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Gaming Across the Divide: Racial Dynamics in e-Sports and the Changing Landscape of East-West Relations

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Racial Dynamics in e-Sports and the Changing Landscape of East-West Relations

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Contents

Introduction

How I got here

The inspiration for this thesis came from my personal experience of competitive *StarCraft* (as opposed to a "casual" experience) as centered on Korea. The center of the professional *StarCraft* universe was Korea. I also quickly discovered that there weren't any competitions outside of Korea that had a similar scale in terms of prize money, audience, or skill. So the reason why Korea received almost exclusive attention from the competitive *StarCraft* community seemed simple: in any form of competition, attention will invariably be drawn to the highest level competitor. One notable website, Team Liquid (www.teamliquid.net), founded by an ex-professional who had attempted to begin a career as a *StarCraft* pro, became a hub for coverage of Korean *StarCraft*. My engagement with this community developed alongside my own increasing racial awareness. Certainly the "gamer" stereotype—the friendless shut-in whose life becomes dominated by video games—had become associated with "Asian-ness"; my experiences as an Asian American did nothing to deny that. But some questions still lingered. Would this community produce racist content, despite its respect for high level *StarCraft*? More interesting still was another question. I argue that the growth of professional *StarCraft* in the West is a deliberate attempt to replicate its success in Korea. What kind of implications does this fact have in light of the globalization process, where flows of cultural influence have a strong "West-rest" flow?

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States.* Said's work argues that the establishment of uneven power dynamics between two groups results in the dominant

group's ability to construct and impose knowledge of the dominated group, regardless of that group's realities. Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation allow for Orientalism to be seen through a racial lens. They define racial formation as a socio-historical process, through which racial categories, signifiers of social conflicts by reference to different types of human bodies, are created, changed, and destroyed. This process is composed of "racial projects" that link representations of these bodies to social structure. Racism enters this framework through racial projects. Racism occurs when a racial project creates or reproduces structures of domination by engaging in essentialist definitions of race.[1]

Essentialist representations of race here can be linked back to the quality of knowledge described by Said. With this modified framework in hand, I can make a brief hypothesis for my investigation. Given the uneven power dynamics between the United States and Korea, where the United States occupies the dominant position, it follows that the production of knowledge—that is, the news coverage that Team Liquid provides—would be essentialistic, or, to be blunt, racist.

However, globalization studies have since turned up intriguing evidence that challenges the context of domination demonstrated by Said. For example, Korean and Japanese video games have seen success outside of their home region, with Japanese video games earning critical acclaim in the United States. This is notable given the assumption that global power dynamics have resulted in a West-to-East cultural flow; the success of Korean and Japanese video games adds to a growing body of evidence of contra flow, or of Eastern cultural influences flowing into the West. Jin Dal Yong and Mia Consalvo note that the production of

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[1] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55-56, 71

Korean and Japanese video games have seen a process of hybridization, or "glocalization", that they argue have contributed to their success. They explain this process as a combination of global and local cultural factors (i.e., Western and those of the producer's, be they Korean or Japanese) that influence design decisions and are later tailored to specific individual markets. The successful implementation of the "glocalization" process has earned Japanese game companies critical success in the United States, where franchises such as *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo) have become cherished household names, and have entered gaming history as legends. Other examples of the local confronting the global (that is, the West) and succeeding, such as the strength of the Korean domestic film industry, and the popularity of the news media outlet Al-Jazeera, exist alongside these examples from the video game industry. Video games thus provide evidence for the case of contra-flow—that the global flows of culture are not dangerously unilateral. It is here that I would like to situate e-Sports: as another piece of evidence demonstrating a contra-flow of cultural products from the periphery to the center.

This evidence of contra-flow also challenges the initial reading of Orientalism, and thus disrupts my attempt to evaluate whether the news coverage of Team Liquid is racist. If racism requires a link to structures of domination, then the fact that classical Orientalism is now being challenged means that part of my research question is answered already—that is, there is no racism here. What remains, then, is to engage in a textual analysis of the coverage itself to make an evaluation about the qualities of the news coverage as a racial project.

Professional *StarCraft* and e-Sports

Developed by California-based Blizzard Entertainment, *StarCraft*'s second iteration, *StarCraft: Brood War* was the subject of the development of what has been called "e-sports", or professional gaming in Korea. I use Brett Hutchins' analysis of the World Cyber Games (WCG, an e-sports tournament modeled off the Olympics and includes *StarCraft* as an event) as a starting point for understanding e-sports as distinct from "traditional" sports. *StarCraft* competition has grown from locally organized tournaments with cash prizes to a full-blown industry complete with a dedicated fanbase, corporate-sponsored teams and professional broadcasters. Meanwhile, attempts to achieve similar success in the West is underway, with a clear consciousness of Korea's example. The creation of the North American Starleague (NASL), a *StarCraft* tournament based in the United States, is an example of an attempt to recreate Korean e-sports in the Western context, and what I argue is evidence of contra-flow.

Hutchins argues that e-sports requires a new understanding of the relationship between sports and media. Traditional sports has a structural relationship with media—the requirements of spectatorship, for example, demand the use of media; in turn, the demand for media resulted in its development as new situations required innovations and adaptations in media technology. He points out that sports can exist without media—a soccer game can be played out with or without technologies to support it. Thus, the relationship between traditional sports and media can be understood succinctly as "sport and media." E-sports, on the other hand, cannot exist without media—it is "sport *as* media". The context of globalization has drastically affected the nature of media technologies. Hutchins argues that networking technologies integrated into video games (that is, online games, such as *StarCraft*)

creates an "ontological inseparability of the local and the global."[2] This similar yet radically

different context requires a re-articulation of existing racial discourses to adapt to the new

context. Based on my analysis of Team Liquid's news coverage, I argue that this re-articulation

is a part of Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation in that it is a racial project, aimed at

explaining the racial dynamics of professional *StarCraft*. The writers are engaged in

representing, interpreting, and explaining Korean superiority in *StarCraft* e-sports and thus

providing knowledge for addressing the divide between Korean and foreign players.

