keep doing game nogada activities?"), I was able to frequently observe or listen to conversations relevant to my research that gamers had while playing the game due to the nature of this multiplayer-oriented game. Gamers' conversations took

place through a variety of private or public chat channels, and I gathered the information for my research from the public (text or voice) chat channels that were viewable to many and unspecified gamers, including me.

I have been playing this game for nearly a decade, starting with *WoW*'s second expansion pack, *Wrath of the Lich King*, released in November 2008, until *Battle for Azeroth*, the seventh expansion pack released in August 2018. Of course, my life as a graduate student prevented me from playing *WoW* with the same intensity for that ten year period. I played this game the most intensely twice, with the first period being from November 2008 to December 2010 and the second period being from January 2018 to September 2018. My *WoW* gamer experience in the first period was a complete participant experience in which I went from a low-level novice gamer to a high-level raid gamer, whereas the second period was primarily for the purpose of collecting research data. The latter was a game experience as a researcher who was more interested in observation than participation.

Whenever there was a noteworthy conversation in text chat or voice chat channel during a game session, I jotted down field notes and transcribed them as a Microsoft Word document later. Of course, the timing of taking the field notes differed depending on the type of game activity with which I was involved. For example, when I was doing quests alone, I was able to pause the game and immediately jot down the things I observed in my field notes. However, pausing the game was not easy to do when I was playing with other gamers. I could not afford to do anything other than focusing on the game during the raid combat sessions. In those instances, I mainly wrote what I observed, either immediately after the entire game session ended or after I had logged out of *WoW*.

I tried to take field notes as soon as possible after playing —when I had vivid memories of what I observed during the raid —but I occasionally encountered the problem of not being able to recall some details that would be useful in my analysis. To address this problem to some extent, I supplemented my observations with online posts on WoW Inven (WoW Inven is a vast archive that preserves hundreds of thousands of online posts reflecting the game experiences of Korean *WoW* gamers and their thoughts on their game culture).

Online posts on WoW Inven were not only used to complement the limitation of my memory but also to determine whether what I observed and experienced was a phenomenon peculiar to myself or was a more or less common phenomenon experienced by other gamers. I also consulted to WoW Inven to find out what had taken place in Korean *WoW* gamers' game culture before I started playing *WoW* and to better understand other changes that might have taken place between my intense bouts of playing. To narrow down my search for online posts, I entered keywords that repeatedly emerged in my field notes (e.g., game nogada, the Gold Party, RMT, Log Score, etc.) into the search engine provided by WoW Inven. About 4380 online posts were found during the search period from February 1, 2011, to February 28, 2021, of which 441 posts relevant to my research were analyzed in detail.

In order to find data related to answering another main research question of my study, that is, why and how Blizzard uses *WoW*'s nogada game system, I analyzed the game reward system of *WoW* primarily based on my experience as a *WoW* gamer. The examples of the nogada game system of *WoW* that I provide in Chapter IV are inspired by the terms "level up nogada," "reputation nogada," and "dungeon nogada," and "gold

nogada," which are repeatedly used by Korean *WoW* gamers in the online posts of WoW Inven, and the reward system of raids was added by my reflection. However, I also refer to online documents from various wikis and websites (such as Wowhead, Wowpedia, WoWWiki, and Namuwiki), which deal with the rewarding system of *WoW*, such as the drop rate of a game item (e.g., how frequently the item drops from a monster that you kill) or the number of experience points needed to level up a game character. To examine the relationship between the nogada game system of *WoW* and Blizzard's profit-making strategy, I collected document data from Blizzard's online shop webpage, *WoW*'s terms of use, *WoW*'s designer interviews, news articles, and Activision Blizzard's annual reports.

My participant observation occurred frequently within the raid group I participated in, a raid group known by Korean *WoW* gamers as "Mak-Gong," which refers to a one-off raid group consisting of gamers who do not know each other in most cases but are selected by a raid leader according to particular criteria to conquer a raid dungeon. The type of raid often compared to Mak-Gong by Korean gamers is "Jeong-Gong," which stands for a regular raid group in which the same raid participants who set a particular day and time for raiding maintain one raid group to conquer a raid dungeon. If the majority of raid participants of a Jeong-Gong belong to the same guild, it is called a Guild Jeong-Gong or a regular guild raid. The reason why I participated in Mak-Gong stems from the characteristics of Korea raid gamers' culture. If North American raid culture is based on regular guild raids, in which gamers play consistently with one another, the current Korean raid culture is mainly based on Mak-Gong.

When *WoW* was released in 2004, it gained great popularity in Korea. At that time, the form of raid group in Korea was a regular guild raid (or Guild Jeong-Gong). However, in Korea, regular guild raids have collapsed, and the Mak-Gong has become the dominant form of raid groups. From the perspective of a raid group, raiding dungeons in a regular guild raid is more likely to conquer them faster than Mak-Gong. This is because raid gamers in a regular raid group are more familiar with each other, with the raid group's combat strategies, and with their assigned roles during the combats. In effect, they are more organized as a team and thus are more likely to win raid combats compared to raid gamers in a Mak-Gong.

Nevertheless, Mak-Gong has become the main form of raid group in Korea. According to a news article entitled "Jeong-kyu gong-dae-ui mol-lag, geudeuli tteona-neun i-yu-neun? [The downfall of regular raid groups, why are they leaving?]" (Park, 2009), there were two reasons. First, as Blizzard lowered the difficulty of raids that were considered "too high" for most gamers, gamers were able to challenge raids in the form of a Mak-Gong without necessarily forming a regular raid group. The second reason is the decline in the *WoW* gamer population. In fact, the number of *WoW* gamers worldwide has been on a downward trend after reaching a peak of 12 million in 2011 (Williams, 2015). And while the number of *WoW* gamers in North America is still at a level that can support regular guild raids, this is no longer the case in Korea. In other words, in North America, the number of *WoW* gamers is much larger than in Korea, and such a difference in the number of gamers has led to changes in both raid game cultures. In the case of North America, to participate in high difficulty raids, gamers usually join a guild that has a regular raid. However, in Korea, where the population of *WoW* gamers is much smaller

than in North America, it is relatively more difficult to find gamers to form a regular raid group for the purpose of conquering high difficulty raid dungeons. This is because a regular raid group requires the attendance of at least 30 gamers who can play *WoW* together at a specific time for several hours.[11]

Thus, in the North American raid culture centered on regular guild raids, gamers may feel a relatively greater sense of belonging as a team member. In contrast, in the Korean raid culture centered on Mak-Gong, the competitive spirit between gamers can be stronger than the sense of belonging as a team member, because Mak-Gong is a temporary group of gamers unknown to each other, who compete with each other for being selected as a raid participant.

7. Limitations of This Study

The population of Korean *WoW* gamers I studied for this project is a very specific one. Indeed, my research focused only on what Bartle (1996) calls "achiever" type gamers (in this case, highly competitive, hardcore raid gamers). In Korea and elsewhere, there are other types of gamers according to Bartle, such as "explorers," "socialisers," or "killers." And there are other gamers who play *WoW* occasionally without investing too much time, and who are generally described as "casual gamers." However, since I chose excessive gaming as a central research topic, I focused on hardcore raid gamers whose invest in *WoW* and their gaming practices is much greater than that of other players.

[11]The maximum number of participants in a raid group set by Blizzard is currently 30 gamers. In case of a relatively lower level of difficulty raids, such as Normal Mode or Heroic Mode raid dungeons, if raid participants' gaming skills and their game characters' power are more than enough, it possible to conquer a raid dungeon of that difficulty without meeting the maximum number of gamers. However, to conquer the highest difficulty raid dungeons (i.e., Mythic Mode raid dungeons), in most cases, raid gamers try to maximize the combat power of their raid group, and thus filling up the number of raid gamers to its limit is almost inevitable.

A second limitation of my research derives from my methodology. My research interests were not precisely in who the real gamers were, but in their gaming activities and practices and ultimately in the analysis of ideology reflected therein. Because I did not conduct (face-to-face) interviews, I do not know the "real" identity of these gamers; that is, differences in their real-life economic status, jobs, gender, age, etc., are not taken into account in this study. Also, instead of directly asking them what they think about and why they do game nogada, I collected data from their conversations on public chat channels, online community posts, and my observation of their gaming practices and then tried to understand why they do game nogada through my own interpretation. Thus, my research is focused on reflection based on my analysis and interpretation. Although "researcher bias is one of the aspects of qualitative research that has led to the view that qualitative research is subjective, rather than objective" (Kawulich, 2005, Limitations of observation section, para. 4), my research results may be more vulnerable in that respect.

Finally, in terms of the political economy approach, in Chapter IV, I argue that Blizzard, the developer, publisher, and copyright holder of *WoW*, attempts to generate or maximize its surplus-values by directly or indirectly using the nogada system in *WoW*. However, another limitation of this study is that it does not reveal precisely how much surplus-value or profits Blizzard actually generates by exploiting gamers' game nogada. There are two reasons for this. The first reason is that the game company does not disclose specific information about the revenues it makes out of *WoW* in Korea. The only information available to me about profits that Blizzard is making out of its games was the annual reports of Activision Blizzard, the holding game company of Blizzard. In these reports, however, Activision Blizzard only provides information about Blizzard's annual

net revenues from its games in an aggregated manner—across all its games, such as *World of Warcraft*, *Diablo* series, *Starcraft* series, *Hearthstone*, etc., to name a few—and not by individual games. And such aggregated net revenues are subdivided into three geographic regions: North America, Europe, and Asia Pacific. Thus, the annual reports do not provide specific information on how much profits Blizzard makes out of *WoW*, particularly in Korea, and what the profits consist explicitly of, that is, the proportion of subscription fees and microtransaction payments in the profits, etc.

The second reason is that it is not possible to objectively quantify gamers' game nogada time used to generate revenues for Blizzard because the time spent playing games is different for each gamer. Since game nogada is fundamentally a subjective experience of gamers, the amount of game time experienced as game nogada time depends on each gamer. Therefore, I believe it is impossible to calculate how much surplus-value the game company creates by using gamers' game nogada in *WoW*. These are the two reasons this study cannot provide quantitative data on how much surplus-value Blizzard actually creates by using gamers' game nogada.

CHAPTER III

GAME AS PLAY AMD GAME LABOR

1. Introduction

Why do people play MMOs? What is the motivation or purpose of their gameplay? Basically, it is a common idea that games belong to the realm of play. What are the characteristics of play, and what is the purpose of game as play? What is the essence of play, and what is the fun of games as play? What is most commonly referred to as the purpose or motivation of play is the pursuit of fun, which is generally associated with the word enjoyment. However, the problem with defining MMOs as a subcategory of play lies in that not all game activities can be simply defined as play activities that pursue fun in the playing process itself, that is, the autotelic fun of game as play. Such game activities are not just limited to those of professional gamers for whom gaming is a means of living; game activities of *WoW* gamers also blur the line between play and labor.

Game nogada, the subject of this dissertation, is a game activity associated with negative emotions (such as boredom and arduousness) experienced by gamers in MMOs like *WoW*. At least, game nogada is not a game activity that provides gamers with autotelic fun or enjoyment. If the pursuit of autotelic fun is the fundamental (basic) purpose of playing games as play, is *WoW* not a game that fits for such a purpose? Then why do *WoW* gamers participate in the game? Or, to simply put, why gamers do *WoW*? If the purpose of *WoW* gamers' game activity is not the pursuit of autotelic fun, what is it pursuing in the game? If their game activity cannot be defined solely as the play activity that provides autotelic fun, how could it be defined? These questions form the starting point for this chapter's study.

Game nogada, in a word, is a game activity that is distinct from playing a game for its autotelic fun. In the early sections of this chapter, I discuss how game nogada activity can be defined as game labor, not play, and how play and labor can be distinguished from each other. First, I differentiate between game activity as play and that as game labor, and based on such a distinction, I classify the types of gamers into game players and game laborers. Then, I focus on game nogada as a sub-concept of game labor and examine from what point of view it can be defined as game labor rather than play. To that end, I will review Johan Huizinga's definition of play, which provides a theoretical framework for the distinction between play and labor, and discuss how game nogada activity deviates from Huizinga's definition of play.

Then, based on the flow theory of Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990; 1994; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005), I will examine how game nogada activity interrupts the enjoyment of flow, an autotelic enjoyment that gamers might experience in the game when playing games as play. From that point of view, after examining why the game activity that gamers begin in the first place to experience autotelic fun turns into game labor and game nogada, game labor will be more clearly defined through the analysis of its goal and characteristics. And after looking at what kind of game activity the game nogada activity is, I discuss the nogada game system, the experience and perception of game nogada, and game nogada as game labor. And finally, I examine the implications of the term nogada in the socio-cultural contexts of Korea. By connecting game nogada with the complex meaning of the word nogada itself has in Korean society's cultural context, I will conclude my definition of game nogada activity and nogada gamer as its agent.

2. Game Activity as Play and Game Activity as Labor

One of the most fundamental and general purposes for people to play MMOs is to pursue fun. MMOs are leisure activities for those who play them for fun. However, when people say that they play MMOs for fun, fun is, in fact, a very vague concept. There are indeed various types of fun that people find in MMOs. For example, they can play MMOs to hang out with friends or to make new friends in online spaces, to escape from their stressful real-life situations and relax, to virtually do things that are physically impossible or deemed illegal, immoral, or unethical in the real world, to experience the enjoyment of immersion (or "flow"), or to feel a sense of achievement that is quite difficult to experience in reality. Such diverse motivations for participating in MMOs could be considered various types of fun. Among such various types of fun, this study focuses on the fun experienced from gaining social recognition from other gamers by obtaining rare game items or by performing in-game tasks well, particularly those performed in raids, the end-game contents of *WoW*.

However, it is worth noting that some people invest their time in games with a different motivation or purpose than just pursuing fun. For example, one cannot say that the daily gaming practice of professional gamers to win a game match or the gold farming activity of gold farmers to earn real money are done just for fun. Gaming is work rather than a leisure activity for them. That is, their game activity could be considered real labor to acquire exchange-value (or real money) rather than play. In such a sense, they are not game players who play games for fun, but real laborers who do games as a means of livelihood.

What I want to emphasize here through the case of professional gamers and gold farmers is that even the same game activity could be play or labor depending on its purpose. By the same token, the nature of game activity, whose fundamental purpose is to pursue fun, may change depends on specific goals gamers set or the type of fun they seek from games. Game activity may be play or game labor depending on gamers' goals. If their goal is to pursue fun in the process of playing games itself, the activity they are engaging in can be called game activity as play; or to put it simply, they play games as play.

If their goal is to acquire in-game rewards (such as gold, game items, game characters' levels, game scores, etc.), more specifically the "sign-value" attached to those in-game rewards, and ultimately to experience the fun of sense of achievement by gaining a high social status and social recognition in the virtual world rather than enjoying the process of playing game itself, their activity can be called game activity as labor, or simply abbreviated as game labor.[12] I use the term game labor to emphasize its similarity in type and purpose to real labor. Game labor refers to game activity persistently performed by gamers as if it were their duty, as if it were a task that needs to be done,

[12]The concept of "sign-value" was proposed by Jean Baudrillard as a counterpart to the Marxian use-value. According to Kellner (2019), "for Baudrillard, the entire society is organized around consumption and display of commodities through which individuals gain prestige, identity, and standing. In this system, the more prestigious one's commodities (houses, cars, clothes, and so on), the higher one's standing in the realm of sign value. Thus, just as words take on meaning according to their position in a differential system of language, so sign values take on meaning according to their place in a differential system of prestige and status" ("Early Writing", para. 7). That is, the sign-value accorded to a good is the prestige and social status that it imparts upon the possessor even if the good has no use-value at all. The Sign-value of a good is, thus, independent of its material properties and utilities. For example, the value of luxury goods such as jewels that have no practical utilities in themselves can be considered a sign-value. The concept of sign-value will be discussed in more detail in Chapter IV.

until the in-game results are achieved. Here, the process of performing game activity itself has no importance compared to its final outcomes.

Based on this distinction between game activity as play and game labor, I will use two different sub-concepts referring to gamers. In this chapter, I use the term gamers as a neutral expression referring to people who participate in MMOs and perform game activities, and this term neither specifies how they are performing game activities nor indicates their specific goals or the type of fun they are seeking from the games. Gamers who perform game activity as play under the goal of experiencing fun in the sheer process of performing it are called game players. On the other hand, gamers who perform game activities like labor (or as labor) under the goal of finding fun not in the gaming process itself but in the outcomes of their activities are called game laborers.

For game laborers, the actual experience of games is not always fun. The process of performing game activities can be boring, hard, and unappealing. One example of such game experience is game nogada. As will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, I consider game nogada a sub-concept of game labor. Game nogada is boring, hard, and unpleasant game labor, and it is game labor for which in-game rewards are not properly (or immediately) given to game laborers.

Generally speaking, games are regarded as a subcategory of play, and based on such a point of view, both game labor and its sub-concept game nogada seem to be contradictory concepts, which cannot be precisely defined. This is due to the premise that gaming is a subcategory of play, and thus the concept of game labor consists of two conflicting components, that is, play and labor. To examine why, from which point of

view, game nogada can be defined as game labor but not as play, it would be first necessary to define play and then discuss how labor can be distinguished from play.

3. What is Play?

Perhaps, the most cited or mentioned definition of play in game studies would be the definition suggested by Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens* (1944/1980). In the book, Huizinga defines play as follow:

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga, 1944/1980, p. 13)

To untangle such a condensed definition of play, it is necessary to take a closer look at the formal characteristics of play that Huizinga (1944/1980) identifies. First, Huizinga states that "all play is a voluntary activity," and "play to order is no longer play" (p. 7). This means that in order for an activity to be play, participants must have the freedom of choosing whether they will participate in the play or not.[13] In order to emphasize such a voluntary characteristic of play, Huizinga contrasts play with work. He states, play "is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty" (p. 8). For Huizinga, play "is never a

[13]When Huizinga (1944/1980) states that freedom is the first characteristic of play, he refers to the freedom to participate in a play.

task" (p. 8). Such a contrast between play and work (or task) is indeed related to the second characteristic of play.

Second, in contrast to work, Huizinga (1944/1980) states that "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life'" but "rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (p. 8). He describes this second characteristic of play as "disinterestedness of play," which means that play "stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites" (p. 9). He argues that the purpose that play serves is "external to immediate material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs" (p. 9). Inferring from Huizinga's contrast between play and work, the activity that serves such a purpose is work (or a task), which corresponds to the concept of labor in this dissertation. Then what is the purpose of play? For Huizinga, the primary purpose of play is to pursue fun. However, he also states that play "interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there" (p. 9). Such a statement can be interpreted as follows: The purpose of play, that is, the fun of play, lies in the playing activity itself. Therefore, play is an autotelic activity, an activity that has a purpose in, and not apart from, itself.

The third characteristic of play suggested by Huizinga (1944/1980) is its "limitedness" and "secludedness." It means that "play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration," or "it is 'played out' within certain limits of time and space" (p. 9). Regarding its "limitedness" of time, Huizinga briefly mentions that play presupposes its end. In other words, "play begins, and then at a certain moment it is over" (p. 9). However, he also hints at play's separation from everyday life: "Play is done at leisure, during 'free time' (p. 8), or "play presents itself […] as an intermezzo, an

interlude in our daily lives" (p. 9). For Huizinga, play is done in free time, and this free time is again contrasted to "daily lives" or "ordinary life" that is bound up with the realm of daily work or labor.

Huizinga (1944/1980) discusses the "secludedness" of play in more detail than its "limitedness," and here one of his famous concepts, the "magic circle" appears:

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (p. 10)

According to Huizinga (1944/1980), within the "magic circle," "an absolute and peculiar order reigns," and such an order is established by "rules of play" that "determine what 'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play." They are the rules that are "absolutely binding and allow no doubt" in the world of play (pp. 9–10). The order established by rules of play must be an absolute one because "as soon as the rules are transgressed the play-world collapse" (p. 11), and what he calls "play-community" cannot be maintained.[14]

[14]"Play-community" could be understood as a group of participants in a play who share "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms" (Huizinga, 1944/1980, p. 12).

In the final characteristic of play, Huizinga (1944/1980) argues that players in such a "play-community" tend to "surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (p. 13). In what follows, I do not pay too much attention to the word "secrecy," as Caillois (1958/2001) did.[15] That is because, considering Huizinga's (1944/1980) accounts of the secrecy of play, his explanation is more focused on the "temporary abolition of the ordinary world" of play (p. 12). Participants of "play-community" stress that "they are different" beings and "do things differently" (p. 12). This can be understood as a complementary explanation of the rules of play; he defines rules of play as an arbitrary one in the sense that it is different or disconnected from "laws and customs of ordinary life" (p. 12).

In sum, Huizinga's (1944/1980) definition of play consists of four main arguments regarding play: (a) Play presupposes players' voluntary participation. It is not done because of moral duty or obligation; (b) The purpose of play, that is, the fun of play exists in the play activity itself. Thus, play is considered an autotelic activity. It is not done for the purpose of gaining material interests or meeting individuals' biological needs; (c) Play takes place within a "play-ground" or "magic circle" that has its own temporal and spatial limitations, in which its participants must follow rules of play; (d) The rules of play are arbitrary in the sense that they are irrelevant to laws, customs, and norms of everyday life.

[15]Caillois (1958/2001) criticizes Huizinga's definition of play for being "too broad" by including "secret or mysterious" within it (p. 4). He argues that "play exposes, publishes, and somehow expends" the secret or the mysterious of play (p. 4). In other words, "play tends to remove the very nature of the mysterious" (p. 4).

Huizinga's (1944/1980) concept of "magic circle" has its limitations when applied to MMOs. Huizinga's "magic circle" is a "playground" that is completely disconnected from other aspects of everyday life. In particular, its rules are arbitrary insofar as they are disconnected from or irrelevant to everyday social rules such as laws, customs, and norms. Such a conception of play does not explain the Gold Party, as we will see, a social rule created by Korean *WoW* gamers, inextricable from the logic of efficiency that prevails in Koreans' daily lives.[16]

Second, as a way of highlighting the voluntary characteristic of play, Huizinga (1944/1980) contrasts play and work by stating that play "is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task" (p. 8). Here, Huizinga differentiates play from work (or labor) by imparting voluntariness to play, while he imparts necessity and duty to work (or labor). It may be true that all work is done by necessity, but I consider it not always imposed by duty or obligation. There may be work (or labor) that people do voluntarily with their own particular purposes, such as the voluntary game labor of Korean *WoW* gamers that will be discussed in Chapter V.

Third, I contend that an emotion induced by a particular activity cannot serve as an absolute criterion to determine whether the activity is play or work (or labor). Although Huizinga (1944/1980) claims that the main purpose of play is to pursue fun, I note that the emotions a player feels while playing is not necessarily just fun. Such an idea indeed is reflected in Huizinga's discussion of play. Huizinga states that the act of playing may involve various emotions such as tension, exaltation, mirth, relaxation, etc., which are loosely connected to but not equivalent to subcategories of fun. What is

[16]This will be discussed in detail in Chapter V.

important here is the distinction between the purpose of play and the emotion that a player feels during the course of playing. Even if Huizinga does not clearly make such a distinction throughout his work, it plays a crucial role in my study because it helps us think about the inconsistent or even contradictory relationship that may exist between the purpose of play and the emotions the player feels while playing. Indeed, the play experience may result in, for example, boredom, an emotion that is generally regarded as an antithesis of fun. Thus, one cannot say that the experience of play is always fun. Likewise, labor may be also a fun experience for some people.

Fourth, the concept of "the fun of playing" suggested by Huizinga (1944/1980) is indeed a vague one. Because the central focus of *Homo Ludens* is "on the concept of play and on the supreme importance to civilization of the play-factor" (p. ix), Huizinga does not explain the fun of playing in detail. He only mentions that it "resists all analysis, all logical interpretation" (p. 3). That is, fun is a concept that "cannot be reduced to any other mental category" (p. 3). Instead, it is "an absolutely primary category of life, familiar to everybody at a glance right down to the animal level" (p. 3). As such, Huizinga does not analyze the concept of fun itself. It may be true that fun indicates an emotion in both humans and animals, which cannot be reduced to anything else and thus stands independently as it is. However, if we try to define "the fun of playing" based on such an understanding, the only conclusion we can come up with would be the fun of playing is fun, a meaningless sentence that prevents further discussions. To avoid such a tautological conclusion, I will discuss the fun of playing based on its various types suggested by previous game studies scholars and the conditions under which the autotelic fun of playing can be experienced, relying on the flow theory.

4. Game and Types of Fun

What types of fun do gamers pursue in MMOs? For example, Bartle (1996) abstracted four types of fun from an online discussion that took place among "highly experienced players" of a commercial MUD, which was sparked by the question, "what do people want out of a MUD?" The four types of fun that Bartle suggests are "achievement within the game context," "exploration of the game," "socializing with others," and "imposition upon others." Depending on the type of fun for which MUD players expressed a preference, Bartle labeled them respectively as "achievers," "explorers," "socialisers," and "killers." Ten years later, Yee (2006a) offered 10 "motivations for play in online games" that are grouped into three overarching motivations ("achievement," "social," and "immersion") based on Bartle's typology of players as well as his online survey date collected from 30,000 MMO users.[17] Such various motivations indeed indicate that there may be various types of fun that could be derived from MMOs.

Such motivations can be read as specific goals gamers set to achieve their purpose, that is, the fun of MMOs. To put it another way, the specific type of fun gamers pursue may vary depending on the specific goal they set. In the case of *WoW*, most Korean *WoW* gamers accept the game's goal as suggested by game designers; that is, achieving the status of the winner in the competition over other gamers, which is based on the never-ending advancement of a game character. However, some gamers may not be interested in in-game competitions and may set a goal of enjoying the process of playing the game itself. Others may not be interested in meeting the goal suggested by

[17]Ten motivation subcomponents of the three overarching components that Yee (2006a) offers are achievement component (advancement, mechanics, competition), social component (socializing, relationship, teamwork), and immersion component (discovery, role-playing, customization).

game designers and pursue peculiar fun by setting an exceptional goal. For example, there might be a "killer" who finds their own fun in hindering the advancement of other gamers' game characters.

As previously discussed in this chapter, this study focuses on a particular type of fun, among its various types, that is, fun as it derives from the satisfaction or a sense of achievement obtained by reaching high social status (or the status of the winner) in the game society of *WoW*. Such a particular type of fun corresponds to the fun of achievement suggested by Bartle (1996) and Yee (2006a), and it is actually a different type of fun from the "fun of playing" discussed by Huizinga (1944/1980) and the enjoyment of flow, which will be discussed in the following section.

4.1. Game as Play and Fun of Play

Previously, I defined Huizinga's (1944/1980) concept of play as an autotelic activity. Huizinga frequently mentions that play provides fun or enjoyment to its participants, and play participants play for fun. He also states that "it is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play" (p. 3). Taken together, Huizinga's arguments can be interpreted as follow. Fun is the essential characteristic of the play experience, that is, the experience of play, or the process of playing, itself can be a fun experience for players, and it is precisely the pursuit of such fun that is the purpose of play. In other words, the purpose of play is to experience its essence, that is, the fun experienced within the playing process itself. From such a viewpoint, play is an autotelic activity.

The supreme enjoyment (or fun) that game players could experience in MMOs as an autotelic activity, that is, games as play, would be the enjoyment (or fun) of being completely immersed in the process of performing game activities. Huizinga (1944/1980)

also mentions that play absorbs "the player intensely and utterly" (p. 13) and argues that "in this intensity, this absorption [...] lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play" (p. 2-3). However, Huizinga does not precisely explain what such an "absorption" (another essence of play for him) might be and how it relates to the fun of playing.

Therefore, neither the enjoyment (or fun) of being completely immersed in the game process nor how such enjoyment occurs can be fully explained based on Huizinga's (1944/1980) play theory. The "flow theory" developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) serves as a useful complementary theoretical framework for analyzing the nature of this enjoyment. In other words, the fun of autotelic play that is not closely examined by Huizinga can be explained by the flow theory of Csikszentmihalyi.

In flow theory, Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990; 1994; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005) discusses the immersive experience, or what he calls "flow experience," which can be experienced in any activity, and he also explains the conditions and constituent elements of flow. Its conditions and its constituent elements provide a theoretical framework that allows the analysis of under which conditions game players can experience the autotelic fun of playing games, particularly by completely immersing themselves in the process of performing game activities. At the same time, flow theory also makes it possible to discuss how such fun may be lost. In other words, based on flow theory, I examine how gamers can experience the fun of playing or lose such fun. To that end, the next section takes a closer look at what the enjoyment of flow is, how the state of flow can be experienced in games, and what breaks off or interrupts the enjoyment of flow.

4.2. Game as Play and Enjoyment of Flow

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), “when we choose a goal and invest ourselves in it to the limits of our concentration, whatever we do will be enjoyable” (p. 42). He defines flow as a state in which our attention is fully concentrated on an activity or a task at hand. When we experience flow, our “concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems” (p. 71). In the state of flow, our “self-consciousness disappears,” and “the sense of time becomes distorted” (p. 71). “An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake” (p. 71). In other words, “flow activities have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences” (p. 72).

According to flow theory, flow is an enjoyable experience in itself. That is, it is an autotelic activity, an “activity rewarding in and of itself (auto=self, telos=goal), quite apart from its end product or any extrinsic good that might result from the activity” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 89). The enjoyment of flow is the intrinsic enjoyment that an actor can experience in the course of the activity, and such enjoyment is the purpose of the activity as well as an intrinsic reward given to the actor.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that “an autotelic experience is very different from the feelings we typically have in the course of life. So much of what we ordinarily do […] we do it only because we have to do it, or because we expect some future benefit from it” (p. 68). However, “when the experience is autotelic, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake; when it is not, the attention is focused on its consequences” (p. 67).

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) states that “activities that provide enjoyment are often those that have been designed for this very purpose” (p. 51). According to

Csikszentmihalyi, games are one such activity; in other words, games are essentially autotelic activities whose enjoyment is pursued in the process of game activities itself. Such a claim that games are autotelic activities is consistent with Huizinga's (1944/1980) view of play; their explanations about play or games correspond to what I call game as play. In short, game players could experience the supreme enjoyment (or fun) of the game as play when immersed in the gameplay process itself.

How then do game players experience flow in games? Adapting flow theory, the answer would be that the enjoyment of flow can be experienced when the subjective level of a gamer's skill matches the subjective level of challenges that a game presents them.

4.3. Game as Flow Activity

Even though any activity can produce a flow experience, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1994), "certain activities are more likely to produce flow than others because (1) they have concrete goals and manageable rules; (2) they make it possible to adjust opportunities for action to our capacities; (3) they provide clear information about how well we are doing; and (4) they screen out distractions and make concentration possible" (p. xiv). He calls such activities "flow activities," and argues that gaming is a representative example of it. In fact, from his early work, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) states that "games are obvious flow activities, and play is the flow experience par excellence" (p. 37).

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), in order to experience flow in any activity, there has to be a clear goal to the task at hand, clear and immediate feedback, and a balance between the level of challenge and the level of skill. One can enter the state of flow when "one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-

directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing" (p. 71). In other words, clear goals, clear and immediate feedback, and the balance between challenge and skills are the three objective conditions of flow.

Based on such conditions of flow, I argue that it is also possible to discuss the game nogada experience of gamers and how it interrupts their flow experience in games. This is an opposing argument against Rea's (2018) opinion about the relationship between flow and game nogada. Rea states that "performing nogada can become so engrossing that sometimes players lose track of time's passage in the actual-world taskscapes around the game, similar to the sense of temporal distortion in 'flow experiences'" (p. 507). He sees game nogada as similar to flow experience because it results in a distortion of temporal experience. In other words, according to Rea, game nogada is a flow experience because gamers "lose track of time's passage" when they perform it. However, strictly speaking, the distortion of temporal experience is just one of the characteristics of flow that one can experience when she is in a state of flow, but it is not necessarily the conditions of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Flow experience entails a distortion of temporal experience, but it is not enough to describe an activity as flow experience only with such a characteristic of flow alone.

To begin with, the enjoyment of flow can be experienced when the level of gamers' skills matches the level of challenges that a game presents them. Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990; 1994; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005) uses the concept of challenge in the flow theory as being interchangeable with other terms such as opportunities for action, demand for action, or difficulty depending on the contexts it is being used. Likewise, skill is sometimes

replaced with terms such as abilities and capabilities. The subtle differences in the meaning of these terms do not seem to be taken into account. Thus, it could be seen that the meaning of challenge and skill in flow theory implies the meaning of other terms used as synonyms for these two terms.