Possibly the strangest aspect of the development of e-sports is that its phenomenal

growth has been largely restricted to one country: South Korea. No other country can currently

claim themselves equal to Korea's *StarCraft* in any terms—in the skill of its players, or in the

development and stability of its competitive circuits. Rather, the rest of the *StarCraft*-playing

world has instead acquiesced to the superiority of Korea's players and expressed a desire to

somehow match the stability of its institutions—its tournaments, its broadcasters, its

organization; earning dedicated sponsors, and eventually achieving a similar cultural positioning

that professional gaming in Korea has, evidence supporting the theory of contra-flow.

The rest of the *StarCraft* playing world, or "foreigners", as they have come to term

themselves, in acknowledgement of the centrality of Korea—has received a new chance at

making such a desire a reality with the release of *StarCraft II*, which had the dual effects of

evening the skill level of *StarCraft* players worldwide; and internationalizing the scene. Where

non-Koreans would have to remain content simply watching and discussing Korean players,

StarCraft II suddenly provided the chance for foreigners to compete on even ground with the

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[2] Brett Hutchins, "The growth of e-sport and the World Cyber Games." *New Media & Society*, 10 (2008), 863

Koreans, and maybe even make a career out of professional gaming as their Korean counterparts have accomplished. This has resulted in a drastic foregrounding of the Korean-foreigner divide, and informs much of the narratives that constitute Team Liquid's news coverage.

In addition to the aforementioned leveling of skills, the *StarCraft II* scene in Korea has seen significant exchange with foreign entities, which I argue is a process of contra-flow. The domestic fanbase that had supported *Brood War* before its professional demise haltingly transitioned to *StarCraft II*, with most preferring the predecessor to the sequel. As a result, the nascent *StarCraft II* scene was hamstrung in terms of financial backing. Corporate sponsors were tentative in supporting *StarCraft II* leagues that did not have the same popularity as their *Brood War* predecessors. In some cases, those *StarCraft II* teams formed initially after the game's release have folded due to financial pressures, while others have merged or been acquired by foreign investors. Korean teams have also formed partnerships with foreign teams. Korean players have also transferred to foreign teams, in some cases leaving Korea to take up residence in their team's country. The efforts of foreign entities to engage so directly with the Korean scene—to sponsor their players, offer them travel to foreign events, and so on—is again, evidence of contra-flow: the center of the *StarCraft* universe is Korea, and not some Western nation.

Chapter 1 of this thesis begins with a historical background to the development of *StarCraft* as an e-sport in Korea, and the international consequences of the release of *StarCraft II*. Chapter 2 attempts to develop a framework to approach this topic by re-articulating Orientalism as a process of racial formation, and supplements it with a theoretical discussion e-

sports as a new media phenomenon. This is followed by its complication by the development

of contra-flow in the globalization process. Chapter 3 then provides an analysis of Team Liquid's

news coverage of *StarCraft II* tournaments from 2010 to 2012, and attempts to apply the

aforementioned theoretical framework and discuss how the evidence gleaned from the data

challenges and supports this framework.

The emergence of e-sports as a phenomenon ontologically distinct from traditional

sports has created a demand from its participants to rearticulate their already existent racial

discourses for this new context. In addition to the mediated nature of e-sports, the centrality

of Korea within the context of professional *StarCraft* competition poses another challenge to

the West-rest flow of culture that has largely characterized globalization processes. The

interaction between what is generally understood as the hegemonic West and the subjugated

East in this context appear to be challenged by the apparent international popularity of

StarCraft competition and the desire to replicate its successes in Korea in the West. Thus,

analyzing the ways in which racial formation is occurring in the context of professional *StarCraft*

is an important endeavor in that it provides an opportunity to understand the relationship

between new media technologies (here, online games) effect and affect transnational

relationships, and how processes of racial formation are being played out in this context.

Chapter 1: *StarCraft* – the game, and "e-Sports"

The curious case of professional *StarCraft* is that of a predominantly white American and European gaming community that finds itself consistently inferior to their Asian, and specifically, South Korean counterparts. The dominance of South Korean gamers, particularly in the game of *StarCraft*, has even entered US popular culture[3]. Simultaneously, this is paired with the frequent publication of sensational stories reporting on South Koreans' seemingly pathological relationship with gaming. Perhaps the most notable is a 2009 incident, in which a married couple were charged with negligent homicide after their infant child starved to death due to neglect. The child's parents had reportedly invested more time in playing an online game together rather than tending to their child.[4] It is on this popular backdrop that competitive *StarCraft* has operated; a niche curiosity among the growth of a new industry and subculture.

Perhaps the greatest curiosity of professional *StarCraft* is the seemingly nonsensical story of how a computer game created by a United States-based company achieved such incredible popularity in South Korea—a country that most Americans at the time of the game's release knew of only because of its Communist neighbor, North Korea. What had once been an obscure backwater country in the Far East had revealed itself to be a very modern country seemingly filled to the brim with *really good StarCraft* players. Though the internet could allow American players to test their mettle against, say, Europeans (or the dreaded Koreans!), language and cultural barriers became the limiting factor in deciding how relationships between extra-national communities would develop. While the European and American scenes

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[3] Leading to a pop culture reference, "Zerg rush." See Appendix C.1
[4]"Jail for couple whose baby died while they raised online child", accessed January 29, 2013, http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/05/28/south.korea.virtual.baby/

were able to connect and even form international teams (early on, referred to as "clans"), communication with the nascent Korean scene was halting at best. Some would try to enter Korea's scene, with little success. As Korean players' skill began to pull away, the rest of the world could only sit, watch, and commentate for each other.

StarCraft: the game

StarCraft is a science fiction real-time strategy (RTS) franchise. The real-time term distinguishes it from turn-based strategy, where players make their moves in sequence; in real-time, both players manage their resources at the same time, which significantly increases the pace of the game. The first title in the franchise, *StarCraft*, was released in March of 1998, and later followed up by *StarCraft: Brood War* in November of 1998. A sequel, *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*, was released in 2010, and has two expansions planned for future releases: *StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm* and *StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void*. Players can choose to play single player or multiplayer modes. The single player content is plot-driven, detailing an intergalactic struggle in the distant future between three "races", as described by the game—the human Terrans; the technologically advanced, psychic warrior-philosopher Protoss; and the savage, animal-insectoid Zerg. Multiplayer mode provides a platform for players to play various game modes, ranging from cooperative gameplay against a computer opponent, to the format that became the mainstay of the professional scene: one on one, player versus player. In this format, players must manage their economic and military resources to force their opponent to surrender. The overall strategic depth and the difficulty of efficiently managing the game's mechanics provided the foundation for a rich competitive environment.

As a result of its online content, a dedicated community developed around community-made content and the competitive aspect of the game, as discussed earlier. Most notable, of course, is the development of professional leagues in South Korea, where corporate sponsored teams compete in individual and team leagues for large sums of prize money.

South Korea: fertile grounds

At the time of *StarCraft*'s growing popularity, South Korea had established itself as one of the Asia's "Tigers", having successfully risen from backwater status. After having been ravaged by the 1950-1953 Korean War, the South Korean economy enjoyed an average growth rate of 9 percent from the 1960s to the 1990s.[5] The character of South Korea's economic growth had been of large-scale industrialization, pairing reform policies with state-directed capital in a continual effort to expand the economy.[6] By 1999, the year of *StarCraft*'s release, South Korea was the 13th largest economy in the world.[7]

Not all had been smooth with South Korea's economic ascendance, however. The Asian Financial Crisis reached Korean shores in 1997, resulting in severe turmoil. Beginning with the Thai government's decision to release their currency, the baht, from the US dollar, the crisis eventually spread in the form of speculative attacks against various currencies across Southeast and East Asia, deeply affecting the region. The impact of the Crisis is difficult to overstate; according to data collected by Shalendra Sharma, Korean economic indicators suffered drastic hits across the board: real GDP growth fell from 7-12 percent to negative 5.8 percent in 1998; per capita income dropped from US$10,543 in 1996 to US$9,511 in 1997; unemployment rose

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[5] Barry Eichengreen, Dwight H. Perkins, Kwanho Shin. *From Miracle to Maturity: The Growth of the Korean Economy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1
[6] Ibid, p4
[7] World Bank Development Indicators, accessed 2/2/2013 http://data.worldbank.org/indicator

from 2 percent before the crisis to 6 percent in 1998 and 8.7 percent in March 1999, the highest Korea had experienced in thirty years.[8]

In this economic context, *StarCraft* arrived in Korea. It received a warm critical reception and achieved best-seller status among Korean consumers.[9] Contrary to common expectations for the lifespan of a video game—the duration of which its players maintain interest and continue playing the game—*StarCraft* has endured. *StarCraft* competition has evolved from its amateur, localized beginnings into a set of stable set institutions, or tournaments and governing bodies. The early days of *StarCraft* competition in Korea can be traced to local tournaments organized by PC cafe owners. The aforementioned Asian Financial Crisis certainly played no small part in driving the popularity of PC cafes in Korea. Visiting a PC cafe is relatively inexpensive—one hour with a high-end computer costs about a dollar or two. Korean youths unemployed by the crisis, now with significant time on their hands, had a cheap and highly engaging form of entertainment.

The Asian Financial Crisis also spurred the South Korean government's drive to support broadband internet in an attempt to move the economy from heavy industry to information technology. The rapid penetration of internet access in Korea was, without a doubt, crucial in supporting the development of e-sports, which is completely dependent on such infrastructure. Korea now has the second best internet access for its citizens, after Singapore. In addition, according to the Korea Internet & Security Agency, as of July 2011, internet usage among

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[8] Shalendra D. Sharma, *The Asian Financial Crisis: Crisis, Reform, and Recovery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 221

[9] "Gamespot presents: The greatest games of all time. The Standard by Which All Real-Time Strategy Games are Judged: *StarCraft* and *StarCraft: Brood War*." Cached version. Accessed 2/2/2013. http://web.archive.org/web/20060705173935/http://uk.gamespot.com/gamespot/features/all/greatestgames/starcraft.html

Koreans aged 3 and over is at 78.0%. Leisure activities, such as gaming, the report notes, is the third most reported purpose of internet usage.[10]

As the appeal of *StarCraft* tournaments grew outside of participation in competition and into spectating, two television stations eventually developed their own tournaments, which would later become the pillars of Korean *StarCraft*: the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation Game division (MBCGame) and its MBCGame Starleague (MSL), and Onmedia's gaming subsidiary Ongamenet (OGN) and its Ongamenet Starleague (OSL). In addition to these two individual tournaments is the Proleague (PL), a joint partnership between MBCGame and OGN and the Korean e-Sports Association (KeSPA), the governing body of professional gaming in South Korea. These tournaments became the most prestigious, and profitable, avenues of competition.   The most recent OSL awarded a prize pool of 102,000,000 Korean won, or roughly US$90,000, awarded across sixteen players.[11] These components of Korean "e-Sports" were all in place by the mid 2000's, which marked the high point of professional *StarCraft*'s popularity in South Korea.