Also, it is worth noting that challenge and skill discussed in flow theory refers to "perceived challenge" and "perceived skill" or "subjective challenge" and "subjective skill" rather than "objective" challenge and "objective" skill. On the one hand, because the experience of flow basically occurs within the consciousness of an actor, the concept of "perceived challenge and skills" here means that the actor is aware of the challenge and the skill. On the other hand, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) emphasize that challenge and skill are fundamentally subjective terms: "It is the subjective challenges and subjective skills, not objective ones, that influence the quality of a person's experience" (p. 91). In flow theory, a goal is basically determined by an actor, and depending on goals, the type of challenges required to meet the goals and the type of skills necessary to overcome such challenges may vary. Thus, these constituents of flow experience, that is, challenge and skill, are essentially subjective.

Gamers can experience flow when the challenge and skill defined as such are balanced. The experience of flow occurs when the level of challenge matches the level of skill, as shown in the graph (Figure 1) on the following page. In the state of flow, the challenging task at hand is neither too easy nor too difficult. This balance allows gamers to devote all their skills to perform the task at hand and immerse themselves in the game activity itself. Only when their level of skill matches the level of difficulty, can they experience flow.

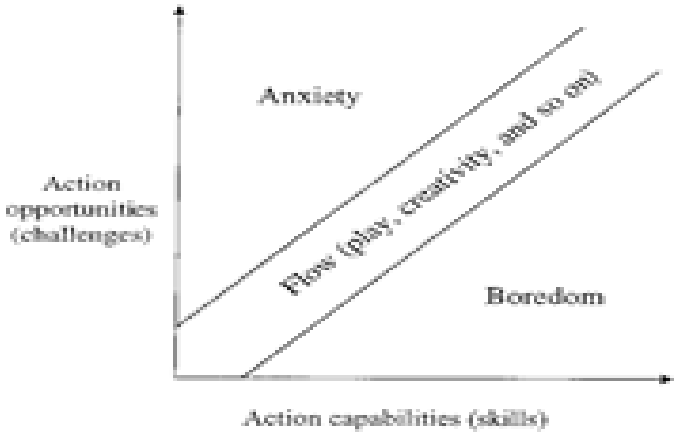

Figure 1. Flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 94).

On the other hand, if gamers' skills and challenges are out of balance, they may experience anxiety or boredom. If gamers have insufficient skills compared to the level of difficulty in a game, they will experience anxiety. On the contrary, if their skill level is higher than the level of difficulty in the game, they experience boredom.

From such a point of view, game nogada can be considered a game activity that game laborers persist in performing even when their level of skill exceeds the difficulty of a game. In other words, gamers experience game nogada when their level of skill is higher than the level of challenge, that is, the level of difficulty of a game.

4.4. Game Nogada as an Interrupting Factor of Flow

Even if gamers want to remain in the enjoyable state of flow, not every moment of a game is fun. The time of game nogada is one in which such enjoyment is lost. Game nogada is a boring experience in itself, and as such, the game nogada experience is not a flow experience. It is rather a game experience that interrupts the flow. Seen through the lens of flow theory, game nogada is the persistence of a state of boredom: boredom experienced when gamers' level of skills is higher than the level of difficulty in a game.

It can be said that such boredom arises because gamers no longer have a new experience or "a sense of novelty" in terms of challenges.

In order to uncover the enjoyment of flow that can be experienced in games, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) mentions Caillois's (1958/2001) four categories of game (agon, alea, ilinx, and mimicry) and argues that these four categories of game have something in common: They provide "a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality" (p. 74). The "sense of novelty" one experiences in flow activity indeed characterizes the enjoyment of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 46). The fact that an actor experiencing flow feels "a sense of novelty" in the task at hand can be interpreted as meaning that the task at hand is indeed a challenging one because there is something new to learn and a possibility to improve their skills.

From this point of view, game nogada does not provide gamers with a game experience that provides a sense of novelty in a task. Although gamers could slowly advance their game characters through game nogada activity, there is no improvement of skills for the gamers behind the screen. In other words, game nogada activity is no longer challenging for gamers because there is nothing new to learn from gamers' point of view. That is why game nogada activity interrupts the flow experience: Game nogada is not a challenging activity for gamers themselves, and because of that, it disrupts the enjoyment of flow.

The second reason game nogada interrupts flow is the delay of clear and immediate feedback. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), "the concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback" (p. 49). He also states that "unless a person learns to set goals and to recognize and gauge

feedback in such activities, she will not enjoy them" (p. 55). It means that if an actor does not receive immediate feedback on whether they are performing well to meet a goal or not, such an absence of feedback can break off the flow experience. Immediate feedback serves the purpose of informing "the individual how well he or she is progressing in the activity, and dictates whether to adjust or maintain the present course of action" (Csikszentmihaly et al., 2005, p. 602). According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the feedback must also be clear: "The kind of feedback we work toward is in and of itself often unimportant" (p. 57). What is important is "the symbolic message it contains: that I have succeeded in my goal" (p. 57). The state of flow can be maintained only when immediate and clear feedback is given to an actor.

Game nogada delays immediate and clear feedback defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as such. The feedback that gamers receive from a game for their game activities is visualized and quantified, whether as game items or as game points. The feedback shows gamers the results of their game activities, and game laborers advance their game characters by performing in-game tasks with the goal of experiencing a sense of achievement. However, when the game system forces these game laborers to perform game nogada activities repeatedly, they are captivated by the feeling of hovering at the same level of the game or going round in circles without making any progress. Game nogada, after all, delays the advancement of game characters and makes game laborers unsure whether they are progressing toward their goal or not. Since clear feedback, which game laborers expect to receive for their game labor, is not given to them, Korean game laborers call it game nogada. For example, gamers performing in-game tasks required to reach the max level of their game characters cannot clearly grasp how successfully they

are achieving their goal at every moment during the game process. In other words, if the game nogada time continues to be prolonged due to the nogada game system, gamers cannot know how many more quests they need to do in order to achieve their goal. Or, in the case of gamers who have to continue to do the same game activity over and over again until finally getting the desired game items, they are doing the game nogada without knowing when it will end; thus, they will not be able to judge whether they are progressing toward their goal or not during the game process. In that sense, I argue that the nogada game system does not provide clear and immediate feedback to gamers. Such an absence of clear and immediate feedback is typical of game nogada, which at the same time interrupts the enjoyment of flow.

If gamers expect quick in-game results with only a goal of winning a competition with others, they will less likely experience the enjoyment of flow than those who play games as an autotelic activity, that is, game players whose goal is to experience the enjoyment of playing process itself. “Competition is enjoyable only when it is a means to perfect one’s skills; when it becomes an end in itself, it ceases to be fun” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 50).

In short, a game is no longer pure play for gamers who do not play games as an autotelic experience but are obsessed with the extrinsic goal of winning an in-game competition and performing their game activities to achieve such a goal. For gamers who are obsessed only with the result of winning and who invest excessive time in games as if it is a mandatory task to do, gaming is more like labor than play. Even though gamers may start playing games, in the first place, as play, as an autotelic experience, if their goal is changed into only winning the in-game competition at some point, their game activities

start to take on the characteristic of labor, focusing on achieving results like the tasks they do in their real lives.

When gamers do not play games as an autotelic experience, or as play, under the goal of experiencing the enjoyment of flow, but perform game activities as an exotelic activity like real-life work done to achieve extrinsic goals, their game activity becomes game labor. In fact, many MMO gamers describe their game activities as a mandatory task to do (Yee, 2006b). Why and how do game activities that game players start playing for fun turn into game labor and game nogada? The answer to this question lies in understanding game labor as the antithesis of game as play, or an autotelic play activity.

5. Game Labor

As discussed earlier, Huizinga (1944/1980) defines play in opposition to work (or labor). What are the criteria we should use to distinguish between play and labor? How can we define game labor as a concept that contrasts with game as play? I contend that play and game labor can be distinguished in two ways: one is based on their goals, the other is based on their characteristics.

5.1. The Goal of Game Labor

First, I propose to distinguish play from game labor based on the goal of an activity. The goal of play is to pursue the fun of playing itself, while the goal of game labor is to produce value, whether it is use-value, exchange-value, or sign-value.[18] In other words, play is essentially an autotelic activity, while game labor is an exotelic activity.

[18]I contend that the value of game items is essentially a sign-value, which represents social prestige, class, or status in Baudrillard's (1981) work.

From that point of view, when comparing game activity as play and game activity as labor, if the goal of play is the fun of the game itself, the goal of game labor does not exist within the game activity itself: its goal is rather to achieve results obtained by the activity and the values attached to its outcomes. If the goal of the game activity is to get the fun in the game playing process itself, then it is play as an autotelic activity, but if its goal is to obtain something other than the fun of game playing itself through that activity, then this game activity is an exotelic activity. In this latter case, the game activity becomes means to achieve its goal. For example, if a gamer engages in a game activity to earn real money rather than for the fun of the game itself, such game activity is no longer an autotelic activity.

Then, what is the ultimate goal gamers hope to achieve through game labor? Game laborers ultimately want to produce a sense of their own sense of achievement. By sense of achievement, I refer to a feeling of pride or satisfaction experienced when a goal has been completed. However, the sense of achievement sought by game laborers is not self-satisfaction based on the fun that can be obtained while enjoying the game process itself, regardless of the results of the game. Instead, it is essentially a sense of achievement or satisfaction, relying on extrinsic rewards such as game scores, game items, and social status imparted by such in-game results.

Importantly, external rewards are given as feedback to game laborers when they have performed well in the tasks required by the game system. In other words, the goal that game laborers want to meet is not their own personal goal; it is instead the goal of the game already presented in the game, which they have accepted as their own and strive to

achieve.[19] From the perspective of game laborers, an ultimate goal they want to meet by participating in MMOs is to experience a sense of achievement, a satisfaction relying on extrinsic rewards given by the game system as a symbol for successfully performing in-game tasks.

5.2. Characteristics of Game Labor

If the ultimate goal of game labor is to experience a sense of achievement, then the characteristics of game labor compared to game as play can be discussed based on two earlier mentioned criteria that distinguish play from labor. Previously, I criticized Huizinga's (1944/1980) distinction between play and work (or labor) in terms of voluntarism. I also argued that the distinction between play and labor depending on whether an activity provides fun for an actor or cannot serve as an absolute criterion.

Even so, in general, when comparing the characteristics of play and labor, it can be argued that everyday work (or labor) has a mandatory characteristic compared to play, and play is a relatively voluntary activity compared to labor. In addition, mandatory labor can be a relatively boring experience than voluntary play, and voluntary play can be a relatively fun experience compared to mandatory labor. Of course, there are exceptions. High-skilled professionals in any field can experience flow or fun, concentrating on their

[19]Game designers create the goal of a game, and gamers only choose whether to accept it as their goal or not. The majority of gamers would accept the goal suggested by game designers and try to achieve it to experience a sense of achievement. However, as mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, where I discussed various gamers' motivations, gamers might set different goals. Gamers can set their own personal goals within games rather than accept the goal suggested by game designers. In such a case, what gamers want to obtain by meeting their own personal goals would be a sense of accomplishment because there may be no external rewards provided by the game system. It is possible for gamers to completely ignore the goals suggested by game designers and in-game rewards that are given only when those goals are met; gamers might play a game by creating a new play based on the given game contents. However, because it is not easy to continue the game by ignoring its given goals and rewards, not many gamers would play games in such a peculiar way.

work, even if they perform a mandatory task. For example, surgeons with a high level of surgical skills can experience flow while performing the operation, so we cannot say that their work is boring. Professional gamers with high game skills can feel the flow during the game playing process, even if they play the game like obligatory labor to earn money. In addition, modders who voluntarily do modding using their programming skills and creativity can feel fun even if their work is not usually economically compensated.

On the other hand, game labor performed by gamers in MMOs like *WoW* is not an entirely voluntary activity. This is because to achieve their ultimate goal, that is, to experience a sense of achievement, game laborers are obliged to do game labor even though it may not please them, providing that the game labor is embedded in the given rules of the game. In order for gamer laborers to experience a sense of achievement based on in-game results provided by the reward system of a game, they must follow the rules of the game. Thus they are thereby obliged to do game labor. Such obligatory game labor is indeed one of an MMO's inherent features. In MMOs like *WoW*, the primary goal is to advance one's game character and compete with others while following the game's rules. In other words, the MMO is a game genre that requires game labor. Game laborers in MMOs are incapable of skipping the process of game labor without breaking the inherent rule imposed by game designers. From the standpoint of game laborers, game labor given as part of the game's rule is an enforced choice that they must accept freely, as their own free choice, to belong to a virtual society.

In sum, game labor can be defined as follows. Game labor is a game activity whose goal is to acquire (or produce) the sign-value of in-game results given within a game and to produce a sense of achievement relying on such results rather than to

experience fun in the process of playing games itself. It is a mandatory task for gamers who want to keep participating in games even if the process is not fun for them.[20]

Such a definition of game labor appears to include negative meanings within it. In fact, the problem of game labor, whose ultimate goal is to produce a particular type of fun, that is, a sense of achievement, lies in that it sacrifices autotelic fun, which constitutes the fundamental fun of play. In other words, the fun of the process is sacrificed because of the obsession with the results. After all, game nogada is a word that emphasizes only the negative aspects of game labor.

Generally speaking, when gamers describe their game activity as labor, the implication is that the game activity is not fun, or more precisely, it is boring and hard to do like daily work. Such emotions attached to game labor derive from the repetitiveness of monotonous game activities. Such a monotonous repetition also characterizes the work people engage in on a daily basis, as managers, coders, clerks, etc. Gamers thus compare their repetitive gaming activities to labor rather than to play because those gaming activities are as boring as the daily routine of their real lives (even though the inducement for game labor involves virtual compensation, while the inducement for work is survival). Thus, at the center of comparison between play and labor lies the common idea that plays should be a fun experience as a means of escaping from the boredom of daily work. Based on the dichotomous idea that labor is boring while play is fun, many (Butler et al., 2011; Goggin, 2011; Terranova, 2000; Yee, 2006b) argued that this dichotomy between work and play has become difficult to maintain today as the distinction between the two

[20]This is because game labor refers to the phenomenon in which gamers continue to participate in games even though its process is boring, like daily work.

has blurred. According to Butler et al. (2011), for example, corporate efforts to increase work productivity include incorporating elements of play into work (or colonization of play for profit-seeking purposes by contemporary organizations). The authors explain the changing trends in corporate management as trying to turn work into play. I contend that game labor may represent a reverse trend: gamers play games as if they were work.

6. Game Nogada as Game Labor

Game Nogada is a Korean game culture term in which Korean gamers compare their game activities to the actual labor of nogada. It is game labor that only highlights its negative aspects, bringing the negative connotations of the term nogada in Korean society into its meaning. And Korean gamers generally use the term to refer to the repetitive and boring game activities they perform in MMOs like *WoW* and call such games nogada games. For Korean gamers, a nogada game is defined by its use of game design patterns that induce gamers to do game nogada activities. To analyze game nogada, the subject of this study, such various aspects associated with the term need to be discussed in detail. Thus, in the following sections, the concept of game nogada will be discussed as follows: After briefly examining what kind of game activity the game nogada is, I discuss the perception of game nogada as a subjective experience of gamers. Then, I briefly discuss the nogada game system, covered in more detail in the next chapter as the main topic. And I examine the implications of the term game nogada in the socio-cultural context of Korean society; the analysis will be conducted from a comparative perspective with the term grind to highlight the particular meaning given by Korean gamers to game nogada as game labor. Finally, I discuss the meaning of nogada gamer.

6.1. Types of Game Nogada as Game Activity

Game activities described as game nogada vary from game to game since each game has its own forms of game labor, types of reward, and different playing conditions through which game laborers are rewarded. The term game nogada, however, is not often used by Korean gamers without modification. Instead, Korean gamers use the term game nogada in a more precise manner by placing the name of the in-game reward before the word nogada. For example, a game nogada performed to level up game characters is called level nogada or experience points nogada.

In the case of *WoW*, game labor described as game nogada by Korean gamers includes various types of game activities, and the types of game nogada that frequently appear in the posts of the online forum of Korean *WoW* gamers called WoW Inven are as follows: Hunting the same or similar monsters over and over again or clearing quests that have similar basic structures (such as gathering quests, hunting quests, escorting quests, etc.) in order to level up one's game character is called level up nogada. Spinning dungeons, or when gamers keep clearing the same dungeon over and over again until they finally get the game items they want, is called dungeon (items) nogada. Hunting the same monsters in a particular game area to earn gold or collecting herbs or mining ores to sell those materials at the in-game Auction House is called gold nogada. Performing daily quests on a daily basis to earn reputation points (or faction currencies) that can be exchanged for faction items or special mounts from the several different factions existing in the game world is called reputation nogada.

The common feature of game nogada activities is that they require gamers to repeat the same or similar activities within a game continuously, and gamers are required to repeatedly perform such homogeneous game activities until they obtain their desired

in-game rewards. From gamers' points of view, such repetitive activity can begin to feel like tedious, uninteresting, and laborious nogada, and it can be said that the moment when gamers feel such emotions is the point where their subjective perception of game nogada begins. In fact, the game nogada experience itself results from the nogada game system inherent in the game itself, but there may be individual differences in the point at which gamers perceive game nogada or in the extent of enduring its experience. In other words, there may be differences among gamers in terms of when they begin to feel they are doing game nogada or the extent to which they endure the negative feelings of game nogada experience.

6.2. Perception and Experience of Game Nogada

As a gamer's subjective experience, game nogada can be discussed in terms of gamers' psychologies and their perceptions of game nogada. On the psychological level, the game nogada experience begins with boredom felt by gamers caused by monotonous repetition of homogenous game activities, and such emotion may lead to stronger negative emotions such as laboriousness, unpleasantness, and irritation when gamers have to continue to do game nogada activity.

The game nogada experience begins with the perception of the boredom that occurs when the game activity of the same pattern is repeated without novelty. However, it cannot be said that all gamers perceive the repetitive game activity imposed by the nogada game system as game nogada activity from the beginning. If the feeling of boredom is the starting point for perceiving a game activity as a game nogada activity, when such perceptions of game nogada do begin may vary depending on gamers' level of skill.

This relates to the relationship between subjective (perceived) challenge/skills and flow experience discussed in the previous section. For beginners who have just started playing a game, everything in the game world could be new. As long as they experience a sense of novelty in the game, they will not yet perceive the game activity they perform as game nogada activity. However, as they become accustomed to the game and improve their game skills, they will eventually reach the point in which they can play the game without learning anything new, that is, the point that the game feels too easy for them. From that moment on, the fun of learning and experiencing new things in the game disappears, and the fun of novelty will be gradually replaced with the boredom resulted from the monotony of the game activities they perform; that is, they reach the point that they begin to perceive their game activity as game nogada activity. In short, the starting point of perceiving game nogada differs according to the gamers' level of game skills, and from such a point of view, the perception of game nogada is essentially a subjective experience.

Once gamers perceive their game activity as game nogada activity, they will usually want to avoid it or complete it as quickly as possible. Gamers who experience game nogada may have two choices: quit the game entirely or endure the boredom (and other perhaps stronger negative feelings) and continue to perform the game nogada activity. For example, game players who are basically trying to experience fun from the gaming process itself will probably stop playing a game if they find the monotonous and repetitive gaming process boring. For them, there is no reason to persist or endure the tedious and tiresome process of the game. Therefore, the game nogada experience may not exist for game players, or at least, their enduring time for game nogada experience

will be relatively shorter compared to game laborers. However, gamers who decide to continue to do game nogada activity, that is, game laborers, do the activity as obligatory work, enduring the negative feelings it entails.

The repetitive game nogada activity is fundamentally imposed on gamers by the inherent game reward system of a game. A game reward system that provides gamers with in-game rewards only when performing repetitive game nogada activities will be called nogada game system.

6.3. Nogada Game System

I use the term nogada game system to refer to the game reward system that forces gamers to perform monotonous and repetitive game nogada activities. More precisely, I define the nogada game system as a game system that does not immediately provide in-game rewards for gamers' game activities, intentionally used by game designers to extend gamers' gaming time. The nogada game system induces gamers who want to obtain particular in-game rewards in the game world to repeat similar or identical game activities (such as hunting the monsters repeatedly or conquering the same dungeon over and over again) until they get the desired reward (or until the desired reward is given to them). Such a definition of the nogada game system indeed corresponds to the definition of grind from a game design perspective. For example, Brice Morrison (2011), the former lead designer of *ChefVille* and *CityVille Mobile*, explains that grind, which corresponds to what I call nogada game system, consists both of "an incredibly strong long term incentive to keep the player going forward" and "base mechanics and punishment and reward systems that have already mastered by the player" (A Design Definition of Grinding section, para. 1). In other words, it not only provides gamers with "a reward that

will come to them in the future in exchange for action in the present" (para. 2) but also force them to perform "the same actions over and over, actions that they have already mastered" to obtain the reward (para. 3). On the other hand, Zagal et al. (2013) describe grind as "a dark game design pattern" that is "used intentionally by a game creator" (Conclusions section, para. 2) and define "grinding" as "a way of coercing the player into needlessly spending time in a game for the sole purpose of extending the game's duration" (Grinding section, para. 1).

From the perspective of gamers, the nogada game system is embedded in the game and given to them as a part of the game rules that they cannot freely modify; thus, the process of game nogada activity imposed by the nogada game system is something that gamers cannot skip in principle. However, using the nogada game system in *WoW* is a fundamental way of generating revenues for Blizzard, the game developer of *WoW*. What the nogada game system of *WoW* consists of and how it works is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Finally, I will examine the implications of the term nogada in the socio-cultural context of Korea. The term nogada implies only extremely negative meanings, and the next section will reveal why and how nogada implies such meaning in comparison with the term grind, which refers to the same game activity but has a different socio-cultural background. The reason for comparing the two terms is that the term nogada has particular implications that can only be understood in the cultural context of Korean society, and the implications reflect Korean gamers' value judgment about game labor called game nogada.

6.4. Game Nogada in the Socio-cultural Context

Game nogada and grind are terms that emphasize the characteristic of game labor; that is, it is boring and hard to do like daily work, even though there exists a semantic difference between the two terms deriving from their original meanings.[21] These two terms have in common that they are both metaphors for real work and reflect gamers' perception of game labor. When North American gamers describe their game labor as grind, it implies that their game labor activity is boring, tedious, and tiresome. On the other hand, the original meaning of the word nogada, which is included in the term game nogada and defines the core characteristics of that game activity, refers directly to daily physical laborers who most often, but not exclusively, work at construction sites or the arduous physical labor these workers do. However, the term nogada is also used by young Koreans metaphorically to refer to "any kind of hard work or arduous endeavor ahead of them," and the term "is most often used for what one might consider menial work or a pointless effort (Liptak & Lee, 2015, p. 78). When the term nogada is used in Korean game culture to describe game labor, game nogada is a metaphor for the hard, physical labor of manual laborers, that is, nogada labor of nogada laborers. Therefore, game nogada and grind, as metaphors for real work (or labor), both reflect a negative perception of gamers regarding their game labor; that is, it is boring and tedious due to its monotonous repetition.[22] Such negative perceptions can be interpreted as being based on

[21]Game nogada is often used as a synonym when grind as a North American game culture term is translated into Korean. However, such an interchangeable relationship only works insofar as the meanings of both terms are limited to what I call nogada game system, which refers to a particular feature that games like *WoW* share with other MMOs that force gamers to engage in monotonous, repetitive game activities to reap the rewards.

[22]Although both grind and game nogada reflect gamers' negative evaluation of game labor, there is a slight difference in what each term emphasizes. Grind emphasizes that an activity is boring because it is monotonously repeated and includes an additional meaning that the activity becomes tiresome and arduous when it is persisted. On the other hand, in Korean game culture, when gamers refer to their game labor as game nogada, it not just means that the activity is boring because it is simple and repetitive. The term

the idea that game labor sacrifices the autotelic fun of game, that is, the fun that derives from the process of playing itself.

However, despite their commonalities, there is a significant semantic difference between game nogada and grind. First, grind does not refer to an agent from a specific class background, while nogada, in contrast, directly references day laborers who do hard, heavy manual labor in places like construction sites. On the one hand, there is no specific agent who performs grinding—everyone grinds, and anyone can be the agent of grinding. The expression that represents such a universality of the agent is the daily grind, which does not refer to a particular type of work but to any work that people do daily, characterized by monotony and repetitiveness. In Korean society, on the other hand, nogada represents the lowest stratum of the working class. The term nogada is currently used to refer to day laborers who work at construction sites pejoratively. However, more generally, nogada is a pejorative term for day laborers who work at any worksite that requires intense, simple, manual labor. Nogada are workers hired and paid on a daily basis by an employment agency, who are dispatched to work sites where they do simple repetitive chores that do not require professional or skilled tasks. Because nogada refers to lower working-class laborers, the evaluation of nogada activity, unlike grinding activity, is linked to the social perception of people who make a living from nogada work.

The second difference between the two terms is that while grind may have negative or positive meanings depending on the context, nogada is always used in a

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emphasizes that the activity is arduous (like physical labor done in construction sites), irritating, and worthless. Boredom is a starting point or a threshold when gamers start feeling that their game activity is like doing nogada, which gradually turns into stronger negative emotions as gamers persist in doing it.

negative sense regardless of the context in which it is used. Even though the term grind generally has a negative meaning, as in the case of a daily grind, there are other cases where the meaning grind changes in a more or less value-neutral or positive sense.[23] On the other hand, unlike grind, the term nogada itself is an entirely pejorative term, and the act of calling someone nogada by Korean people reflects their disdain for daily physical laborers and the type of work they do. While grind does not reflect on the worker so much as the kind of work they must perform, the term nogada entails a negative social perception and evaluation of the lower working class and their work.

Within the hierarchical order of laborers in Korean society, laborers called nogada are treated as the most incompetent low-level workers, and there is a widespread social perception that the work of nogada is trivial and valueless. Such a perception is based on the actual conditions of this work. Although these daily physical laborers have so-called 3D (dirty, difficult, and dangerous) jobs, their labor is not properly compensated. For example, even if daily construction workers in Korea can earn a slightly higher daily wage than the minimum wage in some cases, in reality, they do not always have the opportunity for such a job throughout the year. Thus, with their income, they are not able to escape from the lower class in Korean society. The dangerous, dirty, and difficult work of nogada, which does not require professional skills or professional knowledge, is easily

[23]For example, when the grind is used as a verb, it could be used in a somewhat positive sense, referring to work hard or study hard. In another example, when the grind is used as a noun, it can be used as college slang to refer to a studious classmate (Dundes & Schonhorn, 1963). These examples show that the term grind might have a more or less value-neutral or positive meaning depending on the context in which it is used. Some (Bojin, 2013; Lawley, 2006; Thompson, 2008), in fact, argue that grinding in online games is not always a negative experience; such usage of the term grind in a somewhat positive way confirms that the meaning of the term can change depending on the context.

replaceable and is thus socially underappreciated. In other words, despite their hard work, nogada (as laborers) are neither economically nor socially rewarded.[24]

Due to negative social perceptions and the poor treatment accorded working-class people in Korean society, the term nogada entails a connotative meaning when it is used metaphorically referring to one's work or particular activity; that is, labor that is neither socially nor economically valued.[25] In other words, when Koreans use the term nogada to describe their work or a particular activity they are performing, it implies that no reasonable (or very little) reward is being given to them for what they did.

In short, game nogada, compared to grind, has an additional meaning of worthless game labor that is not properly rewarded. Such negative judgment about game nogada, that is, the idea that game nogada is useless and low-level game labor, implicitly reflects the gamer's desire to skip the process if possible. In particular, *WoW* gamers who are in the process of leveling up their game characters' level and have no choice but to do level up nogada will be more likely to think that way.

In sum, in Korean society, nogada as laborers refer to lower working-class laborers who strive to survive life relying on their simple, repetitive, and physically demanding manual labor. Just as their real nogada labor is socially underappreciated and not properly rewarded economically, *WoW* gamers who have to continue to do game

[24]It would be possible to say that the reverse holds true as well; that is, in Korean society, nogada (and their work) do not receive social recognition because their work is not properly rewarded economically.

[25]Grind sometimes refers to drudgery or menial work such as housework, which takes very little training, skill, or talent and thus is given a low social value. Such work is referred to as a grind because it is probably characterized by monotonousness and repetitiveness, which indeed characterize some portion of almost any kind of work regardless of its social and economic value. Therefore, as grind is not confined to such menial work, the meaning of socially and economically underappreciated work cannot be part of grind definition.

nogada feel like they are being treated as such nogada laborers, that is, as nogada gamers. In other words, the low-level game laborers, who have nothing to do except game nogada activities, are more likely to feel that they are doing tedious and worthless lower class game labor like the nogada labor of actual nogada laborers in Korean society. Moreover, just as nogada laborers are regarded as incompetent in Korea's competitive society, in Korean gamers' society, low-level game laborers who lack game competitiveness are implicitly treated like incompetent nogada laborers and looked down upon.[26] However, game nogada activities are not necessarily done only by such low-level gamers. Indeed, in the society of Korean *WoW* gamers, gamers continue to do game nogada activities regardless of their game characters' level.

Why do gamers as game laborers persist in doing game nogada? The short answer to this question is that the game system forces them to do it. However, the fundamental reason gamers continue to do game nogada activity despite being bored can be found in their goal of doing the game labor; that is, game laborers endure the negative feelings of game nogada experience because they expect to realize their own goal: the fun of achievement. As previously discussed, the fun of achievement is different from autotelic fun in the game process itself sought by game players. The fun of achievement pursued by game laborers relies on outcomes of their game activities, and thus the experience of such fun is delayed until their end goal is achieved. Therefore, the game nogada activity, which game laborers continue to do like obligatory work until their goal is achieved, inevitably ends up being excessive gaming. How and why such game nogada activity as

[26]Such a topic will be examined in detail in Chapter V.

excessive gaming is performed by Korean *WoW* gamers will be discussed in detail in Chapter IV and V.

7. Conclusion

Game nogada is a Korean game culture term that Korean game laborers refer to as their game labor. In order to define game nogada as game labor, which consists of mutually opposed concepts of play and labor, this chapter first distinguished play from labor. The definition of play suggested by Huizinga (1944/1980), who defines play as a voluntary and autotelic activity in contrast with labor, has been critically accepted. However, as Huizinga did not explain the fun of play in detail, I applied the flow theory of Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990; 1994; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005) to describe the autotelic fun of play as the enjoyment of flow. I argued that if gamers' purpose in participating in online games is to pursue fun, the nature of their game activities depends on the type of fun that gamers set as their goal. If gamers' goal is to experience fun within the process of playing games itself, that is, the autotelic fun of the game, their game activity is play, and they are game players. On the other hand, if gamers' goal is to experience a sense of achievement relying on external factors (such as sign-values of game items and scores) and the social recognition of other gamers based on such values accrued in games, their game activity is game labor, and they are game laborers.

Game labor is defined as an oppositional concept to autotelic play, or game as play, whose participants aim to experience the enjoyment of flow by fully concentrating on the process of playing the game. Game labor aims to acquire in-game results rather than enjoying the gaming process, and it is characterized by its mandatory nature and

boredom. Game nogada is a term that emphasizes only the negative aspects of game labor. It reflects not only the perception of game laborers that game labor sacrifices the autotelic fun of game but also their perception that game labor is not properly rewarded. However, what makes the gamers' gameplay game labor is a game system that imposes game nogada activity on gamers. And the system that delays the in-game rewards for game labor was called nogada game system.

As discussed in this chapter, the game nogada imposed by the nogada game system is a process that cannot be avoided by gamer laborers regardless of their level of skill. However, those who cannot concentrate on the forced game nogada activity more than anyone would be high-level gamers who have a relatively higher level of game skill than other gamers. For beginners or less experienced gamers, repetitive game activity enforced by the nogada game system may not yet be perceived as boring game nogada. As long as they experience a sense of novelty in the repetitive game activity forced by the nogada game system, such repetitive elements may not necessarily interrupt their flow experience. However, for gamers that I have defined as game laborers, game nogada activity is inevitably a factor that hinders the experience of autotelic fun that can be obtained from flow experience and game activity as play.

The focus of the discussion in this chapter was to identify and define game nogada as game labor and differentiate it from game activity defined as play. Based on that distinction, game labor was defined as a game activity that aims to acquire a sense of achievement that relies on the game results rather than to experience fun in the process of playing games itself. And I emphasized that because the process of game nogada activity is imposed by the nogada game system, the activity is something that gamers cannot skip

in principle. In other words, it is an inevitable game process that gamers have to perform regardless of their level of skill to be part of the virtual society of *WoW*. Then why did Blizzard, the developer and copyright owner of the game, use the nogada game system as the game rule of *WoW*?