The arrival of *StarCraft II* in 2010, coupled with declining interest in professional gaming in South Korea in general, resulted in a major shift in the foundations of Korean professional *StarCraft*. The parent company of MBCGame opted to reorganize the channel to focus on music, thus folding the MSL. A legal firestorm between KeSPA and *StarCraft's* creator, Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. regarding the intellectual property rights and the legality of the Korean gaming channels' broadcasts prior to *StarCraft II's* release allowed a competing studio, GOMtv,

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[10] Korean Internet & Security Agency, "2011 Survey on the Internet Usage Executive Summary", accessed 2/2/2013.
http://isis.kisa.or.kr/eng/board/index.jsp?pageId=040100&bbsId=10&itemId=317&pageIndex=1
[11]Esports Earnings, "Tving OSL 2012", accessed 2/2/2013
http://www.esportsearnings.com/events/356/tving_osl_2012

to secure broadcast rights to professional *StarCraft II* competitions. GOMtv established its own

league, the Global *StarCraft II* League (GSL), which quickly established itself as the premier

StarCraft II league in the world. KeSPA-affiliated organizations have since begun a transition to

StarCraft II competition, with the OSL having completed its first *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty*

season, and the Proleague in the midst of its first *StarCraft II* season as of this writing.[12]

Outside of Korea, European and North American professional gaming circuits—

Dreamhack and Major League Gaming, as well as the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM)—picked

StarCraft II as a flagship title, and as a result have drastically internationalized *StarCraft II*

competition. Korean players now regularly compete in these international events around the

world, and, to no one's surprise, have continued their dominance from *Brood War*—though the

skill gap between them and the rest of the world's players is decidedly smaller. This has

resulted in the drastic foregrounding of the Korean-foreigner tension. Though the skill gap

between the two has closed significantly now that the professional scene has transitioned out

of *Brood War*, equality with Korean players is still tantalizingly out of reach.

Global impact

Dedicated fans of *StarCraft*, participating in both competition and spectating, created

online fan sites to share news and discuss strategy, as well as other non-game related content.

Among the foremost of these fan sites is Team Liquid (www.teamliquid.net), originally the

eponymous homepage of the "clan" (a self-formed team of players) Liquid, formed in 2002. The

website eventually changed its focus to coverage of professional *StarCraft* after the competitive

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[12] Jeremy Reimer, "The Dawn of *StarCraft:* e-Sports come to the world stage", accessed 2/2/2013
http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2011/03/the-dawn-of-starcraft-e-sports-come-to-the-world-stage/

team, Liquid, became defunct. In the years since its creation in 2002, the Team Liquid website

has provided, and continues to provide, content ranging from match previews and recaps,

opinion articles and columns, as well as article translations, all user generated. The release of

StarCraft II and the resultant shift in the structure of professional *StarCraft* as a whole also

changed Team Liquid's coverage from primarily Korean *StarCraft: Brood War* competition to

that of international *StarCraft II*.

The demographic of Team Liquid's userbase is characteristic of internet users. According

to an informal census in 2011, the website's users are majority white, overwhelmingly male,

and among the 15 to 28 age range; they are also mostly based in the United States and Western

Europe. What is also notable is the high concentration of Asian-identifying users, both based

within the United States and Europe, as well as in Asia.[13]

Team Liquid acts as a creator and disseminator of narratives within the e-sports

community through the production of its coverage—recaps, previews, and analysis articles of

various tournaments, players, and other personalities in the community, along with translations

of similar works from non-English communities. For example, members of the community with

bilingual ability are either recruited, or voluntarily provide translations of written and video

interviews, which supplement the analysis and general coverage that is not limited by language.

During the period of *Brood War* competition, storylines mainly focused on the players

and institutions of the game. A pantheon of players who had been considered to have achieved

legendary status was eventually developed, with similar consideration given to the

tournaments where their reputations had been built. An example of narratives being

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[13] "TL Census 2011", accessed 2/3/2013 http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=214457

transmitted from Korean communities outward is the creation of *StarCraft*'s dramatis personae, Lim "BoxeR" Yo Hwan, and his career-long rival, Hong "YellOw" Jin Ho. Both had earned their reputations as being the most skilled players of their time, and across generations of players. A name was even coined for their emerging rivalry, the "Lim-Jin Rok" (임진록), or the Annals of Lim Yo Hwan versus Hong Jin Ho, with each additional meeting added to the record. The transition to *StarCraft II* has resulted in a drive for storyline creation, ostensibly to hasten the maturity of the scene. The importance of being able to create a narrative is certainly not lost on the staff of Team Liquid, as evidenced in a recent open call for *StarCraft II* writers: "The ability to recognize and develop narratives is also a must." And later: "Try to tell an interesting story about the tournament and players as a whole, rather than listing the details of several matches."[14] The foregrounding of narrative development is, of course, a result of the fundamental necessity of creating narratives to comprehend experience. But the consequence of this emphasis on narrative creation is that the news writers then become part of a racial project that is tasked with engaging the racial dynamics of *StarCraft.* This alludes to a sobering reality that also foregrounds the relationship of e-sports, media, and globalization: participating in professional *StarCraft* is also to grapple with the Korean-foreigner racial dynamic.

Aside from importing storylines from Korea, staff writers, as well as individual community members create their own content, which tends to focus on statistical and strategic analysis, supported with personal details that can be gleaned from viewing matches and interviews. An example of this is an editorial profiling of player Shin "Leta" Sang Moon, titled

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[14] "TL recruiting SC2 writers", accessed 2/3/13.
http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=392338

"On Fire". Written during a moment of ascendance in Shin's play, the article focuses on his surprising spike in skill, and provides strategic analysis of his playing style. Brief references are made to his status in the Korean community—being a "rookie to watch", and being nicknamed "Miracle Boy"—but nevertheless, the emphasis is on his surprisingly strong results, and the hopes that his streak is not simply a flash in the pan.[15] The emphasis on statistical and strategic analysis and the absence of other kinds of other content that could further bolster the narrative of the profile, such as an interview, demonstrates the barrier that exists between the Western and Korean communities. Coverage of the Korean leagues thus relied heavily on importing Korean narrative devices when possible. When this was not possible, coverage would instead emphasize strategy and statistical data to characterize a player, with personifications made primarily by inference from press interviews and recordings of matches. This tendency is characteristic of the *Brood War* period, in which very few foreign players were able to participate in Korean *StarCraft*.

The transition to *StarCraft II* has, in a sense, erased the narrative history of the *Brood War* period, providing a blank slate upon which the community now finds itself tasked with filling. The narrative memory of the *Brood War* period was immediately separated from the nascent *StarCraft II* scene. The interface of *StarCraft II* was drastically different, being rendered with technology that benefited from ten years' advancements; the players and their teams were unknown; and the institutions did not have the same legitimacy. The GSL did not have the same history that the OSL had—the relationships that had been built during the *Brood War* period were largely erased.

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[15] "On Fire", accessed 2/3/2013. http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=85831

In addition, the near-instant internationalization of the scene resulted in a new hope for foreign (i.e. non-Korean) communities for a more even playing field, where non-Korean players stood a fighting chance against their Korean counterparts. Though the potential certainly existed with a transition to a new game complete with a distinct set of mechanics from its predecessor, this potential by and large did not materialize. Korean players traveled abroad and earned decisive victories; foreign players entered the GSL but again failed to win a championship (despite coming close several times). That is not to say that Koreans completely dominated as they once had; some periods have been marked with several victories by foreign players. The volatility in the skill gap between foreign and Korean *StarCraft* players has drastically foregrounded the racial dynamics of *StarCraft* e-sports.

Concluding remarks

If the problem of globalization is understood as the unilateral, homogenizing flow of Western influences to the East, then the competitive *StarCraft* community faces a unique situation, in that its most skilled players are all based in a country, culture and context that, up until quite recently, remained obscure to most of the Western world. Soon after the game's release, South Korea found itself the home of the most advanced e-sports community in the world—the only place in the world where a "gamer" stood the best chance to turn his or her skills into a stable career. This is not to say that the rest of the world did not try; several abortive attempts to enter Korea's scene occurred throughout the history of *Brood War*, all with little success. The release of *StarCraft II*, however, brought hope for the community ex-Korea for a more even playing field; hopes that were quickly dashed as a succession of Korean players ascended the podiums of *StarCraft II*'s first major tournaments. However, foreigners

have on occasion showed that the massive gap between Korea and the rest of the world that

existed prior to *StarCraft II* has shrunk considerably. This conflict between foreign and Korean

players has come to define professional *StarCraft*, and creates a notable situation in which a

non-Western country has come to occupy the center of a global phenomenon. As mentioned

earlier, this is the result of the convergence of globalization processes and the development of

media technologies. The mediated character of interactions between local individuals and the

global have implications for the re-articulation of racial discourse and our understanding of

globalization. Participants in *StarCraft* use each other's interactions through media (the game)

to understand each other's racial selves. The centrality of Korea is evidence of contra-flow,

which challenges the understanding of globalization as a hegemonic process where Western

institutions and culture come to dominate the rest of the world.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Discussion

The basis of this thesis' theoretical framework comes from two works: Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*. Said's work is useful in providing a historical context with which to approach the Western and Korean actors being observed in this thesis, as well as an analytical framework to approach their interactions. Omi and Winant's work seeks to re-center the American discourse about race back onto race itself, rather than subordinate it to economics or nationalist politics, as other discourses have done. *Racial Formation* provides a framework with which to focus Said's theories towards race, where it had made mostly epistemological assertions derived from literary criticism, and demonstrated their political, economic and social consequences. Following the construction of this framework, I wish to further situate my topic in the context of global flows of culture. Jin Dal Yong, in his work *Korea's Online Gaming Empire*, notes that much of the conversation surrounding globalization begins with a center-periphery model, where a largely unilateral flow of culture originating from the central West floods into the peripheral countries (the rest of the world), acting as a homogenizing force and essentially transforming the world into a global West, devoid of its former diversity. Jin, however, seeks to contribute his analysis of Korea's online gaming industry as counterevidence of this trend—that contra-flows exist, with peripheral products influencing the culture of the center. In addition, I would like to show the intersection of these aspects—race and globalization—with new media technologies. Brett Hutchins argues that e-sports is defined by the unity of sports and media and thus requires a new paradigm for understanding; and that the globalized character new media technologies (such as the internet) result in a virtual transnational space where the local

is now inseparable from the global. The result of this is a new space where racial discourses and identities must be re-articulated. To use the terminology of Omi and Winant, this is a new part of racial formation. In the context of professional *StarCraft*, new racial meanings are now being mediated through racial bodies' interactions through e-sports: Koreans, for example, are now understood primarily through their seemingly unassailable dominance, while the foreigner is understood as the underdog—an amusing, and significant inversion.