In fact, *WoW*'s nogada game system is Blizzard's primary monetization strategy to generate (or maximize) profits. In other words, the game labor imposed by the nogada game system is used for generating corporate profits and becomes audience labor that creates real value. In Chapter IV, I examine, from a political economy point of view, how *WoW*'s nogada game system induces gamers to do game nogada activities and how Blizzard uses the *WoW* gamers' game labor in order to generate profits.

CHAPTER IV

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GAME NOGADA

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on the characteristics of game labor that are distinguished from game activity as play to define what kind of game activity game nogada is. I argued that game labor is a game activity in which the boundary line between play and labor is blurred, and game nogada is game labor that highlights its negative characteristics. To explain game nogada, which makes it difficult to distinguish play from labor clearly, I discussed the difference between play and labor, and I defined game labor as a game activity aimed at acquiring a sense of achievement that relies on the game results rather than experiencing autotelic fun in the game playing process itself. Game labor is that of gamers who do games like work, and I have argued that game labor is essentially metaphorical labor, not real labor. However, if such metaphorical labor is bought and sold for real money and is actually exploited by capital, can it be said that it is still nothing more than labor at the metaphorical level?

If the purpose of any game is first to entertain people, gamers' game nogada experience, represented by the feeling of boredom, indicates that unnecessary excessive time is already being consumed in the game time of gamers. The unnecessary game nogada time of gamers, who pursue fun from playing games, is indeed artificially created and imposed by game companies for the purpose of generating or maximizing profit. Since the game nogada process embedded in the *WoW* as part of its game rule cannot be skipped by *WoW* gamers who aim to advance their game character, gamers are obliged to do game nogada. In other words, the fundamental reason why *WoW* gamers do game

activities as if they are doing work is due to the game system of *WoW*, or what I call nogada game system. *WoW*'s nogada game system is a game reward system that delays in-game rewards for gamers' game activities to extend gamers' game time. Blizzard as the copyright owner of *WoW*, essentially generates profit via the nogada game system. Due to the nogada game system, which imposes game nogada activities on gamers, their gaming activities are turned into audience labor from which Blizzard can extract value.

This chapter discusses how *WoW* gamers' game nogada turns into exploited audience labor by the nogada game system of *WoW* from a political economy perspective. However, as mentioned in Chapter II, this study does not deal with the problems of exploitation of game labor of professional gamers as Jin (2010) does, nor does it deal with the game labor of modders called "playbour." My analysis in this chapter only focuses on how Blizzard generates or tries to maximize its profits based on *WoW*'s nogada game system. It is neither a holistic analysis of how Blizzard generates total revenue based on all of its games. In addition to *WoW*, Blizzard generates revenues from sales of other games (such as *Hearthstone*, *Diablo* series, *Overwatch*, etc.), and *WoW*'s nogada game system is just one of the many ways Blizzard generates profits based on its game content. Nor do I discuss here how much revenues and profits Blizzard actually generates based on the nogada system of *WoW* because Blizzard does not explicitly disclose the revenues and profits it earned from this particular game. The only data that I was able to access regarding Blizzard's revenues was Activision Blizzard's annual reports, an American video game holding company based in Santa Monica, California.[27] According to Activision Blizzard's 2020 annual report, the company

[27]Activision Blizzard was formed in 2008 through the merger of Activision and Vivendi Games, a division of French media conglomerate Vivendi, which owned Blizzard at the time of the merger. "A key reason for

generated net revenues of $8.1 billion in 2020 alone. The net revenues generated by Blizzard in 2020, reported as Activision Blizzard's segment net revenues, were $1.905 billion, which accounted for the third largest share of Activision Blizzard's annual net revenues.[28] However, this number includes net revenues generated by Blizzard from sales of all its games, even though *WoW* appears to be the most significant contributor, and game-related merchandise, such as toys, clothes, backpacks, replicas, statues, etc.

Therefore, my analysis in this chapter is not about calculating and discussing how much net revenues Blizzard actually generates from *WoW*. Instead, my analysis is limited to the examination of what methods Blizzard uses to generate or maximize its profits from *WoW* and how these methods turns game nogada into exploited audience labor. Through a detailed analysis of *WoW*'s nogada game system, I will look at how Blizzard's monetization strategy based on that system controls gamers' game activities to generate or maximize profits. More specifically, I examine in detail what the nogada game system consists of, how it delays in-game rewards for game labor, and how Blizzard uses such a system to commodify the game nogada time itself to generate surplus-value.

The analysis will eventually demonstrate that Blizzard uses the nogada game system as a means to extract the value from gamers' audience activities as audience

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Activision's interest in the merger" was the "World of Warcraft franchise, which represented the emerging multiplayer, online gaming market, and the potential for subscription models and other revenue streams" (Reiff, 2021, para. 11). Under the merger, Vivendi owned a 52% stake in Activision Blizzard, but Activision Blizzard became a completely independent company in Jan 2016 after buying back a controlling stake in itself from Vivendi (Reiff, 2021). About a month after becoming an independent company, Activision Blizzard purchased mobile game developer King Digital Entertainment to "stepped into the rapidly growing world of mobile gaming" and "became the largest game network in the world by total user base" (Reiff, 2021, para. 13).

[28]The largest portion of Activision Blizzard's segment revenues was $3,942 billion generated by Activision, publisher of *Call of Duty*, a first-person shooter video game franchise, which is followed by $2,164 billion from King Digital Entertainment, publisher of *Candy Crush Saga*, a match-three puzzle mobile game.

labor. In other words, from a political economy point of view, I argue that *WoW* gamers' game labor is exploited as audience labor that produces surplus-value (or profit) for Blizzard. However, in this chapter, my research is not limited to analyzing how audience labor is used by Blizzard's monetization strategy from a political economy point of view but also discusses practices such as RMT and the Gold Party, which can be considered as Korean *WoW* gamers' backlash against the nogada game system.

In Chapter II, I mentioned that this study adopts an integrated approach from the perspective of political economy and cultural studies to examine game nogada. This chapter attempts an integrated analysis from both sides to better understand and explain the research topic of this study: game nogada. Above all, this is because the gamers' nogada activities (and their gaming practices) and the nogada game system have a reciprocal causal relationship with each other, and thus game nogada cannot be fully explained by discussion from one point of view. Therefore, although this chapter focuses on game activity in terms of the audience labor that game companies like Blizzard use to generate or maximize profits, gamers' gaming practices such as RMT and Gold Party will also be discussed. In fact, because gaming practices such as RMT and the Gold Party are triggered by the nogada game system *WoW*, which exploits gamers' audience labor to generate profits, the nogada game system and gamers' gaming practices are inseparable. Therefore, through discussions on RMT and the Gold Party of Korean *WoW* gamers, activated by gamers' opposition to the nogada game system, I will examine the mutual relationship between Blizzard and gamers in relation to game nogada. In other words, from gamers' point of view, I will discuss why such deviant gaming practices occurred and how Blizzard responded strategically to them.

To examine how *WoW* gamers' game nogada turns into exploited audience labor by the nogada game system of *WoW*, the discussion in this chapter will go as follows: To focus on game labor as audience labor, the first thing to consider is what the game labor, controlled by the nogada game system, intends to produce and what is the value or meaning of the game item provided as a reward for game labor from the perspective of gamers. I then analyze the nogada game system of *WoW*, which is Blizzard's basic profit-generating strategy of the game. This analysis of what the nogada game system consists of and how Blizzard creates surplus-value from game labor will eventually lead to an analysis of two ways Blizzard uses the nogada game system to monetize gamers' audience labor (game labor): basic subscription fee method and additional monetization methods such as WoW Tokens and the Character Boost.

2. What Does Game Labor (Seek to) Produce?

Game labor does not produce material goods, as real labor does. Game labor is not real labor that produces something real but a virtual reality experience that gamers experience as labor.[29] If game labor produces something, it is only the gamers' subjective feeling of achievement. Thus, the product of game labor is the fruit of subjective experience that is abstract, unobservable, untouchable, and thus cannot be objectified. In other words, the gamers' subjective sense of achievement, which is an immaterial, invisible, subjective experience, is the final product that gamers (seek to) obtain through their game labor. In such a sense, game labor is immaterial and metaphorical labor.

[29]Gamers' game labor is mental and psychological labor rather than physical labor. Compared to factory workers' labor, game labor produces no real (or material) products.

In Chapter III, I defined game nogada as a game activity that has the characteristic of routinized daily labor that feels boring, monotonous, hard, and even worthless by a laborer; thus, game nogada activity is essentially a metaphor for such a type of labor (or nogada). At first glance, game nogada is a metaphor used by Korean gamers to describe certain parts of their gaming experiences considered boring, work-like activity due to their monotonous repetition. One might also argue that game nogada is essentially a part of gameplay (or consumption) rather than labor (or production).

However, *WoW* gamers' gameplay is converted into labor as a result of the nogada game system inherent in *WoW*. The nogada game system of *WoW* imposes game nogada activity (hard game labor) on *WoW* gamers (whether general gamers or gold farmers), and gamers cannot avoid doing game nogada activity unless they quit the game for good. However, although gold farmers do the same game nogada activity, they are wage laborers in reality who receive wages from their employers, while general gamers are not wage laborers. Gold farmers do game labor for the purpose of earning real money, while the latter do game labor to produce a sense of achievement for themselves.

Although there is a difference between whether or not they are paid for their game labor as well as their purpose for doing game labor, the game activities of gold farmers and general gamers are essentially the same game nogada activity. Nevertheless, can we conclude that only the game activity of gold farmers is labor because it is paid, while that of general gamers is not labor because it is unpaid? Considering that there are many types of unpaid labor, it does not seem reasonable to distinguish between labor and non-labor

based on whether the laborer receives wages. Borrowing Fuchs's (2015) terminology, such an idea is "wage labour-fetishism."[30]

However, if an activity is valorized somehow or creates exchange-value (or monetary value) regardless of who owns it, it can be considered labor (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013, p. 240). To put it another way using a concept from political economy, if an activity goes through the process of commodification, the activity can be labor. Mosco (2009) defines commodification as "the process of transforming things valued for their use into marketable products that are valued for what they can bring in exchange" (p. 2). According to Marx (1867/1976), "in order to become a commodity, the product must be transferred to the other person, for whom it serves as a use-value, through the medium of exchange" (p. 131). Then what is the product that Blizzard sells to its customers, and what is the use-value of the product?

The product sold by Blizzard is the access right to *WoW* or the game time that is expected to be fun for gamers. *WoW* gamers purchase the access right to the game by paying Blizzard subscription fees to engage in the fun experiences that the game contents of *WoW* seem to promise. From that point of view, for gamers, the consumption time of game contents can be considered a time of creating their own fun (or making the meaning of fun for themselves) by using the game contents as a means of production. However, regardless of gamers' intentions, that process turns into audience game labor time that creates surplus-values (or profits) for Blizzard. This is because as a way to extend gamers' game time to generate or maximize profits from *WoW*, Blizzard uses a game

[30]Fuchs (2015) argues that "wage labour-fetishists are so much fixed on the wage labour–capital relation that they exclude non-wage labour constituted in class relations from the category of exploitation" (p. 29).

reward system that induces the game nogada activities of gamers, that is, the nogada game system.

To the extent that Blizzard uses the nogada game system to generate (or maximize) profits, it can be said that Blizzard is actually using the game nogada of gamers as real labor. On the other hand, game laborers are not only properly rewarded for fun due to the nogada game system, but they also have to pay more for extended game nogada time. From such a point of view, gamers' game nogada activity can be seen as exploited audience labor.

In the following section, I will first examine what audience labor is and what discussions have been made in previous studies of audience labor, and based on this, I will define the game nogada as audience labor.

3. Game Nogada as Audience Labor

Smythe (1977; 1981/2006) conceptualized audience labor by "highlighting the productivist role of audience in the creation of media value" (Fisher, 2012, p. 172). Smythe saw the commodification of audience labor as a major feature of modern monopoly capitalism. Smythe argued that the mass media audience is a commodity and that audiences labor on behalf of corporations. According to Smythe's theory of the audience as commodity, TV viewers watch advertisements, which become an important driver of consumption for them, attached to the TV shows regardless of their will, and it is in this sense that the media sell audiences commodity to advertisers.

However, regarding Smythe's (1977; 1981/2006) audience commodity theory, Livant (1982) argues that the audience itself cannot be a commodity because the media cannot own the audience; instead, it is the audience's watching time that becomes a

commodity. According to Jhally and Livant (1986), "what advertisers buy with their advertising dollars is audiences' watching-time" (p. 130). To be precise, it is the audiences' advertisement watching time allocated to TV programs. Therefore, the authors argue that the entire TV viewing time should not be regarded as audience labor time, but only the advertisement watching time should be considered audience labor producing surplus-value for the media.

Jhally and Livant (1986) argue that commercial media wish to make necessary watching-time as short as possible and surplus watching-time as long as possible from which their profit is generated. I contend that Blizzard's way of creating surplus-value by extending the game nogada time is fundamentally the same. Blizzard extends *WoW* gamers' game nogada time by using the nogada game system. In short, Jhally and Livant consider audiences' watching activity as a form of labor, arguing that "there are many similarities between industrial work and surveillance" (p. 135). They stress that this relationship is "metaphorical and real" because "watching activity through commercial media systems generally goes through the same valuation process as working time in the economy" (p. 142). Similarly, I argue that the essentially metaphorical game labor turns into actual audience labor because game nogada produces surplus-value for Blizzard through *WoW*'s nogada game system.

More recently, Nixon (2014) reconceptualized the concept of audience labor as "the process of signification through cultural consumption" (p. 722). That is, it is a process in which the audience produces individual meaning through individual cultural consumption activities. According to Nixon, the audience labor refers to "the activity of audience members, who engage most obviously in various activities of cultural

consumption," and the object of audience labor is anything perceived "as being consumed by audience members: culture," a cultural product, or "signified objects created to have their meaning consumed" (p. 723). Since the product of audience labor is the meaning produced through individual cultural consumption, it can be seen as a product of individual consciousness in a broad sense (pp. 724–725). He states that "the instrument of audience labour is a communication medium, which includes electronic and digital 'technologies' but is more generally any and all means of communication used to consume culture" (p. 724). In short, for Nixon, the object of audience labor is culture in a broad sense, and the instrument of audience labor is the media.

Nixon (2014) focuses theoretically on audience labor within "communicative production," viewing the process of meaning "through cultural consumption as a process of capital accumulation" (p. 725). He attempts to show "what audience activity is and how that activity is exploited by communicative capitalists" (p. 717). Considering communication as capital, he contends that the communicative capital that owns culture (or cultural products) exploits the audience labor that produces surplus-value for it as a kind of "extraction of rent" (p. 730). According to him, "culture is like land, and the use of culture as a means of production in communicative production creates a process of exploitation that, like the process in relation to land, occurs in distribution, through the appropriation of (surplus-)value as rent" (p. 729). This argument is useful in explaining the way Blizzard commodifies game nogada time and exploits the surplus-value produced through gamers' game nogada. This topic will be discussed in detail in the final section of this chapter.

In contrast to Smythe (1977; 1981/2006) and more traditional political economists, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, discussions about the exploitation of audience labor have focused on the digital labor of internet users. For example, Fuchs (2012; 2015) contends that social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., generate profits (or surplus-values) based on the exploited digital labor of users. According to Fuchs (2015), the use of services by social media users is a process of consumption and, at the same time, a process of producing "data commodities that are offered by Facebook and Twitter for sale to advertising clients," that is, digital labor (p. 704). In other words, "digital labor creates social relations, profile data, user-generated content and transaction data (browsing behavior)—data commodities that are then offered for sale by internet corporations to advertising clients that can select certain user groups they want to target" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 708). Fuchs (2012) states that "Internet and media watching/reading/listening/using is value-generating labour" (p. 734). In other words, Fuchs (2015) contends that digital labor is "labour that contributes to the production of surplus-value and capital" as productive labor (p. 28). This productive labor is exploited labor "because it generates value and products that are owned by others" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 705). In short, the digital audience labor of social media users is "the source of the value of a data commodity that is sold to advertisers and results in profits" (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013, p. 288).

Audience labor, such as the digital labor of social media users, or "playbour" like modding, has been the subject of debate as to whether it is an exploited labor because of the blurred line between play and work. In contrast to political economists such as Fuchs (2012; 2014; 2015; Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013) and Nixon (2013; 2014), who argue that

such audience labor is exploited by communicative capital, from the participatory culture point of view, audience labor fundamentally is not considered as "exploited" but "engaged" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 60), insofar as users do so voluntarily for their own pleasure, not in principle requiring any economic compensation (Gauntlett, 2011). The question here is the criterion of exploitation. If exploitation is judged on the criteria of free will and spontaneity of the public, social media users' digital labor cannot be considered exploited labor, however much it is exploited by capitalists. Such a participatory cultural perspective may merely rationalize the exploitation of capital. From a participatory culture perspective, the game labor of general gamers will not be considered exploited labor in nature because it is an activity undertaken willingly and for fun, like the digital labor of social media users, who in principle do not ask for any economic compensation.

What is the ultimate goal of users who upload their posts to social media platforms? Would not it be the fun of communicating with people who would share their posts? In this respect, I believe the purpose of their digital labor is essentially no different than that of *WoW* gamers. This is because the fun of achievement ultimately pursued by game laborers depends on the recognition of their gaming competence by other gamers in the game community. In other words, it is fun of the achievement based on communication with other gamers.

The common thing between gamer laborers and digital laborers of social media is that they both do digital labor in order to create their own fun (whether it is the fun of communication or producing a sense of achievement) and that their labor is used for capitalist accumulation regardless of their will. Although social media users and gamers

may do digital labor for their own fun, not for earning wages, their labor can be exploited to generate corporate profits.

Of course, game nogada as game labor has different characteristics from social media users' digital labor. First, *WoW* gamers' game labor is not a creative sharing activity like the digital labor of social media users, and it is not necessarily spontaneous or pleasurable work. Second, the way gamers' game labor is used for generating profits by Blizzard is different from that of social media users. In the latter case, "everyday-creative makers offer their work to be profited from, via advertising, by the owners of the big content-hosting web-sites such as YouTube" (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 43). On the other hand, *WoW* gamers are not audience-commodities targeted by advertisers like Facebook users. Blizzard induces game labor to create surplus-value by extending game labor time, not by relying on advertisements. The longer the game labor time, the more money Blizzard can earn. Gamers are not wage workers who receive money but rather pay money to play games, so the extension of their game labor time creates surplus revenues for game companies. And this is why Blizzard uses the nogada game system in *WoW*: to extend gamers' game time by delaying rewards for game labor for the purpose of generating more profits.

In order to analyze how the nogada game system delays rewards for game labor, the first thing to understand is what are the in-game rewards that become the subject of control by the nogada game system. This leads to a discussion of game items provided as rewards for game labor. Why are game items important to gamers? What is the value of game items for gamers? This will be explained in the following two sections, in which I will discuss the value, roles, and meaning of game items from the perspective of gamers.

4. Rewards for Game Labor: Game Items

As previously discussed, what game laborers ultimately want to produce is the fun of achievement. Then, how or by what is such a sense of achievement obtained in *WoW*? Specifically, it can be obtained by accumulating game resources such as game points or game items that are given as rewards for gamers' game labor at each stage of the game. Ultimately, however, the sense of achievement is obtained through the social recognition that gamers finally gain in the game society by advancing their game characters and strengthening their competitiveness, which is realized through such an accumulation of game resources. In short, game items are one of the rewards provided by the game reward system of *WoW* and are essential in realizing the sense of achievement that gamers ultimately want to produce through their game labor. However, the nogada game system of *WoW* delays rewards for game labor and puts a brake on realizing their sense of achievement. In other words, it delays the acquisition of game items as rewards for game labor.

However, game items are not the only types of rewards provided by the game reward systems in digital games. Wang and Sun (2011) argue that the game reward system varies depending on the type of game, and there can be different forms of rewards. For example, according to the authors, there are score systems, experience point reward systems, item granting systems, or achievement systems. To look at some of the "uses and effects" of rewards they discuss, for example, the score systems "use numbers to mark player performance," while experience point reward systems "enhance avatar ability" often "in the form of new skills or increases in attributes such as strength or intelligence" (pp. 3–4). Achievement systems "usually consist of titles that are bound to

avatars or player accounts" and encourage gamers to collect achievement titles, while item granting system rewards "widely used in RPGs and MMORPGs" consist of "virtual items that can be used by players" or avatars (p. 4). "Item granting mechanisms encourage player exploration of gameworlds," and some MMO gamers "invest considerable time and sometimes real money" to get rare items (p. 4). In addition, gamers who have high-end items that other gamers do not have may feel a sense of achievement through them in comparison with other gamers. In MMOs, for example, "players can show off their rare pieces of equipment as proof of their advanced skills" (pp. 5–6).

As such, there are various types of game reward systems, but game items can be viewed as a reward type that has the most important uses and effects from the perspective of *WoW* gamers. This is because game items are essential tools for the growth of characters and are also useful tools for enhancing a gamer's own ability to perform in-game tasks well, or what I call a gamer's game skills in Chapter V. Thus, particularly valuable game items in this regard, such as raid items, are often the object of competition among gamers and become the object of RMT that makes such virtual products having monetary values.

4.1. Values of Game Items

In a study on the value of game items, Ho (2014) argues that game items are objects of value "due to their multiple roles in different contexts in digital environments" (p. 259). He considers game items to have various values and deals with game items' values from a complex perspective to understand their origins comprehensively. He argues that game items should be understood not only as objects "produced by game designers and consumed by game players" but also as "tradable goods in the context of the economy"

(p. 39). He explores the values of game items from three perspectives: the roles of game items in different contexts, the production of game items, and the consumption of game items.[31] In terms of consumption, the author argues that "game items can be valuable because they give players in-game advantages" (p. 11).[32] For example, "game items could be useful tools that help them achieve success in games; a way for players to represent and show off their online identities; or a marker of social status for the players who own them" (p. 12).

In other words, game items play various roles in different contexts, and their roles are one of the important factors influencing the value of game items from gamers' perspective. In fact, as Ho (2014) argues, many factors make game items valuable. The author points out that the sources of value of game items are diverse.[33] For example, the value of a game item can be generated or affected by certain game mechanics derived from game design, such as mechanics of functionality or mechanics of artificial scarcity and randomness. It is also affected by "players' personal preferences" for items and "the power of players as a group giving and justifying their value" (p. 259).

What I want to focus on here is the value of game items from the perspective of gamers. In my opinion, the value of a game item for gamers comes from its role, function, and the particular meaning that gamers give to it. Gamers prefer game items

[31]Ho (2014) considers the value of game items as a result of the interaction of several factors, such as "economic consumption, game design, how players perform online identities, and the norms built by player groups" (p. 263).

[32]According to Ho (2014), game items are valuable to gamers because of the benefits they provide. Gamers consume game items created by game designers according to their own purpose.

[33]"The value of game items can be affected by both production and consumption, economic systems and social interactions, gaming and non-gaming cultures, and so on" (Ho, 2014, p. 260).

that are useful for advancing their game characters or enhancing their social status within the game society. Game items can have various usefulness to gamers.

Although game items may not have material use-value in the sense in which Marx (1867/1976) defined it, they have forms of immaterial use-value in the game world. Game items essentially belong to the virtual world, not the real world, and cannot autonomously have their own ultimate purpose. That is, game items do not have use-value as defined by Marx because they do not exist "as a material reality vis-à-vis social needs regardless of the individual need of any particular person (Richards, 2004, p. 369)." However, a game item can still have its own usefulness even though it is confined to the particular game world it has been produced.

A game item's usefulness is related to the visible characteristics (such as its appearance or its effect expressed in terms of numbers or texts) assigned to it. Game items can be hierarchically differentiated from each other in terms of the functional effect a game item has (bad vs. good, weak vs. strong, etc.) and the rarity of a game item (common vs. rare). Such differential attributes of game items serve as the basis of the hierarchical relationships of game characters that possess them and, at the same time, the social hierarchy of real gamers behind the screen.

I classify the value of game items into three categories according to their roles and functions: functional value, decorative value, and social value.[34] Game items with

[34]Noting five consumption values discussed by Sheth et al. (1991) that affect people's motivation for making choices, Ho (2014) highlights three values of game items: functional value, emotional value, and social value. For Ho (2014), if the "functional value" is centered on a specific game item's practical benefit, the "social value" concerns the social bond "in or outside the games" and the "social distinction" (pp. 101–103). Compared to his point of view, what I call a game item's functional value refers to its instrumental usefulness. And, what I call the social value of a game item focuses on social distinction and social status.

Figure 2. Character Sheet of *WoW*.

functional value have instrumental utility as a function that enhances a game character's ability, while items with decorative value change the character's appearance to make it stand out. And game items that represent a game character's social status are classified as items with social value. In particular, rare game items that are difficult to obtain can confer a high social status in the interactions of the game characters equipped with them and the gamers who own them. In that case, the game item can be regarded as having social prestige.

Let us examine the game items that have these three types of value in more detail. The first type of game item is those that increase the combat ability of a game character. These game items, as functional items, "increase the offensive or defensive power of characters" (Lin & Sun, 2011, p. 271). In the case of *WoW*, these game items increase game characters' combat ability that consists of Attributes and Enhancements, whose numerical values appear on the character sheet (Figure 2 above).

Typical functional game items in *WoW* are gear items and consumable items. Gear items permanently increase the game characters' combat ability as long as they are equipped.[35] Consumable items are food, potions, and flasks that temporarily increase game characters' combat ability, which vanishes from game characters' inventory once used. Despite the manifold differences in terms of types, name, detailed game effect, etc., of functional game items, the usefulness (or the functional value) of these game items in *WoW* can be fundamentally reduced to one function: an increase in the combat ability of a game character.

The second type of game item has decorative value to make the game character's appearance stand out. They are vanity items that serve as a tool for ostentatious displays of in-game wealth and status. A representative example of vanity items in *WoW* is mount items. Since riding skills, which gamers learn from non-player characters (NPCs) called Riding Trainers, determine the speed of the game character's movement (or its riding speed), a mount item's role is limited to changing the appearance of a game character riding it. Among mount items, those that function as a means of ostentation are rare mounts, such as The Reins of the Mighty Caravan Brutosaur or The Invincible's Reins. These mounts are rare game items that are difficult to obtain either because their (gold) prices are too high or their drop chances are too low. Due to their rarity (or because they

[35]In *WoW*, there are 16 different types of gear items that influence a game character's combat ability. Each gear item has its Attribute and Enhancements values, which could be added to the game characters' combat ability when equipped. Each gear item has its item level, which "serves as a rough indicator of the power and usefulness of an item, designed to reflect the overall benefit of using the item" ("Item Level," 2021, para. 2). The higher the level of a game item, the higher the value of the combat ability it increases. The item level that appears in the character sheet is the average value of gear item levels worn by the game character, which "is widely used as a means of assessing a character's power" (para. 3).

are hard to obtain in the game), these rare mounts become objects of desire among gamers, and gamers who possess such mounts become objects of other gamers' envy.

The third type is game items with social value. According to Ho (2014), the social value of a game item is that it "can create social connections with other players" as well as "certain social distinctions" (p. 103). For example, in the latter case, "those who own the rarest and most powerful game items also own a higher social status than those who do not" (p. 103). Focusing on this latter function of social value, I will define it as the value of the social prestige of game items, borrowing from Baudrillard's (1981) terminology, when a specific game item represents a social status with a function of social distinction.

4.2. Game Items as Sign-Value

The game world itself is a virtual reality world that does not have a referent in reality. Therefore, everything produced within it is a virtual product, which is nothing more than a sign that does not have materiality. A game item in itself is fundamentally just a sign whose value is only valid within the game world in which it is produced—only through RMT, such a virtual product produced by game labor acquires real exchange-value.

A useful concept in explaining the value of such virtual products is the notion of sign-value coined by Baudrillard (1981). Just as a linguistic sign reveals its meaning by its difference in relation to other linguistic signs, the sign-value of one object is determined by its difference in the network of objects. Zander (2014) succinctly explains Baudrillard's concept of sign-value as follows: "Sign value is defined as the value arising from differentiation. Possession of an object potentially differentiates the holder from others, thus creating sign value. For instance, a well-designed company logo has the

characteristic that it makes the company stand out from other companies. Therefore it has a high sign value" (p. 386).

With the concept of sign-value, Baudrillard (1981) attempted to explain the fundamental social change that took place in contemporary capitalist societies in relation to the consumption of commodities that Marx's (1867/1976) value framework alone cannot explain. According to Baudrillard (1970/1998), consumers in contemporary society "never consume the object in itself (in its use-value)," but as a sign of social differentiation that distinguishes them from others and makes them stand out, that is, as the sign-value attached to the object (p. 61). In other words, a product is consumed based on what does it mean (or its sign-value) rather than its necessity (its use-value).[36] In short, sign-value is based on the logic of differentiation and distinction, which is especially true in *WoW*, where the acquisition of more powerful and rare game items is a fundamental driver of game nogada, and the value of social prestige is attached to the sign-value. What is essential in the logic of differentiation is prestige, status, and distinction as motivations.

From such a perspective, the value of a rare game item to gamers is the sign-value of social prestige. Because the game item itself has the value of social prestige, a gamer can differentiate oneself from other gamers in the game society by equipping their game characters with (or displaying) a game item that others do not possess.

[36]Baudrillard (1970/1998) states, "the principle of analysis remains as follows: you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status" (p.61).

The sign-value of game items creates the distinction and differentiation of a game character's social status/class within the game world. At the same time, it represents the social status of its operators, the real gamers behind the screen. Since game items equipped by a game character indicate a gamers' social status, gamers compete to gain high-end, rare game items. For example, Mystic raid gears, high-end game items that all raid gamers want to gain, acts as a sign-value of social prestige that gives the game character as well as the gamer who operates it, the status of the supreme. As such, if social relationships between gamers are condensed in and expressed by game items, then game items are fetishized.

Generally speaking, "a fetish is created through the veneration or worship of an object that is attributed some power or capacity, independently of its manifestation of that capacity" (Dant, 1999, p. 43). However, according to Baudrillard (1981), "fetishism is not a sanctification of a certain object or value," but "the sanctification of the system as such, of the commodity as system" (p. 92). In other words, fetishism is not the sanctification of the objects themselves but the sanctification of the "system" of "differences/relationships" between individual objects. It is the system of difference/relationship between individual objects, rather than a particular object itself, becomes fetishized. And the consumption of a product, through its difference in relation to other products, creates the distinction and differentiation between the social status/class of the person who owns it. In short, Baudrillard treats "fetishism as a sign of social value; the fetish object is taken to stand for the owner's social status" (Dant, 1999, pp. 41–42).[37] Raid gamers compete with each other in order to acquire fetishized raid

[37]According to Dant (1999), "it is Baudrillard who begins to treat fetishism as a sign of social value; the fetish object is taken to stand for the owner's social status and sexual status. Here the fetish is no longer an

items as sign-values of social prestige. In the process of competition, high-end, rare raid items have a high exchange-value when they become the object of trading among gamers.

Game items acquired by gamers through game labor have various values and special meanings from gamers' perspectives, as discussed in previous sections. Game items are important to gamers (called game laborers in this study) because their ultimate goal is to gain social recognition by occupying a higher position in their game society and game items, whether they have functional value or the value of social prestige, are essential tools and means for achieving such a goal. However, *WoW*'s nogada game system fundamentally delays the accumulation of game items with these values and meanings. To generate or maximize profit, the nogada game system of *WoW* controls gamers' game labor and delays its rewards in various ways. In the following sections, I will analyze in detail what *WoW*'s nogada game system consists of and how it delays rewards for game labor.

From now on, we will take a closer look at how Blizzard uses *WoW*'s nogada game system to monetize gamers' game nogada. Blizzard uses *WoW*'s nogada game system to generate (or maximize) profits based on two monetization models. The first is the basic monetization strategy, the subscription fee model, and the second is the micro-transaction model from which Blizzard generates additional revenues through service products such as WoW Tokens and Character Boost. In particular, the second model commodifies the game nogada itself. The following sections explore how Blizzard's two monetization strategies based on the nogada game system use gamers' audience labor to

unreal object, believed to have properties it does not really have, but is a means of mediating social value through material culture" (pp. 41-42).

generate or maximize its profits. It will first discuss how the nogada game system of *WoW* induces gamers to do game nogada activities for as long as possible and then analyze the ways Blizzard commodifies gamers' game nogada itself.

5. Nogada Game System and Monetization Strategies of *WoW*

Wang and Sun (2011) argue that various game reward systems of modern digital games provide gamers with positive experiences and social meaning "through motivation, enhanced status within gaming societies, and the use of rewards as social tools" (p. 1). According to the authors, reward mechanisms in video games "can create a sense of anticipation among players" (p. 8), and "properly timed rewards can help create senses of accomplishment and value." (p. 6). In contrast, "poorly timed rewards can cause players to give up and move on to other games" (p. 6). *WoW*'s nogada game system does not provide fast or proper rewards for game labor. Thus, it cannot be viewed as a reward system that provides gamers with a positive experience. The nogada game system induces the gamers who wish to obtain particular in-game rewards to continue similar or identical game activities—such as hunting the same or similar monsters or conquering the same dungeon, etc. —repeatedly until the desired reward is obtained.

The nogada game system of *WoW* can be considered an intrinsic characteristic of the game, which induces gamers to spend a significant amount of time doing game nogada activity (or excessive gaming) to become competitive in the game society. Blizzard takes advantage of this system to commodify gamers' game labor time itself and has designed the system in various types to receive more subscription fees from gamers. More specifically, Blizzard induces gamers to continue to do game nogada activities for as long as possible to generate revenues and maximize its profits through two

monetization strategies based on the nogada game system: the subscription fee model and micro-transaction model.

The first monetization strategy (subscription fee model) generates revenues directly based on the nogada game system as a method of delaying rewards for game labor in order to extend the gamers' labor time as much as possible. On the other hand, the second strategy relies on selling secondary service products that allow gamers to skip the tedious process of game nogada by exploiting gamers' psychology who dislike doing game nogada.

In short, Blizzard uses the nogada game system in *WoW* to generate profit based on the following two revenue models: (a) basic revenue model—sales of access to the game content over a period based on game time or monthly subscription; (b) additional revenue model—sales of various additional game service products by micropayment method. If the basic revenue model is a method that Blizzard uses to generate revenues directly based on the nogada game system, the additional revenue model is a method that indirectly uses the nogada game system. In the former case, Blizzard generates profits by inducing gamers to do game nogada activities. In the latter case, it sells gamers ways to skip the game nogada activities imposed by the nogada game system. Therefore, the latter generates profits that rely on the former. In other words, the latter presupposes the former; if there is no game nogada process in the first place, there is no need for a way to skip it.

5.1. Basic Revenue Generation Based on Nogada Game System

The primary revenues of *WoW* come from the subscription fee. The subscription fee model refers to a business model used by game companies where gamers must pay a

monthly or hourly subscription fee to get access to a game with or without paying the game's unit price. For the game companies that use subscription fees as the primary source of revenues, retaining their existing subscribers as long as possible would be just as important as attracting new customers to their games. In other words, "customer retention becomes every bit as important as customer acquisition" (Fields, 2014, p. 144).

From Blizzard's standpoint that earns primary revenues from game time sales in the form of the subscription fee, the longer gamers pay the subscription fee, the more the company makes profits. To this end, Blizzard needs to extend the game content usage time of gamers. Gamers pay more subscription fees or additional service fees due to their extended content usage time, which in turn increases Blizzard's profit. A method Blizzard uses to induce gamers to pay subscription fees for as long as possible is to delay the advancement of the game characters, which is the primary goal of the game like *WoW*. *WoW*, like other MMOs, is a game about game characters' advancement. In other words, the main goal of the game is to advance one's game character, which "can be achieved through upgrading the player's avatar by level, or skill points, equipment, and other means like in-game wealth or 'achievements' (records of certain tasks performed)" (Suznjevic et al., 2009, p. 194). The slower the game characters' advancements of *WoW* gamers are, the greater profits Blizzard gains. In this context, using the nogada game system in *WoW* can be seen as a strategy used by Blizzard to maximize profits by extending gamers' game time.[38]

[38]For gamers, the prolongation of game time by the nogada game system means that in-game rewards for their game labor are delayed, and for that reason, I argued in the previous chapter that gamers perceive their game labor as game nogada.

The use of the nogada game system in *WoW* serves to maximize Blizzard's profits in that it not only increases the game time of gamers but also reduces game content development costs. Although Nardi (2010) does not use the term nogada game system, she uses "farming" as a synonym for grinding to make the following claim:[39]

> Farming was woven into the game as a design element to provide game content at a cost that increased corporate profit margins. Farming slowed players so they did not rip through months of careful content development in a few days or weeks. Blizzard's incorporation of farming reduced its need for development by inserting a necessary but time-consuming activity into the game that kept gamers busy. Blizzard did not want to create so much content that the game's scope became unmanageable (such as having 250 levels and items that offer +10,000 stamina). (Nardi, 2010, p. 112)

However, even though Nardi (2010) argues that the way "Blizzard wanted to slow players was pervasively evident throughout the game," she only briefly shows how "travel times across the game geography were egregiously long" (p. 112). She does not explicitly describe the nogada game system existing in *WoW*. Thus, in the following sections, I will discuss how Blizzard delays the rewards of gamers' game labor through the nogada game system. Specifically, I will examine how the system increases the amount of game nogada time of gamers and what kinds of problems are raised accordingly. It will be a detailed analysis of the following five methods that consist of the nogada game system of *WoW*: (a) increasing the amounts of in-game tasks; (b) sales of

[39]"Farming referred to repetitive actions undertaken to acquire game materials such as killing the same type of monster over and over again. (The term grinding was also used)" (Nardi, 2010, pp. 98-99).

expensive game items; (c) probability-based rewarding system; (d) segmentation of wearable game items; (e) raid lockout system.

Each of these five methods induces gamers to keep doing game nogada activities in *WoW*, revealing that gamers have no escape from the nogada game system of the game.

5.1.1. System Based on Increasing In-Game Tasks

This nogada game system is a method of increasing the number of in-game tasks that gamers need to perform to obtain meaningful in-game rewards, thereby increasing the number of game nogada activities that gamers need to do. Representative examples include the character's leveling system and reputation leveling system.

Blizzard set the max level of game characters to 120 in *WoW*'s 7th expansion pack, Battle for Azeroth, released in August 2018. Gamers can increase their game characters' level from level one to level 120 one step at a time by accumulating in-game scores called experience points (XP). Blizzard designed *WoW* in such a way that whenever a game character's level rises, it increases both the reward of experience points for in-game tasks performed by gamers and the number of experience points that gamers need to accumulate to reach the next level. However, what makes the character's leveling system of *WoW* a nogada game system is the fact the increase in the number of experience points required for leveling up is greater than the increase in the experience points that gamers earn as a reward for performing in-game tasks.

Table 1 on the following page shows that as the character's level rises, the increase in both the number of experience points required to advance to the next level and the median of the experience points received as a reward when a gamer completes a

Table 1. The Experience Points Table ("Guide to experience points: The XP table," 2019).

Level	Max XP for this level	Median XP for questing
1	400	250
5	2,800	450
10	9,240	1,560
15	24,440	3,170
20	41,260	3,960
25	51,830	4,640
30	62,830	5,320
35	75,640	6,010
40	86,300	6,690
45	101,460	6,690
50	117,700	8,190
55	134,330	8,190
60	152,580	9,450
65	176,450	10,130
70	219,090	10,820
75	267,840	12,190
80	323,580	12,190
85	362,100	12,870
90	406,940	13,690
95	450,330	13,690
100	492540	15,070
105	515140	15,480
110	537730	16,450
115	858700	16,450
119	886400	16,450

quest. However, what can be inferred from the Table 1 is that the number of quests that gamers need to complete to advance to the next character level is gradually increasing whenever the character's level rises. This is because the increase in the number of experience points required to advance to the next level is relatively greater than the increase in the experience points offered as a reward for the completion of a quest, resulting in a gradual increase in the number of quests that gamers need to complete to advance to the next level. Figure 3 on the following page visualizes such a relationship between the character's level and the number of quests gamers need to compete to advance to the next level.

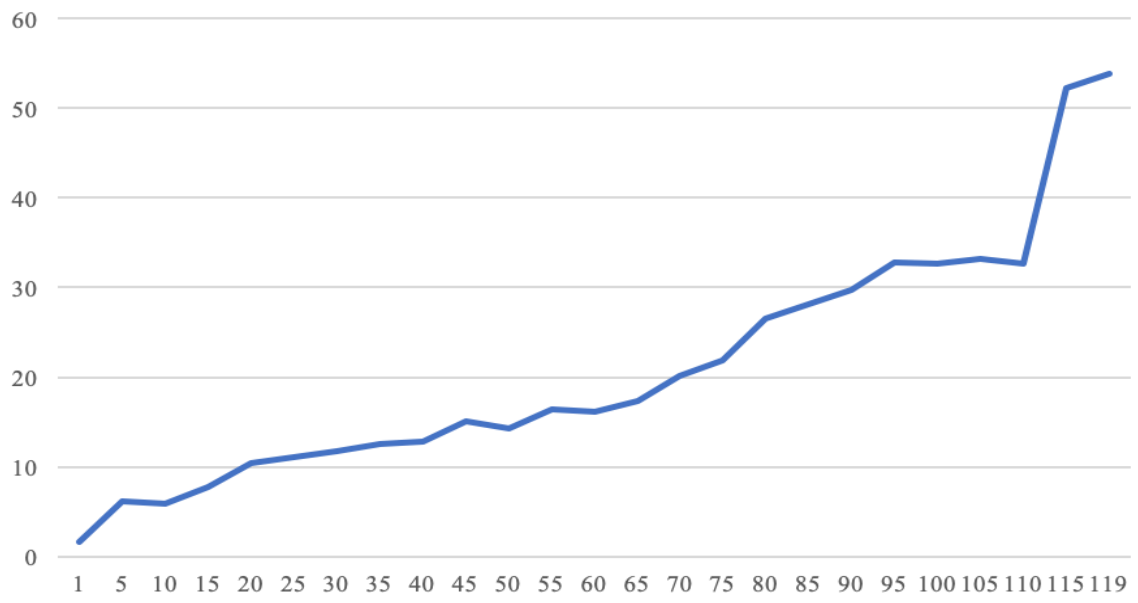

Figure 3. The Number of Quests for Level Up.

The steep rise in the graph (Figure 3) from level 110 is due to the sharp increase in the number of experience points required to advance to the next level from level 110, while the experience points given by completing a quest remain almost the same. This means that from level 110, the number of game nogada activities that gamers must perform increases sharply, and the meaningful reward of level up is further delayed. After reaching level 110, gamers enter game zones newly introduced in *WoW* in the latest expansion pack, *Battle for Azeroth*. Such a sharp increase in the number of in-game tasks required for gamers after reaching level 110 reflects Blizzard's strategy to slow down gamers' game consumption of newly developed expansion pack's game contents.

On the other hand, it should be noted here that the numerous quests that gamers perform for leveling up are only based on a few homogeneous structures, even though the specific content of each quest is slightly different from one another. The quests' structures vary depending on quest objectives such as gathering items, killing creatures,

delivering an item to an NPC, escorting an NPC from one place to another, etc. From the moment gamers realize that countless quests they perform have only a few repeating patterns, they perceive the level up process as a game nogada. In other words, for them, the level up process is considered merely a repetition of similar in-game tasks.

Once a game character reaches level 120, the growth of character power by leveling up can no longer be achieved. From that point on, gamers strive to make their characters more powerful by acquiring and wearing better gear items. One of the things *WoW* gamers do to get gear items is to do reputation nogada, that is, performing repetitive in-game tasks to increase the reputation level of several different factions. Within *WoW*, there are numerous NPC factions with whom a game character can build a relationship, which is represented by reputation level of a faction. Gamers perform repeatable reputation quests to gain reputation points and raise reputation levels by accumulating those reputation points.[40] The meaningful reward here is not the reputation per se but the reputation level. This is because only after reaching a certain reputation level is a game character granted the right to purchase certain items from a faction's merchant NPC as shown in Table 2 on the following page.

What can be seen in Table 2 is the gradual increase in the reputation points required to reach a higher reputation level. Starting usually from a neutral reputation level, gamers aim to reach the exalted reputation to acquire the right to buy in-game

[40]Unlike normal quests that gamers mostly do in the process of leveling up their character, repeatable reputation quests are quests "can be done multiple times with each completion giving reputation as a reward" ("Repeatable reputation quest," n.d., para. 1). Examples of repeatable reputation quests are daily quests that are reset once a day and world quests that are reset every 6 hours.

Table 2. Reputation Levels ("Reputation," 2021).

Level	Points to Level up	Notes
Paragon	10,000	Supply caches, awarded each time the repeatable Paragon bar is filled.
Exalted	0	Access to racial and faction mounts, tabards for most factions.
Revered	21,000	
Honored	12,000	
Friendly	6,000	Championing tabards for factions that have them.
Neutral	3,000	
Unfriendly	3,000	Cannot buy, sell or interact.
Hostile	3,000	You will always be attacked on sight
Hated	36,000	

faction items or the paragon reputation to obtain in-game rewards for every 10,000 reputation points.[41] Gamers increase their character's reputation level of a faction by repeatedly performing quests associated with the faction, which reward a small number of reputation points with each completion. For example, gamers do world quests that usually reward 75 reputation points by each completion or do emissary quests once a day that reward 1,500 reputation points (Figure 4 and 5 on the following page).

Due to the gradual increase in the number of reputation points to raise reputation level, gamers need to do more repeatable reputation quests to reach a higher reputation level; that is, they must carry out more reputation nogada. The reputation nogada that gamers perform is certainly less in terms of its quantity than the level up nogada that they perform to reach their game characters' max level. Nevertheless, reputation level nogada

[41]Paragon level was introduced in *WoW* in March 2017, which gamers can reach after the exalted level. Once a game character reaches the paragon level of a faction, a cache containing gold and items is rewarded for every 10,000 reputation points, which is reset every time the reward is received. Such a process can be repeated endlessly. Therefore, if reaching the exalted reputation level was the end of gamers' reputation nogada before the paragon level was introduced, the advent of paragon level added a reason for gamers to do reputation nogada without end.

Figure 4. World Quests.

Figure 5. Emissary Quests.

is also a tedious process for gamers because the process described above is just about leveling up one faction's reputation level. In fact, every time a new expansion pack is released, Blizzard adds new factions to the game, of which gamers are required to raise their characters' reputation levels individually.[42]

Although reputation nogada is quantitatively less than the level up nogada, it could be considered as a much more severe game nogada. If normal quests performed by gamers in the process of characters' level up consist of similar quests that slightly varies based on a few structures, repeatable reputation quests are, by its definition, exact same quests that gamer complete over and over again repeatedly to raise their character's faction reputation level. In other words, reputation nogada is more severe than level up nogada as gamers end up completing exactly the same quests repeatedly.

[42]Blizzard added a total of 16 new factions to *WoW* (based on the 8.3 patch) in the *Battle for Azeroth* expansion pack.

In short, the character's level up system and reputation-level system are nogada game system that increases gamers' game nogada activities by delaying meaningful rewards through the increase in the number of in-game tasks (or quests). Another nogada game system discussed in the following section is based on the sales of expensive items that induce gamers to do game nogada for accumulating in-game currency such as gold.

5.1.2. System Based on Sales of Expensive Game Items

This nogada game system is a method of exchanging expensive game items for a significant amount of in-game currency, such as gold. *WoW* gamers can obtain game items within the game by killing a creature and looting its corpse or purchasing them from merchant NPCs using in-game currency. Among the game items in *WoW*, those that become the object of gamers' game nogada are rare game items with high exchange-value. As mentioned earlier, the scarcity resulted from a low drop rate gives value to game items. Rare game items are the most preferred items for gamers and have a much higher exchange-value than other game items that can be obtained as rewards relatively easily because of their high drop rate or because they can be obtained by performing a simple, short game activity (such as hunting a monster that is relatively weaker than a gamer's game character) within the game. In other words, rare game items have high exchange-value because many gamers desire them, but they are difficult to obtain. However, the inverse logic can also be applied: gamers desire to obtain game items that have high exchange-value, which makes the game items difficult to obtain and thus rare. In other words, there are game items that gamers eager to possess due to the very fact that they are extremely expensive; that is, the high price of an item makes the item hard to obtain and therefore makes it a rare item that gamers desire to possess. A representative

example of the former case is high-end raid items, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Here, I will focus on the latter case.

The in-game currency that gamers use to purchase those rare items might be gold, or it could be another type of currency that can only be obtained by completing particular in-game tasks such as daily quests or world quests such as Apexis Crystal or Prismatic Manapearl. The items sold by merchants NPCs are priced in a specific currency unit, and in order for gamers to obtain those expensive items, they need to carry out game nogada activity for accumulating in-game currency such as gold nogada or quest nogada.[43]

The difference between such a method of exchanging items through the accumulation of in-game currency and the nogada game system based on the increase in the number of in-game tasks is as follows: unlike the latter, in which the number of in-game tasks (or game nogada activities) that gamers have to perform in order to obtain meaningful rewards gradually increases, in the former, the amount of game nogada is predetermined by the price of the item. Nonetheless, gamers express frustration because the high cost of the item requires them to carry out huge amounts of game nogada. For example, Figure 6 on the following page shows the Reins of the Mighty Caravan Brutosaur, which was introduced in the *Battle for Azeroth* expansion pack, the most expensive mount item in the entire history of *WoW*.

As the mount item is sold by an NPC called Talutu in 5 million gold, Korean gamers often describe it using expensive cars' names such as *Ferrari* and *Lamborghini* ("Talkkeot [Mounts]," 2021). In fact, 5 million gold is too much gold for gamers to

[43]As defined in Chapter III, gold nogada is a type of game nogada activity that gamers perform to accumulate the gold necessary to purchase game items or learning various in-game skills of their character.

Figure 6. The Reins of the Mighty Caravan Brutosaur.

obtain through gold nogada. To earn such an amount of gold, gamers, for example, must perform 25,000 to 33,000 world quests that reward 150 to 200 gold at a time. Five million gold is indeed a tremendous amount of gold, even for gold farmers who earn about 2,000~3,000 gold per hour by hunting the same creatures repeatedly in one place, because they would need to spend about 1,600~2,500 hours of gold nogada to accumulate that much gold. However, the commonality between the first nogada game system and the second one is that there is a limit to the total amount of game nogada activity that gamers need to perform until they are given the desired reward. The experience points and reputation points required for the character's level up and reputation level up respectively have both their own upper limit, which, in comparison, functions as the price of items sold by NPCs. Therefore, both nogada game systems share a common ground that gamers can at least predict the amount of game nogada activity they have to do to get desired rewards. However, such predictability of the amount of game nogada contrast with the characteristic of the third nogada game system discussed below.

5.1.3. System Based on Probability

Figure 7. Invincible's Reins ("Invincible's Reins," n.d.).

This nogada game system is a method of providing rewards for gamers' game labor based on their luck, such as game items drop chance. Gamers hunt particular creatures that may reward them with game items such as high-end gears or rare mounts, but the creatures do not necessarily provide them with the game items that they wish to have. Each game item given as a reward for killing a creature has its own drop chance, and of course, the lower the drop chance of a game item, the harder it is for gamers to obtain it.

For example, rare mount items in *WoW* are known to have drop chances of around 1-3% ("Higwi Talkkeot [Rare mounts]," 2021). Figure 7 above shows a rare mount introduced in December 2009 called Invincible's Reins, which gamers keep striving to obtain by clearing the almost a decade old raid dungeons over and over again repeatedly. The reason why some gamers continue to do game nogada activity—repeatedly conquering such an out-of-date raid dungeon—is because the drop chance of the mount item is 0.78%. Due to its low drop chance, gamers have no choice but to hunt the same creature (or continue the same game activity) repeatedly until the desired items are luckily acquired.

Due to the nogada game system in which rewards are determined by a drop chance, gamers cannot predict the amount of game nogada activity they will have to perform to get the item. This unpredictability stems from the fact that the item's drop rate does not change regardless of the number of attempts gamers make. A lucky gamer may get the item right away from a single hunt, while an unlucky gamer may not still get the item even if they hunt the same creature dozens or hundreds of times. In fact, the amount of game nogada activity a gamer must do depends on the gamer's luck. However, even if the gamer is lucky enough to get the desired item within a few attempts, there is no guarantee that they will have the same luck again when they try to get another one. Therefore, the nogada game system based on probability is no different from leaving the rewards for gamers' game labor to luck just like gambling, and as a result, it increases the amount of game nogada activity for gamers.[44]

Considering the fact that *WoW* is, first and foremost, a commodity from which Blizzard wants to earn as many profits as possible, the reason Blizzard uses a probability-based nogada game system in *WoW* may be to slow down the content consumption speed of gamers, which is directly related to profits come from *WoW*. As gamers usually consume game content faster than game companies can create it (Schubert, 2010), it would be, therefore, crucial for game companies that their gamers spend as much time as possible using existing game content.

The scarcity and randomness of game items could be interpreted as an element of luck in the game activity from gamers' points of view, but it is actually artificial

[44]According to Ho (2014), "the mechanics of artificial scarcity and randomness control the supply of game items and the chances players can obtain them. These two mechanics provide a motivation for players to spend hours and hours pursuing valuable game items in digital environments" (p. 40).

randomness and scarcity created by game designers. Gamers are required to invest more time or compete with other gamers to obtain game items that are difficult to acquire, and their game labor time could increase due to the artificial scarcity or randomness of the game. Game companies artificially designed the mechanism of scarcity and randomness to make gamers devote more time and effort.

In this context, using the probability-based nogada game system can be a cost-effective way to increase the length of playing time as gamers will likely continue to play the game until they get what they want, even when all the newness and novelty of the game content wears off in time.

5.1.4. System Based on Segmentation of Wearable Game Items

This is a nogada game system that increases the amount of game nogada by subdividing the types of wearable game items (or gears) that increase a game character's combat ability. For *WoW* gamers to show a high level of gaming performance, they require not only a high level of game skills but also powerful game characters, whose power is represented by characters in-game stats such as strength, agility, intelligence, stamina, etc. A game character's in-game stats (or combat ability) is determined by the character's level and game items (or gears) such as weapons, armors, ornaments, etc., that the character is wearing. As shown in Figure 8 on the following page, there are 16 different types of wearable items (or gears) in total, which can affect the character's in-game stats (or combat ability).

However, even if it is possible to obtain all types of wearable game items as rewards for conquering a five-players dungeon, a gamer cannot acquire all the items necessary for them by clearing the dungeon a single time. Let us assume that five gamers

Figure 8. Character Information Window ("Character info," n.d.).

form a group (or party) to conquer a five-players dungeon, which can be cleared if the group defeats five different boss creatures defending five different dungeon areas. Even if each gamer obtains one item, they still have to conquer the same dungeon at least 16 times to get all the necessary items.[45] However, that each gamer will get the desired item each time they clear a dungeon is optimistic, at best. When gamers kill a boss creature, what kind of item will be given to them is randomly determined out of a list of items that the creature can offer, and whether an item that gamer wants will be given or not is determined by their luck. Therefore, the segmentation of wearable game items that can increase gamers' game characters' stats (or combat ability) into 16 different slots could be considered as a nogada game system that Blizzard uses for delaying the rewards for gamers' game activities and inducing them to clear same dungeons over and over again, which is called dungeon nogada by Korean gamers.[46]

[45]Usually, gamers get one item as a reward for clearing one dungeon.

[46]If there were only one slot of wearable game items instead of 16 different slots, the amount of game nogada activity that gamers need to perform to increase their characters' stats would significantly decrease.

5.1.5. Raid Lockout System

The raid lockout system is a method that Blizzard uses to encourage gamers to conquer the same raid dungeon repeatedly over long periods by limiting a game character's looting chance in a raid dungeon to once a week.[47] This means that a gamer with a single game character will only be given one opportunity to obtain raid items once a week. However, even in this case, it does not guarantee that the gamer will obtain the raid items they want because of the drop rate of the raid items, which makes the acquisition of raid items entirely up to a gamer's luck. The raids are hard to clear due to their high level of difficulty and require gamers to invest a significant amount of game nogada time for raid preparation. However, if the raid reward opportunity is given only once a week, it means that the reward for gamers' game labor will continue to be delayed.

During raid combats, raid gamers may not think they are doing game nogada activity due to the various factors that make up the high level of difficulty of raids, such as fast game speed, multitasking, the threatening power of raid monsters, and cooperative game system of raids. Due to such a high level of difficulty of raids, raid gamers are required to focus on the combat under tension, and they would have no time to feel bored. However, because of the high level of difficulty of raids, they have a low probability of winning raid combats, making it inevitable for them to replay the same combat from the beginning. If a raid combat failure is repeated continuously, raid gamers could eventually think that they are repeating the same game activity; that is, they could think that they are

[47]Blizzard describes raid lockouts as follows: "Raid lockouts limit the number of times a character can kill a boss in a week with a chance at obtaining loot" (Blizzard Entertainment, n.d., para. 1). It is "the technique implemented by Blizzard to prevent" gamers "from visiting high-end instances" (or raid dungeons) "over and over to repeatedly farm bosses" (or to repeatedly kill bosses and loot game items) "in a short period of time" ("Raid lockout," 2020, para. 1).

doing game nogada activity. This means that, from gamers' point of view, in addition to the lockout system, the high-level difficulty of raids can be regarded as a nogada game system that delays the reward of their game labor.[48] (Another reward system of raids that Blizzard uses as a nogada game system will be discussed in this chapter's later section about WoW Token).

What is noteworthy about the five examples of the nogada game system of *WoW* discussed above is that one type of game nogada activity leads to another type of game nogada activity. In other words, even if gamers are done with level up nogada by reaching their characters' max level, other types of game nogada such as reputation nogada, dungeon nogada, gold nogada, raid nogada, etc., will continue to be imposed on them. In *WoW*, as one type of game nogada draws another type of game nogada, which are interconnected like chainrings, there is no way for gamers to escape from the nogada game system. The only exemption is to skip a part of the entire process of game nogada by paying real money.

Another factor that makes *WoW* a nogada game is the expiration of the usefulness of in-game items, particularly gears, that are rewarded for gamers' game nogada. Gears that gamers acquired by investing a lot of game nogada time in a particular stage of *WoW* become useless as the gamers move on to the next stage. For example, gears acquired by doing dungeon nogada will be discarded when gamers acquire better gears in raids. Even high-end gears acquired from raids will end up losing their usefulness when gamers

[48]If the game nogada activities that gamers must do before participating in raids are simple, repetitive, and boring game nogada, the game nogada of raids is a repetitive game activity that raid gamers must persist due to the high level of difficulty of raids. Although it is not characterized by the experience of boredom, it is a game nogada in terms of its second meaning discussed in the previous chapter, that is, the delay of rewards. Raid gamers are staying at the same level of the game without any progress being made until they finally win the raid combats, which means that the rewards for their game activities are being delayed.

obtain better gears in newly released higher levels of raids. If Blizzard releases a new expansion pack, the usefulness of high-end raid gears—even if they are the best of their kinds in the current expansion pack—becomes no longer useful and will be eventually discarded. In such a sense, there is an expiration date on the usefulness of game items in *WoW*. From the gamers' perspective, game items' expiration dates mean that the game assets accumulated by their game labor become useless, making *WoW* a nogada game without an end. In short, *WoW* is a nogada game that induces gamers to do endless game nogada, game labor without end or limit (i.e., excessive game labor), through various nogada game systems.

In such a way, the nogada game system of *WoW* continues to delay the production of the gamer's sense of achievement by delaying the acquisition of in-game rewards (necessary for character growth) and eventually induces gamers to pay more subscription fees by extending the game content usage time. This is Blizzard's primary monetization strategy based on the nogada game system, but the way Blizzard uses game nogada to generate profits is not limited to the subscription fee model.

Blizzard developed and sold alternative products that shorten the gamers' game nogada time, such as WoW Tokens and Character Boost, by using the psychology of gamers who want to reduce or skip the game nogada time as much as possible. This is an additional monetization strategy that commodifies gamers' game nogada time. The following sections will demonstrate specifically what this additional monetization method is and how it commodifies game nogada time of *WoW* gamers.

5.2. Additional Profits Generation Based on Indirect Use of the Nogada Game System

If the primary source of profits that Blizzard earns from *WoW* is gamers' subscription fees, Character Boost and WoW Tokens are micropayment service products that bring additional revenues to Blizzard. When a game company uses the nogada game system as a revenue-generating method, it does not necessarily rely on the subscription fee model, but sometimes it is based on the microtransaction model. The microtransaction model is a business model frequently used in games "in which users get the client software for free, or at very low cost, and are asked to pay small fees for in-game items, perks, or services" (Fields, 2014, p. 3). For example, game companies that give gamers access right to a part of game contents without paying a fee tend to use game nogada in a much more purposeful way: they intentionally create game nogada activities so that they can charge gamers fees to avoid these boring processes.

For example, game companies sell enhancement items to gamers, known as an "accelerator." These accelerators "increase the amount of reward for the 'grind'" (or game nogada activity) so that buyers of the accelerator can reach a certain level more quickly (Fields, 2014, p. 145). In this microtransaction model, gamers' game nogada activity is the precondition of buying virtual goods from an in-game store as its underlying logic is "pay to skip the grind" (Zagal et al., 2013, Pay to Skip section, para. 3).

In the case of *WoW*, Blizzard sells services that allow gamers to bypass the tedious process of game nogada, exploiting the desire of gamers to reduce their game nogada time as much as possible. Thus, the profits from such services ultimately rely on the game nogada activity of gamers. Character Boost and WoW Tokens are service products created by Blizzard to prevent potential loss of profits due to RMT or power

leveling services used by gamers on third-party websites to reduce their game nogada time. In other words, these products are introduced by Blizzard to take over the profits generated from third-party websites by such deviant gaming practices that violate Blizzard's terms of use. The following sections analyze the background of Blizzard's introduction of these service products and how Blizzard used them for generating additional revenues.

5.2.1. Character Boost

Before the release of the Character Boost, gamers used the power leveling service as a way of shortening the tedious game nogada time required for the level-up process. Power leveling services are paid services, defined as illegal services by Blizzard, provided by third-party websites for gamers who want to skip the process of level up nogada and obtain a max level character quickly and easily. Gamers do not level up their characters themselves but rather pay real money to third-party websites that provide them with a max level character in a short period. Thus, gamers' use of power leveling services can be regarded as causing a loss of profit from Blizzard's perspective, and Blizzard created Character Boost to offset such a loss and take over the profits generated from third-party websites.

Character Boost (Figure 9 on the following page) is a service product that provides gamers with a way of skipping the entire process of leveling up nogada for $60, which immediately provides a gamer with a character with the current highest level (120 level). However, even though the service product exempts gamers from level up nogada, it does not entirely exempt all game nogada activity imposed on them. Gamers still need to do game nogada activities such as reputation nogada and dungeon nogada to advance

Figure 9. Character Boost.

their game characters. In other words, even though gamers can save time for character level-up through Character Boost, they are not exempt from the entire game nogada activity of *WoW*.

Blizzard's introduction of the service product to *WoW* was, in fact, to prevent potential losses that resulted from gamers using power leveling services in third-party websites (Fahey, 2014). At the time Character Boost was introduced, the cost of using power leveling service was around $200~$300, and Blizzard decided to provide gamers with the same service for $60 (Fahey, 2014). Even though the $60 cost of the Character Boost was very low compared to the power leveling service, many gamers still complained about the price being too high (Yin-Poole, 2014). In response to such a complaint leading encounter designer Ion Hazzikostas said:

> "In terms of the pricing, honestly a big part of that is not wanting to devalue the accomplishment of levelling." […] "If our goal here was to sell as many boosts as possible, we could halve the price or more than that - make it $10 or something. And then hardly anyone would ever level a character again." […] "But levelling is

> something that takes dozens if not over 100 hours in many cases and people have put serious time and effort into that, and we don't want to diminish that." (Yin-Poole, 2014, paras. 8-10)

Ion Hazzikostas claims that the reason behind the price of Character Boost is "not wanting to the accomplishments of levelling." Such a claim seems to say that the price of Character Boost was set high to make gamers not want to use the service as much as possible since the leveling process itself could be a valuable gaming experience for gamers.