Said's argument explains the several meanings of the word "Orientalism". It began as an academic discipline with an explicitly textual attitude—in that its investigation of the Orient was limited to experience with texts about it, rather than with the actual Orient and its inhabitants. The Orientalist's actual experience with the Orient was defined and constricted by his textual approach. Even if an interaction with the Orient contradicted this textual basis, the Orientalist would not change his views; rather, he modified the interaction to fit his views.[16] This flawed approach gained a much more sinister quality when the Western experience of the Orient transitioned into imperialism, from the early nineteenth century to the mid twentieth. Western domination of the majority of the world provided the impetus for Orientalism to become a convergence of academia, arts, and politics. The study of the Orient—that is, the "knowledge" the academic field produced—provided the inspiration for the creation of the Western imagination of it, and the Western basis for its governance of its Oriental colonies. Said explains, "…Orientalism overrode the Orient. As a system of thought about the Orient, it always rose from the specifically human detail to the general transhuman one; an observation about a tenth-century Arab poet multiplied itself into a policy towards (and about) the Oriental

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[16] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 52

mentality in Egypt, Iraq, or Arabia…"[17] The body of knowledge put to work in the imperialist

projects of the era continued its textual, static quality—its representations delved further into

one-dimensional, essentialistic, and often pejorative caricature. Said says,

> "…This is the apogee of Orientalist confidence. No merely asserted generality is denied the dignity of truth; no theoretical list of Oriental attributes is without application to the behavior of Orientals in the real world. On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things."[18]

Changing historical patterns that resulted in a dominant-dominated relationship between two

groups allowed the convergence of flawed scholarly observation, cultural imagination and

political will, which in turn created a situation where such knowledge could be freely created,

imposed as reality and continually reproduced.

Said, more broadly concerned with the problems of knowledge and ideology, did not

focus *Orientalism* specifically on race, though he was highly conscious of the racist aspects of

Orientalism. To foreground race in the Orientalist process, I turn to Michael Omi and Howard

Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* as a framework to evaluate the racial project

embedded in the relationship between Korean and Western *StarCraft* communities. Omi and

Winant offer a set of definitions (and redefinitions) with which to approach race. First, they

define their subject: "Race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and

interests by referring to different types of human bodies." Race and its categories—white and

Asian being my particular concern here—are "created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed"

through the socio-historical process of "racial formation." The process itself is composed of

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[17] Ibid, P 96.
[18] Ibid, p 49

"historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized."[19] These projects gain significance when they are linked to hegemony, in the sense that they help determine how society is organized and ruled.[20] The work of doing these links, or those projects, are defined as "racial projects", which are "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines." Their significance lies in "…connect[ing] what race means in a particular discursive practice [here, Orientalism] and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning." For their definition of racism, Omi and Winant emphasize the fluid nature of the concept of race and its dependence on the socio-historical moment. The meaning of race, then, is dependent on the ongoing racial projects of the time; and therefore, the forms that racism takes on is also subject to the changing socio-historical milieu. Thus, Omi and Winant assert that, in light of this "racism can now be seen as characterizing some, but not all, racial projects." Specifically, "A racial project can be defined as *racist* if and only if it *creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race*…Our definition therefore focuses instead on the 'work' essentialism does for domination and the 'need' domination displays to essentialize the subordinated."[21] This illustrates the inner workings of Orientalism as described by Said—that is, the convergence of the academic, cultural and the political into a sort of ecosystem of domination and the production of knowledge about the Orientalized.

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[19] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 55
[20] Ibid, 56
[21] Ibid, 71

We can now understand Orientalism as a racist racial project—beginning as a racial project of representation, interpretation, and explanation—and then evolving into a such a project where these simultaneous acts became based on, and fixated upon, essentialistic definitions of their subject, represented in various forms of knowledge. The West's establishment of domination over the Orient provided the impetus for Orientalism to gain its racist edge. Its essentialist productions of the subject Orient became linked to the overall Oriental/Occidental, dominated-dominant dichotomy, where white producers of knolwedge are able to create and impose the realities of the Oriental.[22]

Though the examples that Said turned to were largely drawn from the Western colonial experience in the Middle East, this process can certainly be implied in other contexts.   This thesis looks towards two groups—Western and Korean participants in *StarCraft* e-sports communities and situates them in this theoretical framework. Korea, and the members of its *StarCraft* communities, are ostensibly a part of the "Orient", a member of the dominated East. Therefore, they are potentially subject to the Orientalizing process by the dominant West, of which these Western *StarCraft* communities are a part of.

I now would like complicate this initial reading of the classical framework of Orientalism by situating professional *StarCraft* in terms of the global flow of culture and business. Jin Dal Yong provides a survey of globalization studies concerned with the power dynamics behind global cultural flows in his book, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire*. He notes that, on one hand, there is the assertion that "globalization is a continuation of cultural imperialism…the West, and, in particular, the United States, [is considered to be] the center of a process of media-

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[22] The mere fact that such disparate peoples that inhabit Asia could be lumped into one enormous category is a further testament to the essentialist logic of Orientalism.

centric, capitalist cultural influence." On the other hand, however, he observes that "several

scholars dispute whether the global flow is necessarily a one-way flow, while conceding the

predominance of Western media and cultural products in international communication."[23] Jin

cites several examples of local cultures confronting Western inflows: "Japanese animation,

Korean films, and Arabic news have also witnessed a proliferation…emanating from regional

hubs and creative industries."[24]

Speaking directly about the video games industry, Mia Consalvo also points towards the

massive influence of the Japanese gaming industry. She asserts that, given the critical success

and the great demand for Japanese-produced titles, "the flow [of the games industry] does

have a well-marked path for consoles and many major games, and its major direction is east-

west."[25] The production of Japanese titles is marked by a process of business and cultural

hybridization, or "glocalization", in which developers incorporate global and local factors into

their design decisions and processes. Designers contend with decisions about what kind of

graphical representations to use, as well as mechanical issues involved in translating language

and cultural norms, the details of which are passed onto localization teams based in the

market's country. For example, Japanese company Square Enix has international subsidiaries in

Europe and the United States (Square Enix Europe and Square Enix USA) that handle

localization of Square Enix titles, as well as their marketing.[26] The fact that Japanese games

have entered the United States market and have enjoyed critical acclaim and success—

Consalvo also notes that Japanese-made titles have consistently topped retrospective "most

[23]Jin Dal Yong, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010), 125

[24] Ibid, 126

[25] Mia Consalvo, "Console video games and global corporations: Creating a hybrid culture", *New Media & Society* 8 (2006), 133

[26] Jin, p 120

influential" lists[27]—clearly demonstrates that global cultural flows are not the one-way street as many scholars have feared it to be.