However, looking at the context in which Character Boost was introduced and the profits Blizzard gained from it tells a different story. In fact, in February 2014, when the Character Boost was introduced, the number of *WoW* subscribers was declining.[49] According to Activision Blizzard's 2015 Annual Report, Blizzard's online net revenues in 2013 was $912 million, which decreased to $867 million in 2014. Such a decrease was due to "lower subscription revenues from *World of Warcraft*" (p. 14). However, the report states that "the decrease was partially offset by the strong performance of value-added services revenues driven by the launch of the *World of Warcraft* paid character boost" (p. 14). Although the annual report does not tell how many gamers purchased the Character Boost and how much profit was generated by the service, it seems certain that it was a popular service for *WoW* gamers.

The use of power leveling services by gamers can be regarded as causing a loss of profit from Blizzard's perspective because gamers do not level up their characters

[49]After reaching 12 million subscribers in 2010, subscribers' number has gradually decreased to 6.8 million in June 2014. When the number of subscribers dropped to 5.5 million in September 2015, Blizzard decided to stop reporting *WoW*'s subscriber number (Williams, 2015).

themselves but rather pay real money to third-party websites that provide them with a max level character in a short period of time, thereby resulting in the decrease in gamers' actual calendar time spending in the game.[50] From Blizzard's point of view, such third-party websites could be regarded as siphoning potential profits, which would have been generated from the increase in gamers' game time resulted from the nogada game system. Through Character Boost, Blizzard offsets such losses and generates additional revenues by providing gamers with a legitimate way of skipping the process of level up nogada for $ 60.

Through the Character Boost, Blizzard receives a lump sum payment equivalent to four months subscription fees from gamers. Blizzard likely set the price of Character Boost ($60) after calculating the average amount of time it took for gamers to reach max level, and Blizzard will not make any loss by selling such a service product that exempts gamers from level up nogada time.[51] Eventually, the game time it takes for gamers to level up their characters turns into Blizzard's profit anyway.

The Character Boost has the same effect as the power leveling service for gamers who purchased it. In power leveling service, real gamers' game labor produces the level-up results to sell, while the Character Boost can be regarded as virtual game labor that produces it to sell. In order to obtain the level-up results sold by the Character Boost,

[50]For example, according to Overgear (https://overgear.com/wow), a third-party website that offers power leveling services, it takes about six to seven days to level up a character from level one to level 120. Although it is impossible to tell the exact time that general gamers take to reach a character's max level since the actual level up time varies depending on a gamer's personal gaming skills as well as how much time a gamer can spend in a game per day, it will be hard to find a gamer who can reach the max level within a week.

[51]Character Boost fee is an extra fee that gamers pay Blizzard after purchasing game time.

gamers, in principle, will have to invest a lot of game nogada time. Therefore, what is commodified by the Character Boost can be seen as game nogada time itself.

After all, what Blizzard sells to gamers is always game time, whether it is a basic product or additional products. The basic product sold for a subscription fee is a content usage time product (which is converted into game labor for gamers), and the Character Boost is actually selling the game nogada time itself necessary for gamers to level up.

If Character Boost is Blizzard's service product introduced as an alternative to power leveling services, WoW Token is a service product that was eventually launched in March 2015 as RMT of gold continued among *WoW* gamers despite Blizzard's deterrence policy. WoW Token is a service product that Blizzard sells to gamers on its official online store, allowing the purchasers to exchange it for gold produced by other gamers. In short, WoW Token is a product that legalizes gold transactions between gamers in the game. Since the sale of this product is contrary to Blizzard's original policy to prohibit RMT of gold since *WoW*'s launch, it is worth examining the background of Blizzard's introduction of the WoW Token and how it relates to the game nogada imposed by the nogada game system. First, in the following section, we will look at the background of Blizzard's introduction of the WoW Token.

5.2.2. WoW Token

5.2.2.1. Wow Token Launch Background

Like the Character Boost, WoW Token is a service product that reduces the time spent doing game nogada for gamers who purchase it. What motivates Blizzard to create such a product, despite its strategy to generate maximum revenue by imposing game nogada on gamers through the nogada game system? Most of all, it was due to the proliferation of

RMT of gold among gamers despite Blizzard's prohibition. WoW Token was introduced as an alternative to offset the losses that could be caused by the failure of Blizzard's RMT deterrence policy. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the background of Blizzard's introduction of WoW Token in terms of the relationship between the game company and gamers. From the perspective of gamers, RMT was triggered and activated by antipathy against Blizzard's nogada game system, which uses gamers' audience labor to generate profits, and Blizzard introduced WoW Token in response to such RMT of gamers. Therefore, I think it is reasonable to comprehensively review the fundamental motives of RMT from the perspective of gamers and Blizzard's viewpoint of suppressing it.

In order to examine the background of Blizzard's WoW Token introduction, this section examines the relationship between RMT and game nogada, why gamers engage in RMT, why RMT is popularized, particularly by the gaming practice called the Gold Party in Korean raid gamers' society, and how Blizzard has dealt with RMT.

RMT refers to the act of trading real money for in-game virtual items or currency or vice versa. Generally speaking, RMT allows gamers to pay real money to reduce their own boring game time. Therefore, what is actually exchanged with real money is not just in-game currency or game items but the laborious gaming (game nogada) hours of gamers. In other words, the gold buyers are paying real money to gold producers such as gold farmers in exchange for doing the game nogada on their behalf.

Since RMT shortens game nogada time for gamers, it can bring potential losses for Blizzard. Thus, Blizzard has prohibited RMT from the time of the *WoW* launch, but with no success. In 2004, when the game was launched in Korea, Blizzard Korea said it believed the RMT destroys the real fun of online games and hopes that this will not

happen in *WoW*; thus, Blizzard tried to eradicate any activity related to RMT within the game (Kwon, 2004). These attempts were failures as Blizzard could not stop RMT. Far from being eradicated in *WoW*, RMT of gold has become more active over time.

Then, why did RMT arise fundamentally? From a gamer's point of view, the answer to this question seems very simple. It is to make it faster and easier to acquire game items without spending too much time on the game nogada imposed by the nogada game system.

The motivation for gamers to do RMT and the reason Blizzard is trying to suppress it lie fundamentally in the pursuit of conflicting interests from their respective standpoints. From Blizzard's point of view, RMT is a violation of the rules of the game and can be considered a form of cheating, but for gamers, it can be considered economically efficient management of time that improves their game labor productivity by giving them access to rare game items for instance.

The reason gamers continue to engage in RMT despite Blizzard's prohibition policy is that they want their game labor to be productive. However, the nogada game system of *WoW* that Blizzard uses to generate profits turns their game labor into tedious, laborious, and unproductive game nogada activities. Gamers expect to receive fair rewards for their time and efforts invested in their game labor. Game laborers consider that the prolongation of game nogada time imposed by the nogada game system hinders the production of fun they wish to experience. For them, game nogada is regarded as inefficient and unproductive game labor. If their gaming labor is fruitless, game laborers would think that their time and efforts are wasted. For example, the continued delay in item production caused by the nogada game system can be felt to them as an exploitation

of their game labor, which can be one of the motives that drive gamers to engage in RMT. In short, gamers want their game labor to be a more efficient and productive activity, and in order to shorten their game nogada time, they continue to engage in RMT prohibited by Blizzard. In other words, from gamers' point of view, RMT is a strategy meant to decrease the boring game labor time of game nogada.

However, from Blizzard's point of view, gamers' RMT is cheating against the game rule of *WoW* since gamers use their credit cards to obtain in-game rewards without investing any game labor time in the game. Thus, ostensibly, Blizzard appears to suppress RMT because it impairs the fair play of *WoW*. However, it would be more convincing to argue that Blizzard prohibits RMT because it can negatively affect its profit generation. This is because RMT only profits third-party brokerage websites and gold farms or gold farmers, and Blizzard does not gain any profit from RMT, whose transactions were based on the game contents (particularly the gold) to which Blizzard owns the copyright. According to Urschel (2011), game developers consider all RMTs illegal because they believe that RMT allows gamers to bypass game content and reduce subscription revenues.

For these reasons, Blizzard tried to suppress RMT until it found a way of incorporating RMT into the game. From the beginning, Blizzard defined RMT as being comprised of illegal activities that violate the game's terms of use and tried to suppress RMT, like many other online game publishing companies, considering it an unintended by-product of its game that only cause detrimental impacts on gaming experiences of gamers and thereby undermines its interests in retaining and attracting more customers. For example, Blizzard banned over 30,000 accounts on *WoW* in 2006, which were

claimed to be associated with gold farming activities (Reimer, 2006). In fact, Blizzard tried to suppress RMT from the time it developed *WoW*, and such an intention was reflected in the way the game was designed. However, such efforts to prevent RMT have turned out to be a failure less than two years after *WoW* was released in Korea. This was because of the emergence of the Gold Party.

In short, RMT that violates the game rules in principle has been rationalized as a productive and efficient economic activity from the Korean *WoW* gamers' perspective, and the RMT has been further invigorated in the Korean raid gamers' society with the emergence of the Gold Party.[52]

In November 2004, when Blizzard released *WoW* in Korea, a news article officially announcing the launch claimed *WoW* was a game that did not necessitate RMT (Kwon, 2004). Particularly, what Blizzard introduced in *WoW* to fundamentally block RMT was the soul binding system or the creation of items that were "soulbound." Soulbound refers to the property of an item that prevents it from being traded or mailed to another character or sold in the Auction House when it is picked up, equipped, or used by a gamer. Once an item is soulbound to a character, it becomes untransferable to another character, so RMT of game items would also be practically impossible.

Blizzard's efforts to prevent RMT by using the soulbound system, however, failed less than two years after *WoW* was released in Korea. On December 12, 2006, an article

[52]In fact, RMT has existed in Korea not long after *WoW* was released in 2004, but it was done only on a small scale by a handful of gamers (Lee, 2012). Even in the early days of *WoW*, the purpose of RMT of gold was to reduce the game time required to produce gold, but the amount of gold that gamers needed to buy consumable items or learn their game characters' skills were manageable for gamers; that is, gamers were able to meet the cost by doing gold nogada. Thus, RMT was either considered unnecessary or was only done by a small number of gamers.

entitled "*WoW*-ga hyun-geo-lae-ro muldeulgo it-da? [*WoW* imbued with real money trading?]" reported the status of real money trading in *WoW* at that time.

> There is a high concern that a peculiar way of playing the game by domestic users is fueling the real money trading in *World of Warcraft (WOW)*. It is because this new way of playing the game called the Gold Party became a popular trend so that users are now frenzied with earning gold, the in-game currency of *WoW*. [...] It is understood that as users who have much gold can get any items they want by participating in an open auction, they are using item trading websites without hesitation. This is because users can easily get the items they want only with gold and do not need to go through dozens of instant dungeons. Recently, in a *WoW* realm, one user bought a weapon at 9,000 gold. Nine thousand gold is a large amount of currency that cannot be obtained by playing the game in a usual pattern, and such a vast amount of currency is being priced at one item. Given that 1,000 gold is traded for 30,000 Won, the single weapon is worth 270,000 Won. (paras. 1-8)

The Gold Party thus emerged as a backlash against Blizzard's raid nogada game system that delays rewards for gamers. From gamers' point of view, the raid nogada game system does not give them reasonable rewards for their considerable investment of time and effort, because raids had fundamental problems regarding the distribution of items: the scarcity of raid items and how they were distributed. The number of items dropped from each raid monster was far fewer than the number of raid participants, and items could not be split or shared among gamers due to the soulbound system. It inevitably raised the question of who will take the raid items among the raid participants, and the

rule proposed by Blizzard was rolling dice. Such a rule was regarded as "unfair" by Korean gamers because they could not get any rewards for their hard work merely due to their bad luck. That is, the time invested in a raid, which takes at least three to four hours and up to 12 hours when a new raid is released, could easily be wasted.

In short, the Gold Party emerged as a response to Korean *WoW* gamers' objections to the unfairness and irrationality of the roll of the dice method of distributing raid items. They revised the game's original rule by creating their own social rule that they consider a more reasonable way to reward their game labor. Korean *WoW* gamers believed that the gold auction system is "reasonable" in contrast to rolling dice because each raid participant can get gold as a reward for their participation even though they may not obtain the raid items they want.

For these reasons, the Gold Party was created and later became popular in Korean *WoW* gamers' society, but it resulted in additional problems. As the items produced in raids are exchanged through gold, the importance of gold in the marketized space of raids has become more significant, gamers' desire for gold production has become excessive, which resulted in the overall increase in the amount of gold in circulation. Such an over-circulation of gold contributed again to the excessive price of game items. As a result, gamers are required to invest more game labor time to produce gold. In short, as the price of game items determines gamers' game labor time, the increase in the (gold) exchange-value of game items results in an increase in the game labor time to produce gold.

Korean *WoW* gamers' excessive desire for gold ended up creating a market for gold farmers, who mass-produce gold and sell it to general gamers for the purpose of earning real money. The gold produced by gold farmers flows into the game economy

(and into the auction markets of the Gold Party) through gold buyers, that is, general gamers who engage in RMT to reduce their own gold nogada time.

Earlier studies (Bell, 2006; Castronova, 2006) pointed out that the main producers of virtual currency are gold farmers. Gold farming fuels in-game inflation as gold farmers pump additional currency into the virtual world, consequently devaluing the currency. It means that more currency is required for gamers to purchase any item; in other words, prices rise and result in in-game inflation.

Despite the fact that the Gold Party has resulted in such various problems, RMT has been further stimulated by the Gold Party's popularization in Korean *WoW* game culture. However, from Blizzard's point of view, it would have been necessary to find an alternative to RMT, considering that it is fundamentally difficult to suppress it.

Realizing that RMT cannot be entirely eliminated from its game, Blizzard has tried to incorporate RMT of gold into *WoW* by competing with illegal gold sellers who are also known as gold farmers. In an effort to end RMT associated with gold farming activities, Blizzard introduced the WoW Token in the North American realm in March 2015 and two months later in the Korean realm, an in-game item that one gamer could purchase from the official website of Blizzard for $20 (or ₩22,000) and then sell through the Auction House of *WoW* to another gamer for gold.

5.2.2.2. WoW Token and Commodification of Game Nogada Time

WoW Token was introduced by Blizzard as a countermeasure against the persistent RMT of gold among *WoW* gamers. Like the Character Boost, WoW Token is a strategic service product created by Blizzard, appropriating the methods already being used in illegal third-party websites and turning them to generate its own profit by selling such services

to gamers who are bored with game nogada. These service products allow gamers to shorten or bypass the tedious process of game nogada if they pay Blizzard extra fees in addition to subscription fees. Such service products, which gamers can purchase from Blizzard's official online store, provide an additional revenue source for Blizzard. It effectively turns gamers' attempts to circumvent the nogada game system into an additional source of revenues, using the nogada game system of *WoW* indirectly. In this section, I focus on how such a commodification process is realized and show the process whereby Blizzard commodifies gamers' game nogada time by selling WoW Token.

Blizzard adds 30 days of game time to the game account of a gamer who uses the WoW Token within the game. Gamers purchase a WoW Token from Blizzard's official online shop for $20 and exchange it for gold produced by other gamers via the in-game Auction House. Considering that WoW Tokens are usually sold for 300,000 to 400,000 gold in the Korean realm, a lot of gold nogada time invested in producing such an amount of gold is being exchanged for $20 through WoW Token, which provides Blizzard with an additional profit (about $5) per transaction. For gamers who purchase WoW Token from Blizzard, WoW Token is a means to shorten the gold nogada time required to acquire that much gold, which is the primary reason for them to buy it with real money.

Since Blizzard is now offering a legitimate way of trading gold, gamers no longer need to trade the gold with real money on third-party websites, risking their account being banned by Blizzard. From that point of view, WoW Token was a monetization strategy that Blizzard uses for gaining more profits by intervening in the exchange of gold among gamers—previously conducted on third-party websites, through RMT—commodifying the gold nogada labor time of gamers. In other words, Blizzard

commodifies the game nogada (labor) time itself required to produce gold and sells it to gamers.

Because WoW Token and Character Boost reduce gamers' game nogada time, gamers spend extra money to use such services, just as they buy gold produced by gold farmers' game labor for the same purpose. Therefore, it can be said that what Blizzard sells to gamers here is a virtual game labor power and that what gamers get from them is the reduced game nogada time that is commodified by WoW Token or Character Boost. Here, game labor time becomes a commodity with exchange-value. As previously discussed, the one product Blizzard sells to gamers is the usage time of the game content, and the other product is the reduced game nogada time through the WoW Token or Character Boost. In these ways, Blizzard's monetization strategies turn game nogada time into commodities.

In fact, from gamers' perspective, the Character Boost or WoW Token is a service that is essentially identical to the power leveling service or RMT on third-party websites. In other words, they are no different for gamers in that they provide charged services that reduce the game nogada time. The sale of these service products seems in principle contradictory in that it allows and legitimizes the practices that Blizzard has prohibited. However, from Blizzard's point of view, this contradiction is not a problem. Everything is just a change in its strategy to generate more profits. RMT and power leveling services through third-party websites are still illegal and prohibited, but WoW Token and Character Boost are treated as legitimate. This reflects Blizzard's claim as a game content copyright owner that all the profits generated from the game must belong to it.

All profits derived from the game contents of *WoW* flow to the game's corporate owner, the copyright holder of the game. What Blizzard sells to gamers is the access right to *WoW* for a certain period, which basically functions as a rental fee. In other words, gamers pay subscription fees like rent in return for obtaining the right to access the game contents for a limited time, but all game contents ownership still resides with Blizzard.

According to Nixon (2014), the copyright holder is a cultural "landlord" who accumulates capital not through the sale of commodities but through the granting of access to the object (culture) to those who wish to use it. And the value created by the audience labor of those who consume the object is exploited by the copyright holder as a kind of rent. In other words, the appropriation of surplus-value produced by audience labor is considered as the extraction of rent.[53] Nixon states that "the purchase of a cultural commodity is only ever payment for access" and "private ownership of culture through copyright creates monopoly power for the copyright holder that can be used to appropriate rent" (pp. 729–730).

Nixon (2014) argues that copyright holders are also capitalists who exploit audience labor to create surplus-value. However, their process of generating profits is different from the process of producing material products using labor power and means of production bought by capitalists and realizing surplus-value as a profit through the sale of those products. Copyright holders do not sell their content itself as a commodity. Instead, by granting the right to use it, they totally monopolize the surplus-value created by audience labor.

[53]"The copyright holder is a cultural 'landlord' who does not accumulate capital through the sale of commodities by rather through the granting of access to a privately owned cultural resource in return for payment, i.e., through rent" (Nixon, 2014, p. 729).

From that point of view, Blizzard, the owner of *WoW*, can impose sanctions on gamers through the exclusive rights of the copyright holder; for example, if a gamer is found to engage in RMT of gold or power leveling service via third-party websites, Blizzard can permanently ban their game account, considering such practices as illegal transactions that violate the terms of use of its game.

Since gamers are not owners of *WoW* but just renters who paid for the use of the game for a while, the exchange-values of all virtual goods produced by gamers belong to the owner of means of production (or the game contents of *WoW*), which is Blizzard. The profits of cultural product copyright holders come from the extraction of such monopoly rents.

Nixon (2014) discusses two ways in which communicative capital appropriate surplus-value through ownership of the audience's work object (i.e., culture as an objectified product).[54] One is the direct way through payment by audience labor, and the other is indirect value extraction through advertising revenue. The latter is the case for media capital like Facebook or Twitter, and the former is the case for game companies like Blizzard.

For gamers, the game content of *WoW* is the object of the audience labor that they use as a means of producing fun for themselves. Blizzard, the owner of the object, receives a subscription fee from them in the form of rent, granting the right of access to

[54]Nixon (2013) argues that cultural consumption is a kind of communicative production, and audience activities of cultural consumption are also productive activities of signification or meaning-making. According to him, the cultural products often called "content" are used as a means of communicative production in audience labor processes of signification. He claims that "since access to the meaning of a cultural product depends on access to the content," the copyright holder of that cultural product "can exploit the audience labor of signification through cultural consumption by controlling access to cultural products" (or contents) (p. 3). And he calls the owners of copyrights of cultural products "communicative capitalists."

the game contents. And Blizzard can appropriate "a constant stream of rent (until the copyright expires)" (Nixon, 2014, p. 731), and surplus-value will continue to be generated from the extraction of the constant rent. It means that Blizzard can continue to appropriate the value produced by the game labor of millions of gamers.

Since game content is an immaterial cultural product, it cannot be completely consumed, and all gamers can use it repeatedly and simultaneously. The product of content usage time sold by *WoW* does not have an expiration date as long as it exists. Furthermore, the more the number of game laborers or the more their game labor time, the more the game time product is reproduced. And that time creates surplus-value for Blizzard. Therefore, Blizzard creates profits by extending game labor time. On the other hand, Blizzard sells WoW Token or Character Boost to earn additional profits by taking advantage of the boredom of gamers who dislike doing game nogada activity.

In a word, Blizzard's monetization strategy is contradictory in that it sells gamers access right to the game content that seems to promise fun but uses tedious game rules for inducing them to purchase additional service products that allow playing the game less if gamers do not want to do boring and laborious game nogada activities. Eventually, gamers who paid a subscription fee and started playing *WoW* are again tempted to purchase such contradictory strategic products to achieve the promised fun in the game content.

As such, Blizzard generates surplus-value by using the game labor of gamers as audience labor in various ways based on the nogada game system that induces gamers to continue to do game nogada. In this way, Blizzard's monetization strategy turns gamers' game nogada into exploited audience labor. The following section concludes the

discussion of this chapter, shedding light on game nogada in terms of exploited audience labor based on what I have argued so far.

6. Game Nogada as Exploited Audience Labor

As mentioned earlier, what game laborers want to gain through consuming game content is a subjective fun experience, a sense of achievement. They could achieve it by continually advancing their characters, which can be realized in the game by increasing characters' combat abilities by increasing characters' level or obtaining high-end gear.

However, the nogada game system of *WoW* continues to delay in-game rewards for gamers' game labor, thereby delaying the reward of experience of fun that gamers expect as part of their consumption. Such a delay of rewards makes game laborers feel like workers who do not get enough wages that meet the value of their labor power since in-game rewards such as experience points, reputation points, game items, etc., serve as a wage for their game labor. The nogada game system inherent in *WoW*, which cannot be modified or skipped by gamers, prolongs the time of game nogada and continues to delay the production of fun promised to gamers. Therefore, from the perspective of the gamers, the game nogada imposed by that system may be felt by gamers as a form of exploitation.

However, Blizzard will not admit that it exploits audience labor to generate profits by extending the game labor time of gamers and delaying their production of fun under the nogada game system. This is because it is fundamentally a personal and subjective experience or a matter of individual consciousness that gamers use game contents as cultural consumption objects to produce fun or their own meaning of fun.

However, not only because gamers' game labor time is not something stipulated by a contract but also because game labor is not economically paid labor in the first

place, there is no way for gamers to know how much profits Blizzard, the capitalist, generates using the nogada game system. Gamers have no way of knowing how much surplus-value their game labor creates for Blizzard. Therefore, there is no way to prove such exploitation numerically. From that point of view, even if gamers perceive that their game nogada is a kind of surplus-labor that is not (properly) rewarded, such perception seems to end up remaining in their psychological level. In other words, it may be argued that it is merely individual metaphorical exploitation. Hence, one may question whether or not the gamer's audience labor is actually exploited labor.

Nevertheless, the exploitation of game labor does not merely remain on a psychological or metaphorical level because Blizzard is actually generating revenues by using the nogada game system in *WoW*. The extended game time and delayed rewards generate profits for Blizzard. Gamers are consumers of the product Blizzard sells (game usage time) rather than its employed laborers, but the nogada game system of *WoW* forces them to do game nogada activity, and that time creates profits for Blizzard. In other words, gamers' extended labor time of game nogada is turned into exploited game labor time regardless of their will.

Therefore, as long as the game labor time of gamers continues to be extended due to the nogada game system, and as long as gamers purchase alternative products such as Character Boost and WoW Token to skip the game nogada, there will be a continuous creation of surplus-value by gamers' game labor for Blizzard. The extension of game labor time by the nogada game system makes gamers pay more subscription fees to extend their content usage time while also spending extra money on purchasing alternative products that reduce the game nogada time. Such alternative products are

those that could not be released in the first place without the nogada game system, or to be precise, if the nogada game system has not imposed a considerable amount of game nogada on gamers, there is no reason for gamers to spend more money to purchase them. In the end, all of this is what makes the gamers' audience labor create surplus-value for Blizzard. As such, game nogada labor is not limited to gamers' metaphorical labor but is turned into game labor—regardless of their will—that creates real surplus-value by Blizzard's profit-generating strategy, which makes it an exploited audience labor.

In short, Blizzard's monetization strategy of *WoW* could be summarized as follows. After attracting gamers-consumers with game content that promises fun, Blizzard generates basic revenues and surplus-value by intentionally extending the game time by the nogada game system. And then, it makes additional profits through service products that allow gamers to skip game nogada by taking advantage of their lack of patience. Whether Blizzard tries to generate profits by extending gamers' game time or by selling products that shorten that time, it is clear that it creates surplus-value by using gamers' audience labor through game nogada.

Nevertheless, if gamers do not feel that their game labor is exploited by capital, it is because the exploitation is hidden behind the packaging of the production of fun. In other words, Blizzard is exploiting gamers' audience labor, commodifying their game nogada time disguised as a fun experience. However, if gamers continue to do game nogada activity without realizing the exploitation hidden behind the disguised fun experience, what would be the fundamental reason for that? The answer to such a question will be explored in the next chapter from the perspective of the ideology that dominates the game culture of Korean *WoW* gamers.

7. Conclusion

This chapter discussed how gamers' game labor is transformed into exploited audience labor by *WoW*'s nogada game system from a political economy perspective. It was an analysis of how game labor, essentially immaterial labor, is converted by Blizzard's monetization strategies into labor that generates its profit (or surplus-value). Highlighting the fundamental conflict of interest between gamers and game companies regarding the nogada game system, I have focused on the following points.

First, I analyzed the various values of game items, which are essential tools for gamers to realize the fun of achievement that they ultimately want to produce through their game labor. Then, I analyzed in detail how the nogada game system, *WoW*'s basic monetization strategy, delays the production of such fun of achievement. Meanwhile, from the perspective of gamers, I examined the issue of the Gold Party and popularization of RMT in the Korean *WoW* gamers' society as a backlash of gamers against the nogada game system that delays rewards for their game labor.

For gamers, the Gold Party and RMT are strategies to enhance their fun by shortening or bypassing the tedious nogada time imposed by the nogada game system. Blizzard regarded RMT as a factor that hindered their monetization and thus fundamentally tried to ban it. However, Blizzard's attempts to suppress RMT have failed, and thus it introduced service products such as WoW Token and Character Boost as an alternative to illegal RMT and power leveling services. Such an introduction of service products was a way for Blizzard to commodify gamers' game nogada time itself, generating additional revenues without losing its customers, particularly those willing to pay extra money to skip a certain part of the game nogada process.

To summarize, Blizzard uses *WoW*'s nogada game system to generate (or maximize) profit through two monetization strategies: a subscription fee model and a microtransaction model. One is the creation of profits by the nogada game system that gamers cannot escape unless they quit the game altogether. It is Blizzard's strategy of imposing endless game nogada (i.e., excessive game labor) on gamers to generate or maximize its profit from *WoW*. The other is the creation of profits based on sales of alternative products that can reduce the game nogada time. This is a strategy that sells content usage time as bait for the promise of fun and then makes gamers either submit to game nogada or purchase additional products that reduce such tedious time.

Blizzard's sales of game time products with the characteristics of labor and separate sales of service products that shorten the tedious game labor process can be considered double exploitation from consumers' (gamers') point of view. This is because gamers pay Blizzard to play the nogada game of *WoW* and then pay again to do less game nogada activity. In other words, Blizzard first tries to create surplus-value by extending game nogada time through the nogada game system and then tries to create additional surplus-value by selling products that reduce the game nogada time. Eventually, Blizzard uses the nogada game system to extend gamers' game time, and it exploits game labor as audience labor, which generates surplus-value for its own sake. In short, from the point of view of gamers, extended game time is turned into game labor time that is exploited regardless of their will.

CHAPTER V

GAME NOGADA IN GAME CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY

1. Introduction

In Chapter III, I provided a political economy analysis of why and how Blizzard imposes game nogada on gamers and explained why Blizzard banned RMT from the time *WoW* was released in 2004. However, despite the tedium of game nogada experience, Korean *WoW* gamers continue to devote excessive hours to it, investing not only their time but also their money to enhance their competitiveness. The political economy analysis of game nogada is insufficient in explaining why gamers engage in game nogada as excessive gaming and what motivates them to endure its tedious process. Game nogada is also a cultural phenomenon that needs to be understood in the context of the ideology of game culture. To address why gamers essentially consent to devote long, boring hours to game nogada, it is necessary to consider gamers as game subjects who form their own game culture, examine their gaming practices as the manifestation of their game culture, and analyze the underlying ideology of such game culture (or gaming practices) surrounding game nogada.

In this study, I define game culture as the norms, values, social rules, and language that are created and shared by gamers. Such a definition of game culture focuses more on the macro-patterns that emerge out of gamers' social interactions rather than the individualized gaming practices of a particular gamer or small groups of gamers. I understand game culture as a dominant way of life in a virtual world, so I consider ideology an important concept in understanding it. Ideology is also a system of thoughts or beliefs reflected in the pattern of social practices of members of society. In this sense,

ideology is not merely an abstract idea but an idea that has materiality in ideological subjects' social practices.

Such an understanding of ideology is quite different from game studies scholars' explanation of ideology as an abstract idea that can be read off particular forms of media like video games. Such a perspective assumes that the ideologies of games are embedded in the games' representations of events, people, or things, similar to the way television or films function. This perspective additionally holds that the ideological effects of games can be generated through the inherent rules and mechanics of the games given by game designers. In other words, ideology is regarded as a set of ideas embedded in the texts (the contents) and the rules (the form) of games.

However, according to Fields (1990), ideology is not just an idea, propaganda, scientific knowledge, a doctrine, or an abstract belief. Ideology is sustained by daily practices of social agency rather than abstract ideas or beliefs. Through participation in the ideological rituals, ideology becomes 'real.' Thus, daily practices create, re-create, and sustain ideology rather than ideology being generated via thoughts or beliefs. This argument resonates with Žižek's (1989/2009) explanation of ideology as that which is "ideological—not the false consciousness of a [social] being, but this being itself so far as it is supported by false consciousness" (p. 21). According to Žižek, ideology is not just "an illusory representation of reality," or false consciousness (p. 21). Nor is it something to be deconstructed or resisted at the level of subjective consciousness because ideology operates and is sustained by the subject's ideological practices and behaviors. In fact, such an understanding of ideology has been argued by Althusser (1970/2004). According to Althusser, ideology does not exist in the form of ideas but is internalized in concrete

individuals and expressed in society through rituals, actions, and practices. In such a sense, ideology has "a material existence."

Rather than seeing the ideology of games as being located in ways exterior to the subject (e.g., through the meanings generated by texts or rules of a game), ideology operates and is reflected in the activities of gamers and the game culture constructed by gamers' social interactions. By analyzing gamers' gaming practices (or the way gamers play online games), therefore, we can understand the characteristics of ideological, social structures and the characteristics of gamers as subjects of ideology, who in fact bring a particular ideology into existence within a game.

Focusing on the ideology of game nogada, this chapter aims to shed light on the broader socio-cultural factors that influence gamers to endure game nogada. To that end, this chapter addresses the following questions: despite the boredom of game nogada, why do gamers continue to do game labor to the extent that it leads to excessive gaming? What ideology operates in gamers' gaming practices surrounding game nogada, and how does this explain their endurance of game nogada? These questions are raised from the perspective of game laborers who continue to do game labor despite their negative perception of game nogada, not from the perspective of game developers of *WoW*, who generate surplus-value by imposing game nogada on game laborers. To answer these questions, the ideological analysis of gamers' gaming practices of this chapter will explain gamers' motivation for doing game nogada and the ideological roots of the gaming environment that encourages Korean *WoW* gamers to do more game nogada.

Beginning with posing such research questions, the analysis of this chapter is divided into three major research topics. The first is a discussion of the values and

ideology that serve as the basis of gaming practices—engaging in RMT or participating in the Sa-Jang Party—that stands out in Korean raid gamers' society. The second is the analysis of the structure and characteristics of the Korean raid gamers' society, focusing on the norms shared by gamers—the norms that the game society requires from individual gamers—and the social relations of gamers. The third explores the core ideology that operates in the various gaming practices of Korean raid gamers: the myth of the American Dream based on the ideology of meritocracy.

To begin the discussion, the following section provides a comprehensive introduction to the main topics to be analyzed step by step throughout this chapter. In other words, it will briefly explain what voluntary excessive game labor is, what gamers aim for through it, and what the socio-cultural context of such game labor is.