While Consalvo uses the Japanese gaming industry as an example, Jin turns to the Korean-produced *Lineage* franchise, which has seen success in and out of Korea. He notes that the production of *Lineage* and its sequel, *Lineage II*, saw similar "glocalization" decisions that have resulted in a hybridized product that contains Western and Korean influences. In addition, the publisher of the *Lineage* franchise, NCSoft, underwent massive expansion following the success of *Lineage I* and *II*, opening subsidiaries in the US and Europe. He argues,

> "The success of the Lineage games lends support to the argument that globalization is not necessarily directed from the West, and that it is instead a multidirectional and multidimensional process. The globalization of local cultures is a dynamic process that needs to be constantly monitored. Unlike other cultural genres, video games, including console and online games, were pioneered and dominated by non-Western companies from the beginning, and this trend will be continued and intensified with the entrance of Chinese online games into the global market."[28]

Despite showing some initial skepticism about the definite presence of "contra-flow" in the online gaming genre, he nevertheless provides a body of evidence through the *Lineage* franchise that paints a more complex (and optimistic!) picture of global flows of culture, where peripheral nations have the growing capacity to influence those in the center.

Absent in these discussions is the significance of media and its connection with both globalization and race. Brett Hutchins, in his analysis of the World Cyber Games (WCG), notes that e-sports constitutes a new phenomenon that requires a new framework for analysis. He asserts that e-sports, despite its similarities to traditional sports, must be understood as a distinct phenomenon. While the relationship between traditional sports and media was

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[27] Ibid, p133
[28] Jin, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire,* p. 140. Kindle Edition.

characterized by structural interrelation, where "respective industries and end-users serve[d]

the other's needs in terms of content, audiences and profit"[29], e-sports is characterized by a

"material integration", where sport and media become inextricably integrated. E-sports cannot

exist without media. In terms of globalization, Hutchins describes e-sports as a part of

> "…internal globalization, whereby local and national experiences are inflected through globalizing processes. The experience of individuals playing games in local contexts and within national societies is structurally bound to the transnational communications networks that support game environments. Indeed, the enormous popularity of digital interactive gaming makes this experience banal. Computer gaming and the WCG symbolize the ontological inseparability of the local and global…"[30]

E-sports understood as sports *as* media means that the arenas where the racial dynamics of

professional *StarCraft* are distinct from those of traditional sports. For example, where

traditional sports might emphasize physical activity, e-sports troubles this definition through its

convergence with media. Human bodies engaging in e-sports are mediatized through their

interaction with computer media, meaning that their success as players depends on their ability

to adopt systems of expression that are predetermined by the media itself. A *StarCraft* player's

excellence is compared and contrasted with a soccer player's in that his ability to compete is

dependent on learning the mechanics of his game. A soccer player must understand the

biomechanics of her physical interaction with the soccer ball—that is, the most efficient

method of kicking a ball to achieve her objective, be it passing or shooting—in order to learn

expertise. A *StarCraft* player must understand the interface of his game; that is, the interaction

of the characters and units within the game (of which there is a mind-boggling level of

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[29] Hutchins, "The growth of e-sport." P 852.
[30] Ibid, P 863

complexity) in order to be competent. Thus, bodies and competition are mediated through the player's interaction with the game.

Thus, e-sports must be understood as a space where individuals, in their own localities, encounter the global on a normative basis. In this context, and specifically, professional *StarCraft*, I argue that e-sports becomes another space where racial formation occurs. Because of the inevitable interaction between different bodies mediated through the game, racial discourses must be articulated and changed, as participants in e-sports engage in racial projects in an attempt to adapt their understandings of contemporary racial discourses in a new context. These new discourses are based upon racial bodies' expressions mediated through the e-sports—that is, how these bodies interact with the game, the players, the tournaments, and its governing bodies—and are put into coherent form through the narratives constructed by such outlets as Team Liquid.

Understood as a phenomenon of contra-flow, professional *StarCraft* gains some urgency as a field of scholarly interest in that it represents a convergence point where contra-flow, globalization processes fueled by new media, and racial discourses all interact with each other. In terms of my research question, the development of contra-flow is particularly significant, in that, it challenges the framework I have attempted to build earlier—it asserts that one of the components of my framework— the Oriental/Occidental, dominated-dominant paradigm that formed such a fundamental aspect of Orientalism may not completely illustrate the situation anymore, and maybe answers part of my initial question already—is it racist? If racism is dependent on a link to domination, then this certainly disrupts an attempt to say yes. Regardless, the other component of my framework remains unanswered—is the character of

the news coverage I have sampled essentialist in quality? And in answering this question, I can begin to make some conclusions about the relationship between the mediated aspect of e-sports and its effect on racial discourses. My attempt to explore this question in suitable detail lies in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Discussion

Data Collection

From the database of Team Liquid's news articles, I chose 446 articles as a data pool to conduct my analysis. The pool was limited to tournaments from 2010 to 2012. Once collected, the data pool was divided into two categories: Korea-based tournaments and International tournaments. This was done with the understanding the characteristics of the coverage in each category would differ with each other, with different narratives being built for each context. An article about a Korean tournament would focus on the storylines specific to that tournament, while an International tournament would be subject to different narratives. Twenty-five articles were then randomly sampled from both pools, for a total of fifty articles. My analysis then focused on any recurrent narratives describing the relationship between foreign and Korean communities, tournaments, and players. In applying my framework, I am able to identify the news coverage as a racial project. However, given the evidence of contra-flow that I discovered through my research, and thus understanding that my initial reading was already challenged, the question of racism was already largely answered, as alluded to before. Thus, my analysis first turns to demonstrating how the data I collected challenges this initial reading of Orientalism, and later in describing how the context of e-sports affects the nature of this racial project.