2. What Makes Gamers Endure Game Nogada?

Game nogada analyzed from a political economy perspective in the previous chapter is excessive game labor that Blizzard strategically imposes on gamers to generate more profit (or surplus-value), which is game labor that gamers cannot avoid in principle.[55] From gamers' point of view, game nogada is excessive game labor that needs to be tediously repeated in a state where the rewards for their game labor are delayed. If a game no longer provides gamers with fun, gamers may be disappointed with the game, and—unlike real nogada laborers—if they want, they can quit the game or do something more fun. In other words, gamers have a choice to do what they want. Nevertheless, why

[55]As discussed in the previous chapter, *WoW* is an MMO that requires gamers to do game nogada to advance game characters and compete with each other, which is the game's primary goal. Although gamers can partially skip the process of game nogada by either purchasing Character Boost or WoW Tokens from Blizzard, there still exists game nogada processes in *WoW* such as reputation nogada and dungeon (item) nogada that gamers cannot skip, game nogada activities that gamers must do by themselves. Thus, *WoW* is essentially a nogada game that imposes unavoidable game nogada on gamers.

do they continue to engage in a game even though they no longer experience it as play'? Why do gamers continue to engage in game nogada—even when they no longer derive pleasure from it?

Gamers voluntarily continue to do excessive game labor despite the boredom and the arduousness that game nogada entails because gamers want their game labor—and the time they have invested in the game—to be productive. As already discussed in Chapter III, when gamers perform a game activity as not just play, but as a task with an extrinsic goal, the game activity is like labor that values achievement. When gamers describe a gaming activity as labor, its general implication is that they feel as if they are doing obligatory and laborious work that needs to be done. As was explained in Chapter III, Korean gamers compare the drudgery of these forms of game labor as homologous to the hard, physical labor performed on a construction site or nogada as a labor (or the labor of nogada laborers).

Of course, the concept of labor itself does not have negative implications. Labor is essentially a productive activity that produces (or seeks to produce) use-value. In Korean society, however, nogada as a form of labor generally refers to hard and arduous physical labor, which is regarded as a worthless chore that neither feels rewarding nor gives a sense of achievement. Nogada, as it refers to laborers, is also regarded as one of the lowest classes in Korean society in terms of both economic and social status. Nogada is a word that not only refers to simple and repetitive manual labor that does not require specialized skills but also refers to the laborers who do it for a living. Their labor is exploited labor because the laborers do not receive reasonable compensation despite the high intensity of their work. In Korean labor society, nogada laborers are treated as the

most incompetent low-class laborers and are publicly looked down upon and despised. For all these reasons, in Koreans' common sense, nogada laborers are regarded as incompetents or losers of survival competition in Korean society.

The concept of game nogada implies the negative meanings of the term nogada: rough physical labor that receives a negative social evaluation and the laborers who do such labor. When Korean gamers use the term game nogada, it only evokes such negative meanings of nogada. First, it reflects Korean gamers' thoughts that they do not want to do game labor that is treated like hard but worthless labor of nogada. Second, it also reflects their thoughts that they do not want to be looked down upon and treated like nogada laborers in their game society. The reason gamers do not give up on excessive game labor despite the boredom and laboriousness of game nogada is to gain a competitive advantage from their labor eventually.

From the game laborers' point of view, voluntary game labor is ultimately intended to get the fun of achievement. As discussed earlier, such fun of achievement can be obtained through the social recognition that gamers finally gain in the game society by advancing their game characters and strengthening their competitiveness. In other words, *WoW* gamers' motivation to voluntarily continue to do game nogada is their desire to attain a social position where they are recognized or envied by other gamers; that is, they try to acquire a high social status in the game society.[56]

[56]What would gamers lose if they stop doing game labor? It is their alter ego or their game characters existing in a virtual world. Strictly speaking, even if the gamers behind the screen stop doing game labor, their game characters do not die. The game characters still exist in the game world unless deleted by gamers. However, without gamers' game labor, game characters remain weak, not qualified to participate in the game society formed around raids. Thus, game characters' death related to game labor is a social death in *WoW* gamers' society. The fact that gamers' game characters are excluded from the social space in an MMO like *WoW* means that gamers lose an opportunity to experience the game genre's major fun.

In the case of *WoW*, such a status is achieved through raids. Since entering raid gamers' society itself is perceived as a departure from the state of doing only game nogada activities, that is, a departure from the nogada status as a game laborer, Korean *WoW* gamers strive to earn the qualification for participation in raids.[57] In fact, for *WoW* game laborers, all the game nogada processes they perform before raids are just a preparation process for entering raid gamers' society. Their game characters, which gamers have grown mainly in solo gameplay until then, are now, figuratively speaking, newborn babies in that society. The game laborers, who have once entered the raid gamers' society, hope that their newborn game characters will grow rapidly and become competitive. *WoW* game laborers aim to be recognized as competitive raid gamers in their game society, to achieve elite status by escaping from the state of being a game laborer who has no choice but to only do game nogada labor imposed by the nogada game system of *WoW*.

Korean raid gamers' society is essentially an infinitely competitive society where gamers are evaluated and recognized for their game competitiveness. By internalizing competition, gamers participating in raids (or raid gamers) make ceaseless efforts to improve their ability in various ways (by investing in time or real money, training their game skills, etc.) for strengthening their own game competitiveness. A gamer's competitiveness consists of all virtual goods (game items and gold) that their game character has accumulated and everything scored in the game. It also consists of all kinds of methods that can promote their game character's rapid advancement and thereby strengthen their competitiveness. Such methods include: engaging in RMT and the Gold

[57]Nogada status gamers are discussed in more detail later section of this chapter.

Party, which are practices that violate the original rules of the game but are regarded to be more efficient, productive, and rational; searching for various information (such as gameplay tips or walkthroughs) that help gamers to advance their game characters more time-efficiently, or that help them to improve their game skills, etc. These are the aspects that stand out in Korean raid gamers, and the shared values derived from such aspects are the pursuit of economic efficiency of game labor, the demand for reasonable rewards for the labor. The game subject that all such values constitute is, in a word, homo economicus as a neoliberal subject.

Economic efficiency, rationality, and interests are the values cherished by Korean *WoW* gamers in their gaming activities. In particular, gaming practices such as RMT and the Gold Party show gamers who prioritize economic interests and seek economic efficiency in all circumstances. Thus, it is possible to define them as game subjects as homo economicus. To begin the discussion of the values and ideology that serve as the basis of gaming practices that stands out in Korean *WoW* gamers' society, the following two sections analyze the aspects of gamers as homo economicus in gaming practices such as RMT and the Gold Party, which reflect the raid gamers' system of thoughts.

3. Gamers as Subjects of Ideology

3.1. Gamers as Homo Economicus, a Neoliberal Subject

As discussed in the previous chapter, even though engaging in RMT and the Gold Party deviate from Blizzard's rules, such practices have become part of social norms and social rules that are accepted, shared, and performed by Korean *WoW* gamers based on their own logic and necessity, which reflects their system of thoughts or value system. In order to illuminate the aspect of homo economicus as a neoliberal subject that emerges in the

gaming practices of Korean *WoW* gamers, it is necessary first to define the terms. Here, I will first briefly discuss homo economicus as the subject of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a term "used to encompass a variety of economic, social, and political ideas, policies, and practices, functioning on both individual and institutional levels" (Saunders, 2010, p. 45). Nevertheless, the general argument is that neoliberal policies or all areas of life in a neoliberal society are subject to market logic. According to Turner (2008), "markets and the market order are central to neoliberal thinking" (p. 115).

Neoliberalism seeks to minimize restrictions on market activities and maximize the results that could be obtained through invested capital by freely pursuing profits. In the view of neoliberalism, competition in the free market leads all economic actors to make the most of their abilities to achieve maximum productivity and efficiency. Such a competitive free market, according to Stark (2018), "is neither spontaneous nor endemic to humans," but "is a structure deliberately imposed to implement the goals of a neoliberal ideology" (p. 45). Therefore, in a neoliberal society, the logic of economic efficiency and rationality dominates individuals' daily lives. One of the most notable aspects of neoliberal ideology is the economic rationality that pervades all aspects of our daily life. In contemporary neoliberal society, economic rationality is the way people express their beliefs, the way individuals make decisions, the way social groups are defined, and the way people participate in the social environment. In all areas of neoliberal society, economic rationality defines every aspect of life, and the mechanism of competition, the principle of the "free market" takes hold, and individuals are transformed into economic subjects who internalize it. This economic subject is "homo

economicus" as a neoliberal subject, an "economic-rational individual" who rationally assesses "the costs and benefits of a certain act" (Lemke, 2001, p. 201).

Korean raid gamers show the aspect of homo economicus as a neoliberal subject who calculates everything from an economic and rational entrepreneurial perspective. They prioritize economic interests in all circumstances and social relationships. In the previous chapter, I argued that the reason for engaging in RMT from a gamer's point of view is to increase the efficiency of the game labor by shortening the game nogada time imposed by the nogada game system, which is considered an inefficient and unproductive game activity. What stands out here is the desire of gamers to avoid tedious and difficult labor through RMT and get quick results and the fact that such a desire is rationalized in the name of economic efficiency. In pursuit of economic efficiency, Korean raid gamers seek to maximize production efficiency by reducing their game labor time.

From the idea that the extension of game nogada is a waste of time, Korean gamers engage in RMT to reduce game nogada time and increase game labor production efficiency. These gamers are capitalist subjects who think that game item can be exchanged for gold and the gold can be exchanged for real money. The idea behind such an act of buying time with money is that time is money. The monetization of time, the combination of money and time, is linked to the idea that a waste of time is a waste of money, and time, like money, becomes an object to be saved and managed. The monetization of time is the product of capitalist thinking and is combined with the principle of utilitarian rationality and efficiency that maximum results must be obtained with minimum working hours (Lee, 2002). According to Baudrillard (1970/1998), people living in contemporary capitalist society "are in an age when men will never manage to

waste enough time" (p. 155). "You can no longer either kill it or waste it, any more than you can money, since they are both the very expression of the exchange-value system" (p. 155).

In short, RMT, which in principle violates the game rule of *WoW* imposed by Blizzard, has been rationalized as a productive and efficient economic activity by Korean *WoW* gamers as homo economicus, and RMT has been further invigorated with the popularization of the Gold Party.

As the Gold Party became pervasive among Korean raid gamers, the gold has become an essential factor for them in rising into the upper class in a hierarchical society formed around raids. The more important gold becomes, the greater their desire for gold production, and Korean *WoW* gamers try to figure out ways to earn gold more efficiently while reducing their gold nogada time as much as possible. For example, the Sa-Jang Party shows a particular way of obtaining gold through a gamer-to-gamer transaction, in which gamers with a high level of game ability earn gold by selling their labor power to gamers with a low level of game ability who want the high-end raid items. What we notice here is, on the one hand, the aspect of homo economicus that strives to obtain the maximum income with the least optimal investment, and on the other hand, the aspect of the gamers who earn gold with their game ability as capital. Such an aspect of the game laborer is linked to that of the neoliberal "homo oeconomicus," or an "entrepreneur of himself," a concept discussed by Foucault (2004/2008) in *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*.

In his discussion of the human capital theory of neoliberal economists, Foucault (2004/2008) defines "homo oeconomicus" as "an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of

himself" (p. 226). He distinguishes between "homo oeconomicus" as a neoliberal subject and "homo oeconomicus" in the classical conception and highlights that the former "is not at all an exchange partner" (p. 226). That is "a homo oeconomicus as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (p. 226).

Korean raid gamers participating in the Sa-Jang Party show an aspect of homo economicus as an entrepreneur of self in that they use their game abilities as their own capital. In other words, they are for themselves their own capital and the source of their income. Then how can game ability be used as capital for them? What constitutes this ability as capital? Furthermore, what income (real or imagined) do they derive from gaming activities? The following section analyzes the aspect of the Korean raid gamers as their "entrepreneur of self" in terms of their game ability as capital.

3.2. Gamers' Game Ability as Capital for Competitiveness

In this section, I first focus on the analysis of the gaming practices of gamers who seek efficiency in terms of the productivity of game labor in the Sa-Jang Party. I then explain how game ability becomes a capital, based on the concept of "capital-ability," discussed by Foucault (2004/2008).

The Sa-Jang party is a form of Gold party, in which gamers with a high level of game ability sell their labor power to gamers with a low level of game ability and receive gold as a kind of wage. Participants of the Sa-Jang Party are divided into a group of Seon-Su gamers, high-level game laborers who are in charge of all raid combats, and Sa-Jang gamers, low-level game laborers who do not actually engage in the combats and

merely observe the combats done by Seon-Su gamers.[58] Gamers with a high level of game ability conquer a particular raid dungeon on behalf of gamers who are unable to gain raid items on their own due to their lack of game ability. Raid items, a product of Seon-Su gamers' game labor, are auctioned and sold to Sa-Jang gamers, and all the gold collected through the auction is evenly distributed only to Seon-Su gamers like wages for their game labor.

The purpose of high-level gamers participating in the Sa-Jang Party is not to obtain raid items for their use. As they pursue the efficiency of their game labor, their purpose is to earn as much as gold-profit possible in the process of producing raid items in a relatively small amount of time and exchanging them for gold. On the other hand, low-level gamers should pay high-level gamers (for the raid items they receive) such a large amount of gold they produce by doing gold nogada for long periods.[59] Therefore, considering the time each group of gamers invests in earning gold, such a transaction between the two seems unfair. What then fundamentally makes such an exchange possible?

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[58]Seon-Su (선수) is a Korean word referring to a person who has been selected, particularly in sports, as a representative player, among others, due to his excellent skills or someone who does sports as a profession. It also figuratively refers to a person who is proficient in something or often does it by habit. On the other hand, Sa-Jang (사장) refers to the head of a company (or firm) or the store or shop owner. Due to the denotative meaning of the Korean word Sa-Jang, Sa-Jang gamers look as if they are capitalists who buy labor power and pay laborers wages for their work. In fact, however, Sa-Jang gamers are also game laborers who have to do game labor by themselves to produce gold before they participate in the Sa-Jang Party.

[59]Generally, the auction's starting price for raid items in the Gold party, including Sa-Jang Party, is 10,000 gold, and the minimum unit price of bidding up is 10,000 gold. Sa-Jang gamers must participate in the auction when an item better than they already have is on the auction. Thus, Sa-Jang gamers end up spending tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of gold at one Sa-Jang party, which is the amount of gold that low-level gamers can earn through gold nogada over days to months. In the Sa-Jang Party, Seon-Su gamers receive such a large amount of gold produced by low-level gamers by doing gold nogada for long periods in exchange for providing their game labor for relatively short periods (from two to three hours).

In fact, what makes such an exchange possible between these two groups of gamers is the pursuit of their own interests from their respective perspectives. Seon-Su gamers produce and sell raid items useless to them to receive gold from Sa-Jang gamers and use the obtained gold to buy raid items necessary for advancing their game characters in higher raid dungeons. On the other hand, low-level Sa-Jang gamers use their gold to acquire raid items useful for advancing their game characters but cannot be obtained by themselves due to the lack of their game ability. Therefore, such an exchange between the two groups of gamers occurs because there is a benefit in the respective pursuit of their interests. High-level gamers can earn more gold in a shorter time than they can produce by doing gold nogada outside of the game space of raids. Low-level gamers can easily acquire raid items using the gold they have accumulated without investing a lot of game (labor) time to improve their game ability. In other words, since they each get the virtual goods they want (raid items or gold) more efficiently (by reducing their game labor time) through such an exchange, their interests accord with each other. From that point of view, it is the pursuit of efficiency in terms of game labor productivity that enables the exchange between them.

From the point of view of gamers pursuing their own interests, everything they do can be rationalized as an economic activity. The aspect of raid gamers that stands out here is that of homo economicus, an economic man who thoroughly calculates benefits based on economic efficiency and makes rational choices. Being an entrepreneur of the self, for Foucault (2004/2008), means "being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (p. 226). For this economic man, everything that "makes a future income possible" can be capital (p.

224).[60] In that sense, in the Sa-Jang Party, gold is capital for low-level gamers, and game labor is capital for high-level gamers as they generate income (gold) with their game ability.

Labor as a capital for workers can be explained by the concept of "capital-ability," a concept that Foucault (2004/2008) derives from his analysis of neoliberal human capital theory.[61] Human capital, according to neoliberal economists, is regarded as consisting of innate and acquired elements: "The former is hereditary, and the latter is conferred through education. The formation of human capital is especially related to the latter, that is, education or educational investments" (Sato, 2021, p. 169).

It is the latter (the human capital acquired through education and self-investment) that neoliberal economists and Foucault (2004/2008) attach the most significance, and what Foucault calls "capital-ability" seems to refer to the latter.[62] Human capital as "capital-ability" cannot be separated from the person who owns it.[63] A worker's "capital-ability" is their skill, which generates their income.[64] All workers own their "capital-

[60]Foucault (2004/2008) states, "we will call 'capital' everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income" (p. 224).

[61]What Foucault (2004/2008) calls "capital-ability" is "ability to work, skill, the ability to do something cannot be separated from the person who is skilled and who can do this particular thing. In other words, the worker's skill really is a machine, but a machine which cannot be separated from the worker himself" (p. 224).

[62]In fact, Foucault (2004/2008) does not precisely distinguish the two concepts: human capital and "capital-ability"; they are generally used in almost the same sense in his text.

[63]"So that we should think of the machine constituted by the worker's ability, the machine constituted by, if you like, ability and worker individually bound together, as being remunerated over a period of time by a series of wages" (Foucault, 2004/2008, p. 225).

[64]"From the perspective of neoliberal economists, labor is not a commodity reduced by abstraction to labor power and the time [during] which it is used but it is a capital, that is to say, it as an ability, a skill or a machine constituted by the worker's ability, that produces an earnings stream. In other words, worker's skill or his machine- ability becomes his capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage" (Foucault, 2004/2008, p. 225).

ability" and invest them in generating income. In such a sense, labor, which is inseparable from the worker, can be defined as a "machine constituted by the worker's ability," and the "ability-machine" produces the worker's "earnings stream" (p. 224).

According to Foucault (2004/2008), this "machine" is not the "labor power sold at the market price to a capital invested in an enterprise" but rather is "capital-ability which, according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income-wage, so that the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself" (p. 225). Here, the income is "the wage paid for this 'capital-ability,'" and a worker is considered as "an agent who has his own 'capital-ability' and who invests it in his work in order to receive a wage" (Sato, 2021, p. 169). In other words, as a neoliberal subject, a worker is not seen "as an object—the object of supply and demand in the form of labor power—but as an active economic subject" (Foucault, 2004/2008, p. 223). Workers are not regarded as passive beings who sell their labor power as commodities to capitalists, but as active subjects, a kind of entrepreneur of the self, who possess their own abilities and use the abilities as capital to generate income.

If gamers try to generate as much income as possible based on their own "capital-ability," then what would be the income that gamers seek to earn? The incomes that gamers receive within the game world of *WoW* are gold, game items, the increase in their characters' combat ability, or more generally, the advancement of their game characters. However, the income they will ultimately receive (or strive to acquire) is their competitiveness based on their game characters' advancement and social recognition for their competitiveness. In other words, for gamers, the ultimate income they get from investing their "capital-ability" is not economic income but their social status given by

the evaluation of their competitiveness in the raid gamers' society. In the end, raid game laborers want the growth, accumulation, and improvement of their "capital-ability" since the "capital-ability" of gamers in the raid gamers' society constitutes the basis of gamers' competitiveness and social recognition.

If a gamer's game skills (or a gamer's ability to perform in-game tasks well) could be their "capital-ability," however, I would call everything that makes up their competitiveness as a gamer' "ability-resources." My concept of ability-resources includes all potential resources that could be converted into gamers' "capital-ability," all factors that can affect their game skills such as their game experience, game-related knowledge or information as well as virtual goods (such as game items and gold) produced by their game labor.

As discussed in the analysis of the Sa-Jang party, in which high-level gamers earn gold as an in-game income by using their game labor as capital and low-level gamers acquire game items as their income using their gold-capital, the capital available to raid gamers is not just limited to their game labor as "capital-ability." The gold does not belong to the "capital-ability" as game skills because it can also be acquired through RMT without doing any game labor. However, the gold can be invested as gamers' available capital in acquiring more (or better) game items. After all, as the entrepreneur of the self, raid gamers seek to increase their ability-resources in various ways and to convert those resources into capital to get more income.

Gamers' ability-resources or "capital-ability" constitute the basis of gamers' competitiveness, and more importantly, it also determines their social status in *WoW* society. Raid gamers' society is indeed a hierarchical society in which gamers are ranked

based on their competitiveness. And in the Korean raid gamers' society, the competitiveness of gamers (built up by their game ability or "capital-ability") is measured by Log (ranking) Score posted on the Warcraft Logs website (https://www.warcraftlogs.com). In other words, the Log Score is considered (and used) as an official measure of an individual gamer's competitiveness in the Korean *WoW* gamers' society. It means that Log Score determines the hierarchical relationship between gamers. Since the Log Score represents the social status of each gamer in the Korean *WoW* raid community and determines the hierarchical relationship between gamers, Korean *WoW* gamers give a great significance to the score and make much effort to increase it. The improvement of their Log Score can be a specific motivation for them to do voluntarily excessive gaming.

I have repeatedly expressed my view that Korean *WoW* gamers' ultimate goal is to improve their competitiveness and gain social recognition and status in their game society. However, what social recognition do they seek? I believe it means that one day they will also have the highest competitiveness as top-level raid gamers, thereby gaining social honor in the raid gamers' society and becoming the object of envy from others. Also, I think that the sense of achievement they ultimately want to produce as game laborers depends on such a kind of social recognition.

Then why do they value social recognition like that? That is because their game community is a competitive hierarchical winner-centric society. In that society, top raid gamers with high Log Scores have the privilege of getting more opportunities to increase their ability-resources. In contrast, gamers with low Log Scores have the disadvantages of being excluded from raids or are often looked down upon by high-level gamers.

Therefore, Korean raid gamers want to continuously increase their Log Scores to get into the upper class, and such a desire motivates them to continue to do excessive voluntary gaming and also intensifies competition against each other. In the end, in the Korean *WoW* community, the stratification by Log Score is interconnected with gamers' excessive gaming and their competitive relationships, building winner-centric game culture. The following sections analyze these structural characteristics of Korean *WoW* game culture in turn.

4. Structural Characteristics of Korean Raid Gamers' Culture

4.1. Stratification by Log Score

This section analyzes the structural characteristics of a winner-centric Korean raid gamers' society, which evaluates each gamer's competitiveness based on their Log (ranking) Scores. It will first look at how the raid gamers' society is stratified based on the Log Score, then analyze the dichotomous relationship of gamers resulting from the Log Score access barrier, and finally discuss the social inequality caused by the monopolization of top raids by top-level (or upper-class) raid gamers.

Raids refer to *WoW*'s high-difficulty game contents that require a high level of concentration of gamers and game time. In order to complete a raid dungeon, gamers form a raid group (or party) of 10 to 30 gamers to fight against the dungeon's elite monsters together.[65] Raids are generally considered difficult for gamers because of a range of interrelated factors. Due to the high defensive and attacking power and the

[65]Gamers adopt the party play form in the battle with elite monsters because these monsters are much stronger than the ordinary monsters that gamers hunt in solo play. It is practically too difficult for a gamer to attack them alone. The game rule does not determine cooperative hunting, but gamers are encouraged to adopt it to increase the probability of success.

diverse attacking patterns of raid monsters, gamers in a raid group are required to engage in relatively long combats, react quickly and accurately to the attacks of raid monsters, perform various game actions simultaneously and work organically as one team.[66]

Due to raids' level of difficulty, only gamers with a certain level of competitiveness are eligible for participating in raid groups for dungeons on Heroic and Mythic mode difficulty.[67] In other words, in Korean raid gamers' society, an invisible barrier restricts gamers' access to high-level difficulty raids depending on the degree of ability-resources each gamer has. Such an access barrier is the Log Score for Korean raid gamers who already have experience in raids, and it is the gold that serves as such a barrier for low-level gamers who want to participate in raids for the first time.[68] Since selecting raid participants based on their Log Score has become a common practice, gamers must show their Log Score to a raid leader, the gamer in charge of a raid, to be selected as a participant of Heroic or Mythic mode raids.

When raid leaders select their raid group participants, they check the applicants' Log Score posted on the Warcraft Logs website to see if they are competitive enough to participate in raids. A gamer's Log Score is a percentile score that shows the gamer's ranking, which is determined based on damage per second (DPS) or heal per second

[66]The combat time required to beat a raid boss monster is about 10 minutes, while hunting a non-elite monster outside the game space of raids takes about several tens of seconds, although the hunting speed of these creatures may vary depending on gamers' game ability.

[67]Gamers can choose the raid difficulty before entering a raid dungeon, which is divided into the Normal, Heroic, and Mythic modes. The Mythic mode is the highest raid difficulty of a raid dungeon that gamers can choose, which increases the defensive/attacking power of raid monsters as well as adds more attacking patterns of raid boss monsters.

[68]For a low-level gamer who tries to participate in raids as a Sa-Jang rather than a Seon-Su, the first barrier to entering a raid is gold. For a gamer who wishes to participate in the Sa-Jang Party as a Seon-Su, a high Log Score serves as an access barrier. For low-level gamers to participate in a raid as Sa-Jang, they need to possess a large amount of gold even if they are not required to have a high Log Score.

(HPS) scores that the gamer had earned in the past victory of raid combats. Therefore, checking a gamer's Log Score is to select a gamer who has achieved a high DPS or HPS score in the past, that is, who is expected to show high gaming performance in raids. In other words, for Korean raid gamers, the Log (ranking) Score calculated based on DPS or HPS scores that gamers obtained in their earlier victory of raid combats are regarded (and used) as an official measure that determines the competitiveness of an individual gamer.

On the Warcraft Logs, a gamer's Log Score is displayed in six different colors (mirroring the game item quality colors in *WoW*), which represent somewhat arbitrarily split six ranges of percentile: gray (0–24.9), green (25–49.9), blue (50–74.9), purple (75–94.9), orange (95–99.9), and gold (100). The color of the Log Score can be regarded, so to speak, as a status symbol of raid gamers. In the Korean online community of *WoW*, such as WoW Inven, gamers are often called by the Log Score's colors such as Grays, Greens, Blues, etc., and only those who have obtained at least blue color are considered being able to do their part in raids.[69]

What should be noted in such a selection of raid participants is the relationship between gamers: the relationship between the selector and the candidate, the relationship between those who are selected and those who are excluded, or the relationship between those who can overcome the Log Score barrier and those who cannot, that is, those who

[69]On the contrary, Grays, and Greens, that is, gamers whose Log Scores are below average, are stigmatized as gamers who cannot even do their own part, and gamers stigmatized as such are those who have a hard time finding a raid group that accepts them; this is because middle and upper-class raid gamers (Blues or higher color) regard lower class gamers (Grays and Greens) as those who try to take advantage of other gamers, as free riders; thus, they do not allow Grays and Blues to be part of their raid groups. However, it does not mean that Blues (middle-class gamers based on Log Score) are likely to be quickly promoted to a higher class by participating in higher difficulty raids. They also need to have a higher Log Score to participate in such raids. However, to get a higher Log Score, they must win the competition with gamers who are already higher than them because Log Score is based on the relative evaluation.

have the chance of social mobility and those who have not. In this dichotomous relationship, a small number of top-level gamers with high Log Scores have more privileges than other gamers in the raid gamers' society. In fact, the access barrier by high Log Score is created from the perspective of high-level gamers who have the right to select participants of high-level raids. They do not accept those who cannot help their raid groups achieving successful results in raid battles. The higher the difficulty of a raid, the higher its access barrier, so it becomes increasingly difficult for low-level gamers to cross that barrier. As a result, in the end, only a few raid gamers are eligible to participate in the top raid that all raid gamers wish to go.

In raids of great difficulties, such as Mythic raids, the Log Score required when selecting raid participants is too high from lower-class gamers' perspective (i.e., gamers whose Log Scores are below average: Grays and Greens). In fact, Korean gamers who succeeded in entering Mythic raids and at least clear the Mythic raid dungeon's first stage are only about 2% of all gamers.[70] It means a small number of gamers are monopolizing Mythic raids. In other words, by demanding high Log Scores, top-level raid gamers are fundamentally blocking the chances of gamers with low Log Scores to participate in the top raid. It also means that they monopolize the opportunity to acquire the best game items offered there. According to Weber (1921/1999), such a "monopolization of […] material goods or opportunities" and the specific class consciousness or "the specific status honor, which always rests upon [...] exclusiveness," are what accompany

[70]As of November 6, 2020, the number of activated game characters in the Korean *WoW* realm is 117,032 (WoW Realm Population at https://www.wowrealmpopulation.com). As of the same date, the number of game characters that have succeeded in hunting the first boss monster of Ny'alotha, the Waking City, the final raid of *Battle for Azeroth*'s expansion, in mythic difficulty is 3,502 (Warcraft Logs), which is equivalent to 2.6% of the total.

"stratification by status" (p. 91).[71] In the end, they may show off their status power based on the logic of differentiation by monopolizing high-end raid items that lower-level gamers cannot have—as if only competitive ones had the right to own those items.

Their monopoly of the opportunity to participate in top raids increases their accumulation of high-end game items, which eventually increases their ability-resources and strengthens their social power. Such benefits may motivate them to monopolize the top raids by preventing other gamers from entering their society and building their own privileged community.

Such a monopoly of top raids by top-level (or upper-class) gamers raises the question of the in-game hierarchy. Nevertheless, although only a few top-level gamers monopolize all the opportunities and privileges—from the opportunity of participating in top raids to the accumulation of high-end raid items—Korean *WoW* gamers seem to be more obsessed with the status of a winner rather than questioning the structural contradictions and inequality of raid gamers' society. In other words, it seems that lower-level (or lower-class) gamers tend to view them as objects of envy rather than questioning such a hierarchy. In WoW Inven, numerous posts clearly show the perspective of Korean *WoW* gamers who not only envy the top raid gamers but sometimes see them as their role models or idols. What stands out in such posts is the former's positive appraisal of the latter's best achievements and an expression of envy for the latter's highest social status, that is, the envy of the social honor that the successful and the winner could enjoy. From

[71]"For all practical purposes, stratification by status goes hand in hand with a monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities, in a manner we have come to know as typical. Besides the specific status honor, which always rests upon distance and exclusiveness, we find all sorts of material monopolies" (Weber, 1921/1999, p. 91).

that point of view, it can be said that top raid gamers have considerable social power in *WoW* gamers' society. Many gamers search and analyze their combat logs on the Warcraft Logs website and try to find a way to increase their Log Score by imitating their playing styles. In other words, by taking top-level gamers as role models, Korean *WoW* gamers try to learn their gameplay know-how and hope to become as competitive as they are. They want to be more competitive to finally occupy the place of the winner in the hierarchical raid gamers' society. The ideological roots of such thinking lie in the winner-centric thinking of a competitive neoliberal society. The Korean raid gamers' society is essentially a society that requires gamers to be competitive, and it is essentially a winner-oriented competitive society and a microcosm of broader Korean culture.

In Korean raid gamers' society, high-level gamers with high Log Score have the privilege of gaining more opportunities to increase their ability-resources and are the object of envy of other gamers, while gamers with low Log Scores are often looked down upon and are subject to exclusion due to their lack of ability-resources. In short, the envy for high-level gamers and contempt for low-level gamers are two sides of the same coin that illuminates the winner-centric Korean raid gamers' society. Thus, if the focus has so far been on privileged top raid gamers to examine raid gamers' society stratified by Log (ranking) Scores, it will now be necessary to more broadly illuminate the winner-centric raid gamers' society from the standpoint of disadvantaged lower-level raid gamers. This is the topic that will be discussed in the following section. It will discuss how the winner-centric competition system works among raid gamers and how low-level gamers are disadvantaged in that system.

4.2. Winner-Centric Competition System

Raid gamers basically perform raids based on cooperative gaming. Ultimately, the goal of each raid gamer is to improve their Log Score, but the premise to achieve that individual goal is the success of the raid group they participate. That is why raid gamers attach great importance to raid participants' ability-resources and their gaming performance. To show how Korean raid gamers' society's winner-centric competition system works, this section discusses the following points. I first discuss raid gamers' requirements to achieve the raid group's shared goals, how each gamer competes for their own individual goals, and what issues emerge from their competitive relationship. I then focus on the winner-centric thinking shared by Korean raid gamers, describing how high-level gamers give disadvantages to low-level gamers who are pointed out as the cause of the failure in the event of raid combats failure.

In raid combats, Korean raid gamers compete with each other while playing cooperatively. Due to the raids' difficulty, gamers adopt a cooperative playstyle to increase their chances of winning. Therefore, in the first place, a raid group tries to defeat raid monsters as a team, so each gamer must perform their individual role as well as possible. However, ultimately, each gamer's personal goal is to improve their own competitiveness.

For an individual raid gamer, the goal is that the raid group should be able to achieve maximum results and, at the same time, increase their Log Score as much as possible. In other words, from the team's point of view, the common goal is to beat as many raid boss monsters as possible to produce as many raid items as possible. In contrast, from an individual raid gamer's perspective, the goal is to improve their own competitiveness. Thus, raid gamers are in a contradictory situation where gamers must

cooperate for the success of the team while competing with other gamers for individual goals.

The common goal of gamers participating in cooperative raid hunting is to increase raid hunting efficiency and increase game item productivity to achieve maximum results. To achieve such a goal, increasing the team's attack efficiency is essential. Therefore, combat strategies and individual gamer's game skills that can maximize efficiency are needed, and raid gamers must be fully prepared to execute the team's combat strategy. For example, the raid composition taking into account the Buffs, the reasonable division of roles, and the installation of add-ons programs that help gamers multitasking should be prepared in advance.[72]

Once raid combat begins, raid gamers are required to entirely focus on the combat, performing their pre-assigned roles (tanker, dealer, or healer). The tanker's role is to take damage for the raid group, protecting the others from being attacked. Dealers are gamers who are mainly responsible for dealing with damage to raid monsters. Healers heal other gamers when they are taken damage, thus keeping the raid group alive. All gamers must move like the cogwheels of a single mechanical device under the raid leader's command. The most important thing here is the accurate and efficient game performance of individual gamers; each gamer must react immediately to the game's speed that progresses by the unit of seconds without making any mistakes, which is not easy as a gamer is not dealing with a single task while engaging in combat. Multitasking is required for gamers in order to quickly and immediately respond to rapidly changing

[72]"A Buff refers to a temporary beneficial spell or effect placed on a player," provided by some of the game character's classes such as Death Night, Druid, Hunter, etc. ("Buff," n.d., para. 1).

combat situations.[73] Game laborers have to continually press the keyboard buttons and click the mouse with their fingers, watch warning signs that continuously pop up on the screen with their eyes, and listen to game sounds as well as raid leader's vocal instructions with their ears.[74] Here, the most important thing for gamers is the efficient management of time.

Using add-on programs to help gamers overcome such multitasking difficulties for time management efficiency is essential. For example, BigWigs, a commonly used add-on program, provides information that helps gamers effectively engage in combat and quickly cope with multitasking situations. BigWigs informs raid gamers of the name of the spell cast by raid monsters and notifies gamers about the casting time of a spell through a bar graph, messages, or warning sounds. With Bigwigs' help, raid gamers obtain information about the upcoming combat situation, which helps them prepare for it.[75] However, among the add-on programs widely used by Korean raid gamers, the most important one for individual gamers is Recount, a damage meter add-on that shows the DPS score and HPS that serves as the basis of individual gamers' Log (ranking) Scores.

The primary purpose for gamers to use this add-on is to increase the team's winning rate through efficient time management, but what is more important for an

[73]The word multitasking originally refers to the work of a single computer performing several tasks simultaneously. When a person tries to deal with several tasks in such a way, their perceptions are scattered and fragmented in various directions, and their concentration decreases as time goes by.

[74]Raid gamers use voice over internet protocol (VoIP), third-party software such as Discord, Skype, etc., to communicate with each other. Since it is challenging for raid gamers to send or read chat messages through the chatting channel allocated to the raid group when raid combat is ongoing, they use such a method to deliver voice communications to respond to rapidly changing combat situations efficiently.

[75]For example, tankers can use their survival spell just before they receive a fatal attack from a raid monster to increase their chances of survival by minimizing the damage they take.

Figure 10. DPS Window of Recount.

individual gamer is their achievement. Thus, for example, dealers are obsessed with DPS scores. The DPS window (Figure 10 on the following page) provides dealers with information about their DPS ranking in real-time, which intensifies competition among dealers over their DPS scores.[76] Therefore, dealers frequently check their real-time DPS scores during raid combats, trying to get a higher score than others. The DPS score is also meaningful to the team because the sum of the scores determines the team's offensive power as a whole. From the point of view of an individual gamer, however, the score is of paramount importance because it serves to measure personal achievement (winning in competition) and determines their Log (ranking) Score that is crucial for participating in high level difficulty raids.

In the end, gamers cooperate strategically to achieve the common goal of producing the maximum number of raid items while at the same time competing with

[76]Healers use the HPS window of Recount that shows the HPS ranking in real-time, which functions as accelerating the competition among healers over their HPS scores.

each other covertly to achieve their personal goal of obtaining high DPS or HPS scores (or Log Score), and what stands out here is, in a word, the aspect of gamers who value their own success more than that of the team. In raids, gamers seem to cooperate for the team's victory on the surface, but in fact, they are competing against each other over DPS or HPS scores, and they try every possible means to gain an edge in the competition. For example, to increase the DPS or HPS score, some gamers engage in selfish behaviors that may hinder the team's overall victory.[77] Or, for the same reason, gamers try to figure out free riders who do not work hard or non-qualified gamers and report them to the raid leader.[78] Such behaviors reflect the idea that achievements should be given according to the individual's ability and contribution, and above all, it highlights the competitive spirit among Korean raid gamers.

In any case, as the team's defeat can also be a loss to the individual gamer, each raid gamer is required to perform their role accurately, quickly, and without mistakes to succeed in the cooperative hunt. Gamers who are suspected as the cause of the team's failure may be excluded from other raids if their game characters' name is disclosed and become the target of criticism in an online community such as WoW Inven.

[77]For example, to maximize DPS, a dealer may attack other targets alone instead of focusing on the team's primary target promised in the combat strategy, or they may keep striking a target alone in a situation where all attacks must be stopped. In the case of healers, to maximize the HPS score, one may deliberately inflict damage on themselves and heal themselves rather than healing those who need it. Such behaviors do not contribute much to the team's victory, or in some cases, may lead directly to the teams' defeat. Nevertheless, if a gamer does so, the only reason is that they want to gain a higher DPS or HPS score than others. Such shows that the team's victory means nothing more than a requirement for the individual gamer to strengthen their competitiveness.

[78]If a gamer is suspected of showing a low role performance during raid combats, gamers report the gamer to their raid leader. In such a case, the accused gamer may be subject to specific penalties, such as being excluded from the gold recipients' list or being kicked out of the raid group. Such exclusion of a free rider indeed benefits the rest of raid gamers because they could receive more gold dividends at the end of the raid or eliminate a potential competitor for raid items in advance.

From the perspective of losers in the competition, the raid is a "hardcore game" with a "harsh punishment" (Juul, 2010).[79] In a winner-oriented raid gamers' society, gamers, especially high-level gamers, are overly obsessed with winning raid combats and show a strong antipathy to everything that might interfere with a successful raid. For example, Korean raid gamers do not like what is called "Headings," or the constant repetition of combat that gamers do not expect to win.[80]

After a raid combat loss, raid gamers discuss the combat failure's reasons, using the game chat channel allocated to their raid group. However, such a chat channel easily turns into a site for denouncing mistakes rather than a site for discussing combat strategy to prepare for the next try. That is, raid gamers try to find those who are deemed to have caused their Heading, to whom they shift the responsibility of the failure of previous combat. A gamer who consistently makes mistakes during the raid combat is intensely criticized by others in the raid group and is regarded as a gamer who might cause another Heading in the next raid combat. If a gamer repeats the same mistake over and over again, the gamer becomes an object of ridicule behind their back and eventually be called

[79]According to Juul (2010), "hardcore games" punish gamers' failure harshly. For example, early arcade games were designed in the way of "forcing the player at the 'game over' alert to start from the beginning (and insert new coins)," and gamers had no choice but "to replay exactly the same early levels of a game over and over" (p. 42). The "harsh punishment structure" of raid refers to the problem of raid system that makes the raid group restart the raid combat from the beginning once they lose the combat, which can be caused by a single mistake made by a raid gamer because it can wipe out the entire raid group.

[80]Korean *WoW* gamers use the English noun "try" to refer to the same raid combat retry after the previous combat turns out a failure. On the other hand, they use the term "Heading," which corresponds to the English noun header, to refer to a "try" that they expect to have no chance of winning.

"Gumeong (구멍)," a vulgar slang term that Korean *WoW* gamers use to refer to a gamer who makes a loophole in the raid combat strategy.[81]

Once a gamer is stigmatized as Gumeong, such a stigma continues to chase the gamer implicitly throughout their virtual life and bring them disadvantages in participating in raids again. For example, when a new raid group is being formed, the gamer stigmatized as Gumeong may be excluded from the selection of raid group members. Korean raid gamers do not want to play with gamers thus stigmatized because they might cause a meaningless Heading to their raid group. As Korean raid gamers regard meaningless Headings as a waste of time, they tend to reject gamers stigmatized as Gumeong.

In the competitive Korean gamers culture formed around raids, gamers who lack game abilities and thus are deemed to not be conducive to a raid group's success are subject to such exclusions. In the eyes of high-level (upper-class) raid gamers, there is not much difference between gamers who have not yet been part of elite raid gamers' community and gamers stigmatized as Gumeong. Due to the calculation that there is no benefit to be gained from these gamers, upper-class gamers exclude them from high-level (top) raids by the following logic: "The others do not need you; they can do as well, and better, without you. There is no self-evident reason for your being around and no obvious justification for your claim to the right to stay around" (Bauman, 2004, p. 12). In short, they are regarded as those who lack ability-resources or "capital-ability." Gamers lacking "capital-ability" are bound to become losers in the competition, and upper-class gamers

[81]In this context, the Korean word "gumeong (구멍)" means a flaw, defect, or weakness in English.

treat them as useless beings or surplus beings. In short, in Korean raid gamers' society, only the winners in the competition receive positive recognition, and those who fail in the competition, that is, losers, are socially excluded, ignored, or subject to contempt.

In Korean raid gamers' society, there are only winners and losers according to the individual's ability, and only the logic of the winner is justified. In this society, the social status of gamers classified as losers, I think, is the same as that of laborers called nogada in Korean society. The status of gamers who failed to enter the upper-class stratum of raid gamers' society due to lack of ability is no different from that of nogada, the lowest-class laborers who are considered incompetent losers in Korean competitive society. To clarify the social status of a nogada gamer, I would like to evoke the implications of the word 'nogada' in Korean society again. Nogada as laborer refers to Korean daily employed workers who do hard manual labor in the construction industry. These workers are the lowest working class in Korea, and they suffer from poor working conditions. They are the workers whose hard work is not (properly) rewarded in Korean society. Despite being very laborious, their labor does not require special skills and is therefore considered socially worthless. Moreover, in contemporary Korean competitive society, they are considered incompetent and thus are socially marginalized, relegated to the fringe of society.[82]

In Korean people's perception, nogada laborers are regarded as those who have failed in the fierce competition for survival in Korean society. It is generally believed that

[82]It can be seen that the Confucian ideology of the pre-modern Korean society (the Joseon Dynasty), which has disdain for manual labor, is still operating in the negative social perception of workers referred to as Nogada in contemporary Korean society. In the twenty-first century's knowledge-based society, it can be said that the value of the life of manual workers is more degraded than before.

these workers did not make enough efforts for self-development during their school days, and they are now paying for their past laziness and idleness by hard manual labor as a punishment. Although their labor intensity is higher (and their working hours are longer) than that of other workers, it is believed that they do not deserve decent wages because they once lived a lazy life. The social perception that nogada laborers are ignorant and poor people with an unstable future and are inferior people who have failed in the survival competition does not allow nogada themselves to speak proudly about their work.

In short, nogada laborers are regarded as lower-class incompetents who suffer from physical labor due to a lack of ability in a meritocratic competitive society. For that reason, they are treated as losers in competition and as surplus social beings. The same is true in the Korean raid gamers' society. Gamers who become losers in the competition due to lack of "capital-ability" are treated as incompetents who find it difficult to break out of the status of nogada gamers. Ultimately, they are treated as socially useless and surplus beings.

Korean *WoW* gamers strive to strengthen their competitiveness in order to not be treated as surplus beings as such, and to that end, they end up doing excessive game labor. In other words, they voluntarily do excessive game labor in the name of self-investment to gain competitiveness so that they do not become losers in the competition.

In order to complete my analysis of ideology that operates in Korean *WoW* gamers' gaming practices centered on game nogada, the following three sections discuss the core ideological roots of excessive voluntary game labor of raid gamers who aim to strengthen their own competitiveness. The first discussion focuses on gamers as an

entrepreneur of the self who constantly do game nogada to increase their ability-resources in terms of self-investment for competitiveness.

5. Gaming Practices and Ideology

5.1. Voluntary Excessive Game Labor to Increase Competitiveness

The discussion here will focus on the excessive game labor of gamers who constantly compete against their own Log Score record to gain a higher social status in raid gamers' society. For them, excessive game labor, which has no end or limit, is considered self-investment to increase their competitiveness. Eventually, the discussion will reveal that the infinite competition ideology of a neoliberal society encourages gamers to engage in excessive gaming and that gamers as a neoliberal subject, who internalized that ideology, voluntarily do excessive game labor as a kind of self-investment to increase their own competitiveness.

In Korean raid gamers' society, each gamer's competitiveness is regarded as the result of their efforts. Thus, the lack of competitiveness is considered a result of the lack of personal efforts to increase their ability-resources or "capital-ability," the lack of self-investment. In the raid gamers' society, which is fundamentally a winner-centric competitive society, gamers fear being treated as losers. For that reason, to not become losers in the competition, I think Korean *WoW* gamers do voluntary excessive game labor.

In order to obtain a better Log (ranking) Score by increasing their game ability-resources, a gamer competes not only against other gamers but also against their own record. To achieve the final result, the winner's status, a gamer, constantly competes against themselves to break their previous record and raise their Log Score ranking. As

competition with oneself means to go beyond one's limits, there can be no end to that competition. That is why raid gamers have no choice but to continue their excessive game labor—is not that the reason why raid gamers have no choice but to continue to do excess game labor?

As long as gamers continue to do *WoW* to gain recognition of their competitiveness by expanding their game ability-resources, they cannot escape the vicious circle of excessive gaming. Game nogada activity as excessive gaming cannot be over unless gamers, regardless of whether they belong to the upper class or lower class, give up their desire to become a more competitive winner in endless competition.

While gamers who are in the process of leveling up their game characters' level are doing excessive gaming as nogada activities imposed by the nogada game system of *WoW* to enter the raid gamers' society, high-level gamers who have already entered the higher stratum of that society voluntarily do nogada activities to occupy the position of the winner ultimately. In other words, while *WoW*'s nogada game system imposes nogada activities that gamers are required to do to participate in raids, gamers who have already participated in high level difficulty raids can voluntarily redo the process they have once completed to increase their game characters' combat ability and to expand their gold-capital.

For example, raid gamers voluntarily do game nogada activity if there are game items that can even slightly increase their game characters' current combat ability in a game space other than raids.[83] This is because it might take too long if gamers increase

[83]For example, gamers repeatedly conquer a five-players dungeon that provides a gear item that can increase their game characters' combat ability until they obtain the game item they want; that is, they do

their character combat ability only by obtaining raid items.[84] On the other hand, accumulating a large amount of gold is necessary for raid gamers to purchase raid items in a Gold Party, so they do gold nogada to obtain gold. For Korean *WoW* gamers, the fastest way to earn much gold, except purchasing gold with real money, is to participate in a Sa-Jang party as a Seon-Su gamer. However, since such a way of earning gold is limited to once a week per game character, gamers create a secondary game character, or an Alt, to participate in raids more often to earn more gold. However, creating an Alt and advancing it to the level of Seon-Su means that the gamer has to restart the game from scratch—the gamer has to do the game character's level up nogada from level one, do reputation nogada, do dungeon nogada to raise its item level, etc. If the gamer wants to have several Seon-Su Alts to accumulate more gold, the gamer can repeat the nogada process over and over again.[85]

As such, raid gamers' voluntary game nogada activity is endless. Whether it is to increase game character's combat ability or to earn more gold, the reason they continue to do excessive gaming (as game nogada) is that gamers as entrepreneurs of themselves try to increase their ability-resources in order to strengthen their competitiveness and they regard such voluntary game nogada activity as investments in themselves. Any activity

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dungeon nogada. Alternatively, if there is a better gear item (than gamers already possess) that can be purchased by raising their game characters' reputation level, gamers do reputation nogada.

[84]Raid gear items are indeed the best gear items in the game world of *WoW*, which increase the game character's combat ability the most once they are equipped. However, due to the nature of the raid's rewarding system that offers a game character only one chance per week of obtaining raid items from a particular raid dungeon, it could be an inefficient method for gamers to increase the combat ability of their game characters only by acquiring raid gear items.

[85]A gamer can indeed create eleven game characters on a game server with their game account. Even though it is quite unrealistic to advance eleven Alts simultaneously, gamers can create more Alts if they want. They simply need to create another game account.

that increases their ability-resources can be for them an investment in their human capital as their "capital-ability."[86]

However, the self-investment of this entrepreneur of the self continues indefinitely, like a machine that cannot stop once it is activated. From that point of view, Han (2017) states, "today, everyone is an auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise. People are now master and slave in one" (p. 13). According to Han (2015), the "entrepreneur of the Self" as a neoliberal subject believes that they are free, but in fact, it is an achievement-subject that exploits itself.[87] The concept of achievement is the core value of neoliberal society. Han (2015) argues that neoliberal society **"**is no longer a disciplinary society but an achievement society" (p. 8), and in that society, "prohibitions, commandments, the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation" (p. 9). Also, its inhabitants constantly strive to achieve everything they can, and their obsession with achievements eventually leads to self-exploitation. "Excess work and performance escalate into auto-exploitation" (p. 11). Thus, achievement-subject is not actually free because they become the object of self-exploitation rather than obeying others who exploit them. "The achievement-subject stands free from any external instance of domination forcing it to work," but "gives itself over to compulsive freedom—that is, to the free constraint of maximizing achievement" (p. 11). From that point of view, the Korean raid gamers' society is a neoliberal achievement society that encourages gamers

[86]According to Foucault's (2004/2008) analysis, the theory of human capital divides labor into capital and income: Capital is a worker's aptitude and ability (the worker's capital-ability) as a source of income, and income is wages allocated to capital-ability.

[87]Han (2015) defines Foucault's entrepreneur of the self, or neoliberal homo economicus, as an "achievement-subject."

to engage in excessive game labor, and raid gamers are the achievement-subjects who internalized the infinite competition ideology of that society.

I think that Han's (2015) explanation of the achievement society and achievement-subject is helpful in understanding and defining the Korean raid gamers' society and the excessive game labor of gamers. From that point of view, the Korean raid gamers' society is a neoliberal achievement society that encourages gamers to engage in excessive game labor. And the Korean raid gamers, as achievement-subjects who internalized the infinite competition ideology of that society, voluntarily exploit themselves until they are burned out for maximum achievement.

What raid gamers ultimately want to obtain as a reward for voluntary excess game labor is to gain social recognition as a winner in the raid gamers' society by strengthening their own competitiveness. The reason they continue to do excessive game labor, or game nogada, to achieve such a goal would be due to their belief that, in the end, if they work hard, they will one day get such a reward; that is, it would be a belief in the myth of success that anyone who works hard will be rewarded based on their efforts and abilities. From that point of view, Korean raid gamers' excess game labor is the practice of their belief in the American Dream based on meritocratic ideology.

In fact, Korean gamers' belief in the myth of the American dream is the ideological root of the Gold Party's appearance in Korean *WoW* gamers' culture. The idea that dominates Korean *WoW* gamers who created and have popularized the Gold Party seems to be the idea that "hard work is rewarded," a reflection of the myth of the American Dream. And that dream motivates their excessive game labor based on the ideology of meritocracy. Hard work is "a powerful factor in meritocracy" and one of the

ways “individuals achieve the American Dream” (Alvarado, 2010, p. 12). The American Dream is the idea that everyone can have an equal chance to achieve the desired success through their hard work and abilities. In other words, the American Dream is based on the belief that individual efforts and abilities will be rewarded regardless of one’s socioeconomic status at birth. It is an achievement ideology based on the belief in meritocracy. Then how does the Gold Party connect with the American Dream?

5.2. Gold Party and the Myth of the American Dream

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Gold Party emerged as an objection of Korean *WoW* gamers to the unfairness and irrationality of the dice rolling as a method of distributing raid items. The fundamental reason for the rise of the Gold Party is that Korean *WoW* gamers thought that reward system of raids for their game labor was unfair. To answer the question of how does the Gold Party connect with the American Dream, I first look at what the American Dream is, especially through the lens of Consalvo et al. (2010) that discusses the MMOs’ reward system in terms of realization of the American Dream in a virtual world.

The American Dream is the idea that everyone can have an equal chance to achieve the desired success through their hard work and abilities. In other words, the American Dream is based on the belief that individual efforts and abilities will be rewarded regardless of the circumstances in which they were born; therefore, it is an achievement ideology based on the belief in meritocracy. The American Dream represents the American spirit or identity, but the idea has a universality that can be shared by other societies.[88] Consalvo et al. (2010) argue that the ideology of “hard work

[88]The American Dream represents the ideology of Western capitalism and embraces a much wider range than the United States. It is an ideology that can be universally accepted in today’s westernized capitalist

is rewarded" is part of the myth of the American Dream, a "Western capitalist ideology, which can encompass a much wider purview than simply the United States" (p. 396). In that sense, "the American Dream is a global discourse" (Callahan, 2017, p. 257).

Among multiple versions of the discourses of the American Dream, Consalvo et al. (2010) focus on its materialist foundations. In this version, the American Dream is an ideology that "is grounded in the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, 'playing the game,' initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success" (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). The dream also "promises that if one employs one's energies and talents to the fullest, one will reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power" (p. 161). It makes one believe that an individual's success, that is, the achievement of upward mobility in the social-economic hierarchy, is solely due to their hard work. In other words, successful people are those "who worked hard, were men of integrity, and with a little bit of luck, they have achieved fame or fortune" (Scheurer, 2005, p. 158).

According to Consalvo et al. (2010), people realize that the belief that hard work is rewarded is just a myth that is impossible to achieve in "the real world" because they know that "poverty, racism, sexism, or other structural barriers" create obstacles toward this (p. 397). In contrast to real life, however, MMOs give players the "faith in its existence" because they provide gamers with a "perfect world" where socio-economic constraints do not exist and where our efforts will be acknowledged and our achievement celebrated" (p. 398). From their viewpoint, gamers are compelled to play MMOs because

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society, including South Korea. In fact, historically in South Korea, the myth of self-made-man played an important role as a driving force behind state-led economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s. It was the idea that "anyone can get rich if they work hard," the core idea of the American Dream. Such a belief still has a strong influence on many Koreans, even though it is, in fact, just a dream that can no longer be realized in today's Korean society.

they allows them to actualize the ideology of "hard work is rewarded." In other words, according to Consalvo et al., it is the rewarding system of MMOs itself that realizes the American Dream because it rewards gamers for their hard work.

Consalvo et al. (2010) seem to argue that the tedious hard work the game system imposes on gamers will surely be rewarded if gamers are willing to do it fairly, and their achievements will be celebrated. Therefore, gamers should climb to the top of the ladder step by step only with their own efforts, and only by accomplishing that way the American Dream that the game system activates can be realized. On the other hand, gamers who opted for RMT instead of hard work are considered cheaters; thus, the authors seem to argue that such cheaters cannot truly realize the American Dream.[89]

However, as Consalvo et al. (2010) argue, is the hard work in *WoW* actually rewarded? The authors describe the relationship between the American Dream, which is according to them realized by the game reward system of MMOs, and gamers as follows:

> Developers create procedural systems that demand players engage in hard or tedious work to achieve success, and players themselves (particularly power gamers and hardcore gamers) embrace that dream (Consalvo et al. 2010, p. 397).

Here, Consalvo et al. (2010) seem to argue that such a system (what I call nogada game system) encourages gamers to realize the American Dream, which is difficult to realize in the real world. I agree that the game system, what I call nogada game system, triggers the American Dream for gamers, but I think their views are either too ideal or optimistic. It is also worth noting that the nogada system of *WoW*, on the other hand, is putting the brakes

[89]"Cheaters in MMOGs are referred to in the same moralistic tone as those who cannot achieve the American Dream—slothful and morally weak. Only players who have climbed the ladder fairly and put in the hard work should have access to the game's rewards" (Consalvo et al., 2010, p. 397).

on the realization of that dream. In my view, Consalvo et al. do not seem to care much about the share of luck in the game reward system.[90]

To maintain the belief that gamers can get rewards for their hard work, reasonable and substantial rewards must be given. In other words, the reward for their hard work should be one hundred percent guaranteed. Otherwise, gamers who have not received any reward for their gaming activities will feel that their time and efforts have been wasted. However, in raids, Blizzard suggested a rule of rewards that is determined by luck. In other words, the raid item distribution rule of *WoW*, that is, rolling dice, does not provide fair rewards to gamers for their hard work. Korean raid gamers' objections to such a rule's irrationality resulted in the emergence of the Gold Party.

In short, from Korean *WoW* gamers' points of view, the belief that hard work will be rewarded did not operate in the game because of the inherent irrationality of the game reward system. At least for the Korean gamers who created the Gold Party, *WoW* does not seem to be a perfect world, giving them full confidence that their hard work will be rewarded and their achievements will be celebrated, as Consalvo et al. (2010) argued. This is the fundamental reason why the Gold Party was created by Korean gamers who did not want their rewards for their hard work to be determined by a matter of luck. In other words, Korean *WoW* gamers regarded Gold Party as their own fair rule giving reasonable rewards for their game labor. In that sense, the Gold Party could be seen as a result of Korean gamers' attempt to realize the American Dream in their own way, which is triggered but not realized by *WoW*'s nogada game system itself.

[90]Consalvo et al. (2010) state, "the entire setup of an MMOG encourages the attainment of not only a part of the Dream but of the entire Dream itself" (p. 397).

Here, it is necessary to explain what I mean when I say that the nogada game system of *WoW* triggers the American Dream for gamers, and thus the creation of the Gold Party of Korean *WoW* gamers can be interpreted in relation to that dream.

To that end, let us revisit Consalvo et al.'s (2010) quote mentioned above, discussing that game designers create procedural systems that require gamers to engage in hard or tedious in-game tasks to achieve success and that gamers themselves accept that dream. If we read such a statement from Hall's (1973/2006) account on the relationship between encoding and decoding, it can be interpreted that the message of the American Dream encoded in the game reward system of *WoW* is fully decoded and accepted by gamers, particularly by hardcore gamers, as intended by the encoder (game designer).

The hardcore gamers that Consalvo et al. (2010) refer to here can be seen as audiences decoding encoded messages in "the dominant/hegemonic position," to borrow Hall's (1973/2006) terminology.[91] Then how about Korean gamers who created the Gold Party? They recognize and share the dominant message of the American Dream (hard work is rewarded) that is encoded in the game reward system of *WoW*, but they do not fully accept the game rule in the way intended by the encoder (game designers). They rather modified the game rule suggested by game designers of *WoW* in a way that reflects their interests. From Hall's point of view, they are more similar to the audiences who decode the message in a "negotiated position." According to Hall, "decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements." It accepts a

[91]Hall (1973/2006) discusses three decoding positions of audiences in relation to intended messages encoded into a text: the dominant/hegemonic position, the negotiated position, and the opposite position.

"'large views' of issues" but "makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule" (p. 172).

Then what would be the relationship between *WoW*'s nogada game system and the American Dream? In *WoW*, there are nogada game systems that have a limit to the amount of game nogada activity required to get rewards, which, as Consalvo et al. (2010) claims, embodies the American Dream because "the reward WILL come" eventually no matter how long it takes (p. 398). The representative example of such a game nogada activity is the level up nogada that gamers do from the very beginning of their journey in the virtual world of *WoW*.

However, the probability-based reward system and the method of distributing items by rolling dice are putting the brakes on the realization of that dream, because it rather follows a way of delaying the reward or, in some cases, not rewarding gamers for their hard work. In other words, the nogada game system that gamers first encounter in *WoW* triggers the American Dream, while the game also has the nogada game systems that hinder gamers from realizing that dream. Such a contradiction arises because Blizzard designed *WoW* in the way of maximizing its profit rather than creating a virtual space for gamers to realize the American Dream. Thus, it would be more plausible to assume that Blizzard is using the realization of the American Dream as a kind of bait.

Korean *WoW* gamers noticed the contradiction of the nogada game system, and I consider that they created the Gold Party to solve such contradiction of the system in their own way and to achieve the dream more actively.

However, with the advent of the Gold Party, could Korean raid gamers fairly receive desired rewards, that is, raid items for their game labor? In fact, the premise of

providing equal and fair opportunities in the distribution of raid items by the Gold Party was an illusion because only those who possess more gold capital than others will have the priority to acquire raid items. The Gold Party seems to give every gamer a fair chance to obtain as many items as they want from the auction market of raids, but in fact, high item bids eventually lead to favorable outcomes for gamers who own much gold-capital. In addition, since the Gold Party uses a gold auction system that eventually induces gamers to participate in RMT of gold, it is contrary to American Dream's belief that hard work will be rewarded. According to Consalvo et al. (2010), RMT upsets "the balance of hard work is rewarded" because it replaces "'hard work' with 'credit card use'" (p. 395).

Eventually, the Gold Party that resulted in the popularization of RMT did not lead *WoW* to become a space where gamers' hard work, that is, their investment of time and effort, is rewarded and celebrated, but instead turned it into a game where gamers can purchase the victory with real money. In this sense, the belief of Korean *WoW* gamers that the Gold Party is "reasonable" because it rewards their hard work with gold is, indeed, an ideological illusion that conceals its true nature.

In fact, for *WoW* gamers, the belief in the American Dream that hard work will be rewarded, either by success or by wealth, is an illusion in itself. Since the American Dream ideology encourages them to do more game labor to get rewards, they invest significant time and effort into the game to realize that dream. However, in the end, such is just the illusion of a reward. The rewards continue to be delayed and given rewards are even immaterial. Gamers invest all this time and effort into the game that has no pay-off but only structurally results in more game nogada. Nevertheless, I believe Korean *WoW*

gamers voluntarily continue excessive gaming to realize that dream somehow, because they do not recognize that realizing the American Dream is just an illusion.

For the ideal believers in the American Dream, what matters will be the belief and hope that the rewards for their efforts will surely come even if those rewards might be given a bit late to them. They may not care much about the delay in the reward itself. For example, Consalvo et al. (2010) state that hard work will be rewarded and that "in MMOGs, the reward is often ... more hard work" (p. 398). From that point of view, the sense of achievement gained through a slow but steady advancement may be considered as the process of realizing that dream.

However, for Korean raid gamers, the success in their game society is not limited to subjective self-satisfaction. As argued repeatedly, it depends on the social recognition of their competitiveness in Korean *WoW* gamers' society. Hence, the "capital-ability" or ability-resources to improve their competitiveness is regarded as the most important thing for them. From their point of view, the realization of the dream depends above all on their abilities. In other words, as a way to realize the American Dream, an individual's ability is the key to success in the competition and lead to the position of a winner. From that point of view, the belief in the myth of the American Dream that dominates Korean raid gamers is based on an ideology of meritocracy.

The following section will examine the excessive game labor of Korean *WoW* gamers from the perspective of meritocratic ideology and conclude the analysis on the relationship between excessive game labor and ideology, the central topic of this chapter.

5.3. Excessive Game Labor and Meritocratic Ideology

Individual efforts and abilities are the way to realize the American dream, and the myth of the American dream and the myth of meritocracy are interconnected. According to Alvarado (2010), "meritocracy answers the question of who and how one achieves the American Dream" (p. 12), and "the myth of meritocracy is a part of the utopian belief in the American Dream" (p. 10). Thus, it can be said that the belief in the American Dream and meritocracy merge in contemporary neoliberal society. Korean raid gamers' society, which is a microcosm of Korean neoliberal society, is a winner-centric, competitive society. In their society, meritocracy serves as a powerful ideology that encourages gamers to do excessive game labor to improve their own competitiveness. This section will examine how their belief in the American Dream, based on meritocracy, encourages gamers to do excessive game labor and why such a belief is an ideological illusion.

In the previous section discussing the stratification of the raid gamers' society, I argued that despite the issue of inequality in terms of raid participation and opportunities for raid gamers to increase their ability-resources, Korean raid gamers only show winner-centered thinking rather than objecting to it. Then, what does such thinking fundamentally originate from? It cannot be said that it spontaneously arises from gamers themselves. I rather think that such thinking is imposed on them by the dominant ideology of the society to which the real gamers belong: the competitive system of neoliberal society and the meritocratic ideology that serves as its driving force.

In Korea's contemporary neoliberal, competitive society, many young Koreans are continually striving to develop their careers and build up all kinds of "Specs" for their competitiveness not to become losers.[92] Likewise, I argue that Korean raid gamers are

[92]Spec is a neologism widely used by Koreans, "referring to one's capabilities for a certain job" (Kim et al., 2019, p. 85). Kim et al. (2018) provide a detailed explanation of the term as follows: "Spec is an

doing excessive game labor in the name of self-investment and self-development in order to increase their competitiveness in the game society; and that the driving force behind their infinite practice of excessive game labor is their belief in meritocratic ideology, more specifically, a neoliberal meritocratic ideology.

The concept of neoliberal meritocracy I use here comes from Littler's (2018) book, *Against meritocracy: Culture, power, and myths of mobility*, which examines the fundamental relationship between meritocracy and neoliberal capitalism. Littler distinguishes two key forms of meritocracy: meritocracy as a social system and as ideological discourse. "Meritocracy firstly refers to a social system which is based around the idea that individuals are responsible for working hard to activate their talent and thus one in which the majority will arrive at social positions for which they are suitable and appropriately rewarded" (p. 8). The author also states that "meritocracy needs to be understood as an ideological discourse, as a system of beliefs which constitute a general worldview and uphold particular power dynamics" (p. 9). According to Litter, "neoliberal meritocracy, as a potent blend of an essentialised notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and belief in social mobility" (p. 223) functions as an "ideological engine of late capitalism" (p. 15). And it "is mobilised to both disguise and gain consent for the economic inequalities wrought through neoliberalism (p. 223).

As previously argued, the belief in the myth of the American Dream based on meritocracy that anyone can succeed in certain areas of society as long as one has the

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abbreviation of 'specification', a word used to describe the qualities of electronic products. As used by young adults, it is a self-deprecating term, derived from a simple analogy between electronic products and jobseekers. As electronic products have specifications of memory capacity, speed, processor power, and so on, jobseekers have 'specs' like English test scores, certificates, degrees, extracurricular activities, awards, and other numerically quantifiable accomplishments. Specs display one's quantified and standardized human capital in a way that demonstrates one's competence to employers at a glance" (pp. 83-84).

necessary talent and works hard enough seems to operate as a powerful ideology in raid gamers' society. Gamers cannot stop excessive game labor because they believe that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, so that if they work hard, they will gain an appropriate social status according to their ability. However, they do not realize that it is an illusion, a myth.

Advocates of meritocratic ideology believe that just as individuals' success depends entirely on their efforts and abilities, failure is also due to their lack of effort and ability. Therefore, to succeed, not only hard work but also ability is required, and the achievements and rewards of each individual's labor are inevitably differed according to their ability. As discussed in the case of the Sa-Jang Party earlier, the difference in "capital-ability" makes a difference in their income, but Korean raid gamers not only take it for granted to earn different incomes depending on their ability but also consider it a fair reward. From their perspective, such a difference is taken for granted since it accords with the meritocracy principle that gamers consider a fair rule.

The problem is that raid gamers' ability-resources, which are the basis of their competitiveness, are not only determined by their game skills and abilities but are also influenced by their gold-capital. Gamers can acquire gold through RMT without doing game labor and use the gold they purchased in the Gold Party to purchase raid items and improve their competitiveness. In other words, real capital (real money) is involved in the gamers' competitiveness.

For Korean raid gamers, meritocratic ideology gives the illusion that anyone with the necessary talents and efforts could be promoted to the upper-class stratum of raid gamers' society, but in fact, it hides the structural inequality of their society.

Alternatively, it could be argued that meritocratic ideology acts as a justification for social inequality.

In the raid gamers' society, from the moment of selecting raid participants, the opportunity is only offered to those who have sufficient "capital-ability" or ability-resources, and those who do not have enough resources are excluded from raids. Moreover, as previously discussed, high level difficulty raids are monopolized by only a small number of high-level raid gamers. As a result, only high-level gamers can acquire high-end raid items provided in the top raids, which they use to strengthen their ability-resources, while low-level gamers enter the top raids becomes more and more difficult. Therefore, equal opportunity according to the ability and the possibility of social mobility is only hope and fiction for lower-class gamers. Therefore, from the latter's perspective, "meritocracy as a social system is [...] a structural impossibility" (Littler, 2018, p. 217). As in contemporary neoliberal society, social mobility based on individual abilities in raid gamers' society is only possible for those who already have privileges and is only an unrealistic fiction for those in the lower classes.

Raid gamers' society is a miniature of a neoliberal society where wealth inequalities are deepened, and social mobility between classes is limited. Nevertheless, raid gamers obsessed with the belief that everyone will get results according to their ability, that is, meritocratic ideology, cannot stop excessive gaming. This is because the belief in "the 'existence of an opportunity to rise in status' according to ability might lessen feelings' of personal frustration'" (Allen, 2011, p. 376). According to Allen (2011), "the knowledge that we live within a system that allows us to realise our talents is seen as good for social stability. It produces contentment or at least, it avoids discontent.

[...] [Thus] 'even if there is little actual opportunity to rise in social status, the belief in a myth of opportunity may produce similar results'" (p. 376).

In Korean raid gamers' society dominated by neoliberal meritocratic ideology, there are only winners and losers according to individual abilities, and only the logic of the winners is justified. However, without objection to the irrationality and harshness of such a winner-centric logic, raid gamers are obsessed with meritocratic ideology and do not problematize the unbalanced distribution of wealth or social inequality. According to the rules of meritocracy, "everyone believes that the little they accomplish is the result of their dedication" (Sullings, 2019, para. 4). When people are "imbued with the 'competitive spirit', each person's results can be explained by the proportion of an individual's merit," and they "will be convinced that the distribution was fair and that meritocracy works" (para. 4).

In short, Korean raid gamers internalize a neoliberal meritocratic ideology and continue to voluntarily do excessive game labor in the imagination that they can actualize the myth of success one day. In other words, their excessive game labor is the practice of the ideology that governs them. Raid gamers believe that they can become the achievement-subject recognized in the raid competition society by strengthening their competitiveness through excessive gaming: by accumulating their ability-resources through excessive game labor and improving their "capital-ability." However, they do not realize that it is an illusion, a myth. Achievement-subjects who voluntarily overwork according to their free will are not free because the freedom forces them to do more to maximize their achievements.

The belief of gamers that anyone can succeed if they work hard, according to their ability, makes them continuously do excessive game labor. Their game labor in order to obtain a higher Log Score and occupy a higher position in the raid gamers' society is an endless competition against their own record, that is, an absolute competition of "the achievement-subject" that "competes with itself; it succumbs to the destructive compulsion to outdo itself over and over, to jump over its own shadow. This self-constraint, which poses as freedom, has deadly results" (Han, 2015, p. 46). In the voluntary and limitless excessive game labor of the game subject internalizing the meritocratic ideology, "the exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Perpetrator and victim can no longer be distinguished" (Han, 2015, p. 11).

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the practices of game nogada and ideology, the central theme of this final chapter, began with the following question: Despite the boredom of the game nogada, why do gamers voluntarily continue to do excessive game gaming as excessive labor? The question led to an analysis of gaming practices of Korean *WoW* gamers who voluntarily do excessive game labor, an analysis of the values that they consider essential, and an analysis of their ideological roots, which can be summarized as follow.

First, Korean raid gamers' society is an achievement society that requires each gamer to achieve maximum game labor productivity in game items production. What raid gamers need above all to achieve maximum labor productivity is economic efficiency, and it is why gamers engage in RMT or power leveling services prohibited by Blizzard. Raid gamers show an aspect of homo economicus, an economic man who values productivity, economic efficiency, and rationality in all game activities. As entrepreneurs

of themselves, they prioritize economic interests in all circumstances and relations and seek to obtain maximum income by investing at least optimally.

Second, Korean raid gamers' society is a competitive society in which the mechanism of infinite competition operates, and it is a hierarchical society in which gamers are ranked according to their competitiveness. The "capital-ability" of a gamer serves the basis of their competitiveness, which is quantified as Log Scores that determine each gamer's social status. The Log Score indicates the social class to which each gamer belongs and their social status.

Third, the meritocratic ideology that dominates the raid gamers' society demands competitiveness from each gamer and encourages them to have a "capital-ability" that does not have an upper limit. The gamers who have internalized such an ideology endlessly seek to increase their "capital-ability" to become the protagonists of their own success stories. The result is their excessive game labor. They voluntarily engage in excessive game labor in the name of self-investment in their own competitiveness. The endless voluntary excessive game labor of gamers, who compete against their own record to become a winner, is bound to result in self-exploitation.

Finally, the ultimate goal of Korean *WoW* gamers' voluntary game nogada is to obtain a sense of achievement that can be realized by being socially recognized for their competitiveness in their game society. However, if the sense of achievement can only be obtained by acquiring a winner's status in the game society, most gamers, except for very few top raid gamers who monopolize the top raids, will gain more experience of defeat than success. From such a point of view, the raid gamers' society only mass-produces numerous losers, to whom the success myth based on meritocratic ideology is only a

detrimental, unrealizable dream. Their excessive gaming is nothing but self-exploitation that wears them out in the end, and their hard work and project as an “entrepreneur of himself” are doomed only to failure.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has provided an alternative approach to the psychological game addiction discourse, which deals with the problem of excessive gaming from the perspective of individualist-reductionism. I considered that gamers' more fundamental reason to engage in excessive gaming is not actually an individual problem but rather the way games are designed to generate or maximize corporate profits and the structural problem of their game society and the ideology that governs it. Thus, I suggested the necessity to understand excessive gaming from a broader perspective, particularly from that of both political economy and ideology, and examined a particular form of excessive gaming, that is, game nogada, a Korean game culture term that refers to repetitive, monotonous, labor-like game activities entailing negative (boring, arduous, unpleasant) emotions experienced by gamers. Throughout this study, I discussed and analyzed two main research questions:

- What is the political economy context of game nogada of *WoW*?
- What ideology operates in the game culture of Korean *WoW* gamers surrounding the game nogada?

Game studies is a field where the importance of interdisciplinary research is repeatedly discussed. Until now, game studies has methodologically and theoretically relied on approaches rooted in various academic fields, and I believe games and gamers can be studied in a variety of ways in the future. Game systems and gamers and game activities are often studied independently within game studies, but my research takes a more integrated approach. As game systems designed by game designers significantly impact

the gaming environment of gamers, it is necessary to look at gamer's gaming practices in terms of game systems (or rules of the game). In other words, since game systems and gamer activities are in a mutually influential relationship, an approach that integrates both political economy and ideology is necessary. Taking different methodological approaches to explain one particular phenomenon has the advantage of enriching reflection on the topic. From that point of view, I tried to examine the topic of excessive gaming related to the nogada game of *WoW* from a combined approach that intersects the perspectives of political economy and ideological analysis. On the one hand, I examined the relationship between game nogada and game systems (rules and structure, etc.) from a political economy perspective, and on the other hand, I looked at the gaming practice that highlights the excessive gaming of Korean *WoW* gamers from the viewpoint of game culture. The analysis of the latter has shed light on the ideology that dominates Korean *WoW* gamers and their game society.

Even if a game world has its own rules and norms, I did not consider them to be completely separate from the real-world ones to which gamers belong. Gamers bring real-world norms or ideologies into their game culture, and in that sense, the line between the virtual world and the "real world" may sometimes be blurred in gaming activities. For example, such can be evidenced from the occurrence of RMT, in which players purchase in-game items, which have no use-value in real life, with a significant amount of real money. In that sense, I share Castronova's (2005) opinion that there may be a mutual influence between the virtual world of online games and the real world. He describes the online game world as a synthetic world. According to him, the membrane of "magic circle" protects "the fantasy world from the outside world," but in synthetic worlds, "this

membrane is actually quite porous" (p. 147). He argues that people are always crossing in both directions with their behavioral assumptions and attitudes. According to him, "because no one can permanently separate events in one sphere of their life from all the other spheres, that part of human life taking place in synthetic worlds will have effects everywhere" (p. 7). He metaphorically describes this synthetic world as a "hyper-stage" in which gamers are involved as audiences and actors, unfolding online drama without scripted a plot in the vast and uncharted realm between humans and their machines. And when "the audience becomes the players" on stage, he insists that the play already becomes a part of their "ordinary life" (p. 10). From this perspective, it may be natural for gamers to project the ideologies that influence them in the real world onto their gaming practices in the virtual game world.

This study analyzed game nogada as a form of excessive gaming of Korean *WoW* gamers in the relationship between the game system, gaming practices, and ideology. When dealing with the subject of ideology in game studies, many previous studies have focused on the analysis of the ideologies embedded in games themselves. However, my research was not aimed at deciphering the ideological message hidden in a game. I rather analyzed the ideology that stands out in the gaming practices of gamers. I have considered that the game system can activate ideology and also that the ways gamers play games or their gaming practices can reflect a particular ideology. From such a point of view, I analyzed the nogada game system of *WoW* and the way gamers play the game to show how the ideology is involved or operates in their gaming practices. I believe that is the contribution of my research to game studies.

The following summarizes my findings, adds reflections from a comprehensive perspective, and discusses directions for future research.

In Chapter III, in order to define game nogada as game labor, which consists of mutually opposed concepts of play and labor, I first distinguished between game activity as play and game activity as game labor. I focused on game nogada as a sub-category of game labor and discussed how it could be defined as labor rather than play. After examining the reasons why game activities for fun turned into game labor and game nogada, game labor was defined by analyzing its goal and characteristics. I argued that game activity could be play or game labor depending on the gamers' goal. If the gamers' goal is to experience the autotelic fun of a game, their game activity is defined as play. If gamers aim at experiencing a sense of achievement relying on external evaluation, their game activity is defined as game labor. I applied the flow theory of Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990; 1994; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005) to describe the autotelic fun of play as the enjoyment of flow and game labor as an oppositional concept to autotelic play.

After reviewing game nogada as a game activity, I discussed the concept of the nogada game system, the perception and experience of nogada from gamers' point of view, and game nogada as game labor. I argued that game nogada is characterized by a sense of unavoidable boredom and is a negative aspect of game labor that is not rewarded. I contended that game nogada is forced by the nogada game system, as an inevitable process for *WoW* gamers and interrupts the experience of flow due to the delay of in-game rewards for game labor.

In the final section of Chapter III, I highlighted the particular implications of the term game nogada in relation to the meaning of nogada in the Korean socio-cultural context, comparing it with the term grind in North American culture. Both terms refer to monotonous, repetitive, and boring game activity. However, I pointed out that, despite the commonalities, there are significant semantic differences between game nogada and grind. First, while grind may have negative or positive meanings depending on the contexts, nogada is always used in a negative sense regardless of the contexts being used. A more important difference is that grind does not refer to an agent from a specific class background, while the term nogada entails a negative social perception and evaluation of the lower working class and the work they do. In short, I argued, game nogada is regarded as game labor with strictly negative meanings. I emphasized that the implications of the term nogada, which simultaneously refer to the lowest-class daily workers and their hard manual labor in Korean society, characterize the term game nogada. I highlighted the fact that the hard work of nogada laborers for their survival is regarded as worthless labor of incompetent workers or as not properly rewarded labor in Korean society. I argued that such negative meanings are implied in the term game nogada, which explains the antipathy of Korean gamers toward it. As Korean gamers do not want their game labor to be treated unfairly like the labor of nogada laborers, they perceive game nogada as a game process they want to get over with as soon as possible or to skip.

Chapter IV emphasized that the fundamental reason *WoW* gamers cannot avoid the tedious process of game nogada is due to the game reward system of *WoW*, or what I call nogada game system. In this chapter, I analyzed such an issue from a political

economy perspective, focusing on the nogada system of *WoW*, Blizzard's strategy to generate or maximize profits using gamers' audience labor. Throughout this chapter, I discussed how gamers' game labor turned into audience labor exploited by *WoW*'s nogada game system, that is, how gamers' game labor, essentially immaterial labor, is converted by Blizzard's monetization strategies into labor that creates profits or surplus-value.

Considering that what gamers ultimately want to produce through their game labor is the fun of achievement, I first analyzed the various values of game items, which are essential tools for gamers to realize such a type of fun. Then, I analyzed in detail how the nogada game system delays the production of gamers' fun of achievement. Blizzard would have needed to find a way to extend gamers' game labor time as much as possible because gamers' audience labor creates more surplus-value as their game labor time continues to be extended. Such an intention of Blizzard is reflected in the game design of *WoW* as follows: (a) increasing the amounts of in-game tasks to get meaningful in-game rewards; (b) sales of game items that require a significant amount of in-game currency, such as gold; (c) providing game items based on probability; (d) segmenting the types of game items necessary for game characters' advancement; (e) introducing a lockout system that provides gamers with a chance to obtain game items only once a week. Because these nogada game systems are interconnected like chainrings —one type of game nogada leads to another type of game nogada —and this whole process of game nogada is restarted every time Blizzard release a new expansion pack, *WoW* is a nogada game that induce gamers to do endless game nogada (i.e., excessive game labor).

In such a way, the nogada game system makes gamers do excessive game labor to produce gold or game items that have no practical use-value in the real world. From the perspective of gamers, they want to produce items efficiently by investing a minimum amount of game labor time. However, from Blizzard's point of view, since the game nogada time of gamers is directly connected to its profit generation, something must have been needed as a driving force for sustaining the nogada game system of *WoW*. Therefore, Blizzard extends gamers' game labor time by limiting the number of high-end raid items provided as rewards and making gamers compete for items with scarcity value.

Then why do gamers want to get items with scarcity value? I argued that it was due to their meaning given by gamers, namely the "sign-value" discussed by Baudrillard (1981). In other words, because it is difficult to obtain high-quality raid items or rare items, they have social prestige value and become the object of ostentation, and the gamers who possess such items become the object of the envy of other gamers; that is, it is not the objective value of a game item itself but the value derived from the gamers' own thoughts that give it a special meaning based on the logic of differentiation.

As a reaction against the nogada game system of *WoW*, which delays the production of items with such value, Korean *WoW* gamers attempted to reduce the boring nogada time and obtain in-game results faster by using a bypassing method such as engaging in RMT or creating the Gold Party. When Blizzard's attempts to deter RMT turn out to be a failure, Blizzard developed and sold service products such as the WoW Token and Character Boost to gamers as a way of generating additional profits without losing customers who do not like game nogada. In this way, Blizzard commodified game nogada time itself. In other words, Blizzard generates basic revenues by creating

conditions in which gamers must do boring game nogada through the nogada game system of *WoW*, and then again creates additional revenues by inducing gamers to purchase service products that shorten the tedious time of game nogada. Thus, I contended that such Blizzard's monetization strategies could be considered as double exploitation of gamers' audience labor.

Game labor is not real labor, to be sure, and what gamers want is not an economic reward but a psychological reward. Thus, gamers may overlook the economic exploitation of game companies, even knowing that game labor is used to create surplus-value for them, the capitalists. However, as discussed in Chapter IV, since their game labor is essentially aimed at producing fun, it may be argued that the exploitation they may feel is incomparable to the feeling of workers being exploited in real factories or in poor working conditions. However, I argued that not only waged labor but also unpaid voluntary audience labor can be considered exploited labor if they create (surplus)-value for the capitalist, regardless of the worker's will. Just as social media companies generate profits by using the digital labor of social media users, who produce and upload digital contents for their own enjoyment of communication, game companies create revenues and surplus-values by using gamers' game labor done to produce their own fun. From that point of view, I concluded that the game labor of *WoW* gamers is audience labor exploited by Blizzard's nogada game system. The only difference between digital labor of social media users and game labor is that social media users' products are their own creations, whereas game laborers do not create something on their own—if the latter produce something, it is only the subjective experience of fun that has no visible form.

In this way, *WoW* gamers' game nogada, regardless of their will, is turned into game labor that creates real surplus-value by Blizzard's monetization strategy of *WoW* and becomes an exploited audience labor. However, I argued that if gamers continue to do game nogada without feeling the exploitation by capital hidden behind the packaging of fun production, the fundamental reason should be found from an ideological point of view. This was the topic of Chapter V.

Chapter V tried to explain why Korean gamers voluntarily persist in doing game nogada despite its tediousness from gamers' perspective. I contended that the reasons for their voluntary excessive game labor are their belief in the American dream, based on meritocratic ideology. And I considered that *WoW*'s nogada game system triggered the belief in the myth of the American dream among gamers. For example, the randomness of item rewards and the scarcity of items as artificially designed nogada game systems extend the game time for gamers to obtain their desired rewards. However, gamers continue to do excessive game labor because of the misconception that the more time and effort are invested, the higher chances to get the items they want. In other words, it can be interpreted that gamers' voluntarily excessive game labor is influenced by the belief in the American dream, triggered by the game reward system of *WoW*, that is, the belief that efforts will always be rewarded.

In Chapter V, game nogada was understood in the context of ideology of game culture. I defined game culture as the norms, values, social rules, and language that are created and shared by gamers and ideology as a system of thoughts or beliefs reflected in social practices of ideological subjects. It was argued that ideology could operate and be

reflected in the gaming practices of game subjects (or their game culture), who, as the subject of ideology, bring a particular ideology into existence within a game.

The shared values of Korea raid gamers derived from the analysis of the motives for engaging in RMT and participating in the Sa-Jang Party, the reason behind the emergence of the Gold Party, the structure and characteristics of raid gamers' society were as follows: the pursuit of economic efficiency of game labor, the demand for reasonable rewards for their game labor, and all kinds of investment and self-development to strengthen one's competitiveness to become a winner in an infinite competitive society. The game subject derived from such shared values is homo economicus as neoliberal subject, an economic-rational individual who calculates everything in terms of economic efficiency from an entrepreneurial perspective, or as Foucault (2004/2008) defines, an "entrepreneur of himself."

Korean raid gamers, as homo economicus, rationalize RMT in the name of economic efficiency. They consider the extension of game nogada time as a waste of time and thus engage in RMT to reduce game nogada time and increase their game labor production efficiency. For the same reason, Korean raid gamers participate in the Sa-Jang Party. As entrepreneurs of themselves, they try to increase their game labor's productivity by obtaining the maximum income with the least optimal investment. In the Sa-Jang Party, Seon-Su gamers, high-level game laborers, use their game labor (or game skill) as capital, or "capital-ability" to earn gold as income, while Sa-Jang gamers, low-level game laborers, use their gold as capital, or gold-capital, to obtain raid items as income. The Sa-Jang Party's seemingly unfair transaction, which creates a time difference in the game labor that each group of gamers earns gold, is made because each group of gamers earns

income more efficiently. Gold and raid items are used to advance their game characters, strengthen their competitiveness, and gain the social recognition of others by acquiring a high social status, the ultimate income both gamers seek to obtain. To that end, as entrepreneurs of themselves, Korean raid gamers seek to accumulate their ability-resources, all potential resources (including gold) that could be converted into gamers' "capital-ability" in various ways.

Game labor itself is not a means of earning real money but immaterial metaphorical labor. However, the thought that dominates gamers is the economic logic of neoliberalists, and gamers pursue economic efficiency and rationality in their game activities. The income they want to earn is not economic wealth but social status and reputation, representing their success in their game society. Therefore, they are obsessed with accumulating their ability-resources or "capital-ability" in terms of self-investment for the future (success) in their competitive game society.

Gamers' ability-resources or "capital-ability" constitute the basis of their competitiveness in Korean raid gamers' society, a hierarchical society where their competitiveness and their social status are determined by Log (ranking) Score. Because Korean raid gamers, as homo economicus, consider the Heading, the constant repetition of raid combats failure, a waste of time, they select raid participants based on the Log Score to increase the winning rate of their raid groups. Such a selection of raid participants based on Log Score, which aims to increase the labor productivity of the raid group, functions as an access barrier for gamers who want to participate in the raid without (high) Log Score. The higher the difficulty of a raid, the higher its access barrier; thus, only a small number of high-level gamers with high Log Scores monopolize top

(Mythic) raids and high-end raid items essential for securing the highest competitiveness as raid gamers. Even though such a monopoly of top raids might raise the question of hierarchy from the perspective of low-level gamers, they are more obsessed with increasing their Log Score and gaining the status of a winner rather than questioning the hierarchical structure of raid gamers' society stratified by Log Score of each gamer. In other words, Korean raid gamers are obsessed with winner-centered thinking.

The Korean raid gamers' society is essentially a winner-oriented competitive society that constantly pushes gamers into the competition, demanding individual gamers be competitive. As homo economics, raid gamers prepare for various things such as installing add-ons, learning combat strategies, assigning roles to each gamer, etc., to increase cooperative raid hunting efficiency and increase game item productivity to achieve maximum results of their raid group. However, the obsession with strengthening individual competitiveness leads gamers to engage in selfish behaviors that may hinder the group's victory or to find out and blame a gamer who caused the Heading and, in severe cases, disclose the gamer in an online community and stigmatize them as a Gumeong, who becomes the target of exclusion from the selection of raid group participants. However, in the winner-centered competitive Korean raid gamers' society, gamers stigmatized as Gumeong, low-level gamers with low Log Score are both regarded as those who lack ability-resources or "capital-ability" and thus are subject to such an exclusion. They are treated as losers in the competition, incompetents who have difficulties in breaking out of the status of nogada gamers, and surplus social beings in Korean raid gamers' society, where only the winners in the competition receive positive recognition.

I argued that Korean *WoW* gamers, as entrepreneurs of themselves, voluntarily do excessive game labor to strengthen their competitiveness in the name of self-investment in order to not be treated as surplus social beings as such and to gain a higher social status by increasing their Log (ranking) Score. To obtain a better Log Score, they strive to accumulate more ability-resources by doing game nogada. However, as their competitors are not only other gamers who have higher Log Score but also their own record, there is no end to that competition. Thus, there is no upper limit to the accumulation of ability-resources and game nogada as self-investment. Korean *WoW* gamers, who engage in endless game nogada to accumulate more ability-recourses, to strengthen their competitiveness, to increase their Log (ranking) Score, and ultimately to experience a sense of achievement by gaining higher social status and social recognition as a winner, are achievement-subjects, a homo economicus that internalized the infinite competition ideology of neoliberal society and voluntarily overwork according to its compulsive freedom to maximize its achievements.

The ideological root of voluntary excessive game labor of Korean raid gamers as achievement-subjects is the American Dream based on meritocracy ideology: a myth of success that anyone who works hard will be rewarded based on their efforts and abilities. As a reaction against the nogada game system of raids, which does not reward gamers' game labor properly, Korean raid gamers created the Gold Party and considered it as their own fair raid item distribution rule giving reasonable rewards for their game labor. The emergence of the Gold Party could be interpreted as a demand from Korean *WoW* gamers for equal opportunity and fairness to obtain items as a reward for their game labor, and

from this point of view, it could be seen as an attempt to realize the American Dream in their own way.

The nogada game system of *WoW*, introduced by game designers as an inherent rule of the game, triggers the myth of the American Dream for gamers, but in fact, the system aims to generate profits by delaying the rewards of their game labor. Korean *WoW* gamers objected to the unfair and irrational way of distributing raid items suggested by Blizzard and created a gold party as their own raid item distribution rule, aiming to accelerate the realization of the American Dream. From Hall's (2006) point of view, it can be read that they basically accept the message of the American Dream encoded by game designers into the game system of *WoW*, but at the same time modified the rule of the game in a way that reflects their interests.

However, because there was a contradiction in the way the raid items were distributed in the Gold Party, through auction using gold, the result proceeded in a different direction from their original intention (i.e., to realize the American dream). The Gold Party seems to give every gamer a fair chance to get as many items as they want by using an auction system, but in fact, high item bids eventually lead to a favorable outcome for gamers who own much gold-capital. In other words, the premise that the Gold Party provides equal and fair opportunities to each gamer in obtaining raid items is actually an illusion.

Anyhow, as advocates of neoliberal meritocracy, Korean raid gamers believe that the realization of the American Dream, their individual success, and their achievement depend on their efforts and primarily on their abilities. They believe that they will gain an appropriate social status according to their ability if they work hard and improve their

competitiveness as raid gamers. However, such a belief is an ideological illusion because the ability-resources, the basis of their competitiveness, include gold that can be purchased through RMT, the gold they can obtain without investing any personal efforts. This is also because the top raids they ultimately aim for conquering are monopolized by a small number of high-level gamers by the excess barrier of high Log Score. Without realizing that the American Dream based on meritocracy ideology is a myth, an illusion even in their virtual society of *WoW*, Korean raid gamers continue to voluntarily do endless game nogada in the imagination that they can actualize the myth of success one day. The result of such an endless voluntary excessive game labor of gamers as an achievement-subject is self-exploitation.

Gamers, dominated by neoliberal meritocratic ideology, may not view their game labor as exploited by game companies, as long as they regard their voluntary excessive gaming as self-investment to improve their competitiveness even if the exploitation of game labor occurs by the gaming system. In short, the exploitation of game labor by the nogada game system and self-exploitation by voluntary excessive game labor that continues endlessly are both hidden behind the name of the gamer's competitiveness.

A brief summary of my arguments in this study is as follows.

I defined game nogada as not just a play, but game labor that gamers perform like work. I contended that game nogada is both metaphorical labor and also labor that creates real value. I have identified two factors that make games like work for gamers: one was the nogada game system, and the other was the influence of ideologies that dominated gamers.

I contended that *WoW*'s nogada game system induces gamers into excessive game labor and turns their game activity into game labor that places weight on achievements rather than playing activity for autotelic fun.

Ultimately, gamers' excessive game labor is initiated by the nogada game system, which game companies use for inducing gamers to do more game labor to generate profits. However, the more fundamental driver of Korean *WoW* gamers' voluntary excessive gaming is their belief in the ideology of the real society they belong to: the American Dream based on the meritocratic ideology of a neoliberal society. The Korean *WoW* gamers' society is a microcosm of the Korean neoliberal society, which requires higher competitiveness and productivity for individuals, and gamers are encouraged to do excessive game labor not to be treated as losers in endless competition. In other words, I considered the excessive game labor of Korean *WoW* gamers as a response to the demand of their competitive society, and from that point of view, I regarded it (excessive game labor) as the practice of the neoliberal meritocratic ideology that governs them and their real and virtual society. After all, their excessive game labor should not be reduced as an individual pathological problem but should be understood in the broader economic and socio-cultural contexts of games and gamers.

What I wanted to emphasize in this study was that gamers are the subject of dominant ideology in the real world, and they practice that ideology in the virtual world of online games through excessive game labor. In the end, excessive game labor is not a pathological problem of an individual but a structural problem of society and a problem of the ideological subject subjected to dominant ideology. My research showed how the ideology that dominates the real world in which gamers live operates in the virtual game

world. For gamers, who are immersed in games for any motive and invests a significant amount of time and effort in gaming activities, I believe the experience in the virtual world is just as important as the real world. For them, their game activities can be meaningful experiences that could not be completely separated from their ordinary real life. For gamers obsessed with excessive gaming, gaming experiences can be considered as part of their daily life, and the lines between work and play and the virtual and real worlds can be blurred. Perhaps, as Castronova (2005) argues, "the two worlds are destined to interact" (p. 160), and "the distinction between game and life may be fading" as games are increasingly becoming "an integral part of daily life" (p. 158).

Although not covered in this study, the panopticon mechanism, which operates in a competitive structure of raid gamers, might be an important subject of discussion in other studies. In fact, Korean raid gamers' society is a kind of digital class society in which the competitiveness of gamers is ranked by quantified data, and it is a competitive society where the ability of gamers is only recognized by Log data. As I discussed in Chapter V, the combat log data of each gamer provided by the Warcraft Logs website becomes a fundamental and essential element from the time of raid participant selection. However, the data are also used by Korean *WoW* gamers for surveilling each other's combat performances in real-time and surveilling that of oneself. In other words, each gamer's competitive spirit encourages them to monitor and check each other and leads them to self-surveillance. In-depth research on this subject is expected to be an interesting work to illuminate the competitive game culture of Korean *WoW* gamers from a different perspective in the future.

APPENDIX: SUPPLEMENTAL SOURCES

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