Before delving into deeper analysis, the nature of the data warrants some commentary. In terms of mere numbers, coverage of Korean tournaments exceeded foreign tournaments by a fair amount (259 to 187). In addition, coverage was often haphazard and incomplete. Often, some sections of a tournament's bracket did not receive any attention, while others received

maximum scrutiny; previews for a tournament were written, but a recap was not to be found. The possible reasons for this are structural, in a sense: Korean tournaments' formats are often spread out over the space of weeks or months, resulting in more games played over a longer period; this makes reportage and analysis easier for the writers. Foreign tournaments are often structured on the "LAN party"[31] format, or a weekend long event in which all stages of the tournament—qualifier, pool play, elimination bracket, and so on—are played out within the space of a weekend. This results in a much larger density of games to analyze, making the task of coverage much more difficult—both for the tournament organizers and those independently observing. Issues of coverage are also exacerbated by the fact that most of the writing staff for Team Liquid are volunteers, and thus cannot afford to focus their time entirely on coverage.

Also, given that Team Liquid's news reporting has historically spent most of its energies covering Korean tournaments, it is reasonable to assert that the emphasis on Korean tournaments evidenced from the data pool is the result of this bias. The reason for this is because of a tacit acknowledgement of the superiority of Korean competition.

In fact, this tacit acknowledgement was discovered to be one of two primary themes, and is evidence of the racial awareness of the news coverage. The second is the trend towards internationalization. This trend can be described as a two-way street: one the one hand, foreigners continue to chase the elusive prize of a Korean tournament championship, while several Korean players have chosen, to pursue international opportunities. Korean-foreign partnerships have, in various forms, become increasingly common. Teams and leagues have

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[31]LAN Party: In the early days of gaming, when internet connections were even less reliable than they are now, gaming communities would favor ad hoc (physical) connections for greater stability, thus requiring players to gather together in one location. Though usually just a gathering of a few friends, in some cases these LAN parties developed into major events, such as DreamHack in Europe.

agreed to various forms of cooperation, sharing players and accommodating them in their new locales, Korea or elsewhere. Non-Korean entities have also taken advantage of the relatively unstable state of *StarCraft II* competition and have provided sponsorships to Korean teams facing financial challenges. Thus, while the interaction between Korea and the rest of the world is decidedly imbalanced in favor of Korea, the release of *StarCraft II* has resulted in a more complex picture than originally thought. However, I argue that this international involvement is simultaneously an acknowledgement of Korea's centrality in professional *StarCraft* and an attempt to recreate the success of Korean e-sports in the West.

"Global Standard: GSL"

The first and most prominent theme is that of Korean players' superiority. Accordingly, their tournaments—specifically, the Global *StarCraft II* League and its team league *StarCraft II* Team League—are the standard by which the rest of the world ought to be judged.[32] This establishes that the newswriting is conscious of the racial dynamics of professional StarCraft, and that the writing is a racial project engaged in interpreting, representing, and explaining these dynamics. This much is made quite explicit in the preview of the North American Starleague (NASL) Grand Finals, the final stage of the tournament. The column from which the following passage is taken is humorously entitled, "I for one welcome our new Korean Overlords":

> "Everyone wants to see the best players play against the best players. Everyone knows that you have to compete against the Koreans to be considered serious, and (up until now -- spoiler alert!) that Korea is the only place to do that. If you wanted to become

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[32] GomTv, the organizers of the GSL, have been well aware of this, and have included it in the GSL's branding—see Appendix C.3.

great, you had to make the trip to Korea, the promised land, and see if you had what it takes."[33]

Even with the bevvy of international tournaments picking up *StarCraft II* as their flagship

game—IEM, MLG, Dreamhack, NASL (which was originally founded as a *StarCraft II* league), and

so on—questions would continually linger after a tournament in which Koreans were absent, as

they did after the Battle.net World Championship Series European Finals, in which Frenchman

Ilyes "Stephano" Satouri claimed victory:

> While WCS Europe is perhaps the biggest event Stephano has won so far, in pure StarCrafting terms, DreamHack Valencia is a much more interesting tournament…you can't deny that from a pure competitive standpoint, any tournament is spoiled by a lack of Korean players…Nor can you forget that Stephano's greatest validation as a StarCraft II player came at NASL Season 3, where he beat MC, HerO, and Alicia [all high-level Korean players] to take the championship… Sure, WCS Europe was the feel good story of the summer, and the level of play was high enough (especially in the later rounds) that people could optimistically hope that the Korean hegemony might end in Shanghai. But it was still an experiment performed in a vacuum, and Valencia could end up being a bitter reality check."[34]

Korea is interpreted as a mishmash of symbols—some parts Mecca, others Valhalla, where the

best of the best compete with each other for the greatest glory a player can earn in *StarCraft.* A

racial dynamic is clearly articulated through these passages, with Koreans occupying a

dominant position.

Representations of Korean players begin with a focus on their role as a player, and build

upon that foundation. Their qualities as players are described as having indomitable skill, both

in terms of mechanical training and strategic knowledge. This demonstrates that the racial

divide between Korean and foreign players are defined in terms of their ability to interface with

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[33] "[NASL] Grand Finals Preview/Playoffs Recap", accessed 2/6/2013
http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=241269
[34] "Seven Stories for DreamHack Valencia", accessed 2/6/2013
http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=370579

the game, revealing the influence of the mediatized nature of e-sports in articulating racial

discourses. Korean players, of course, are not all equally excellent; there is most certainly

stratification among Koreans' skill levels and understanding of their trade. However, when

compared to foreign players, the Korean player is given the advantage. In a preview of the

tournament DreamHack Summer (2011), Jang "Moon" Jae Ho is given particular attention:

> "Group E features the return of Liquid'HuK to international competition. The Canadian
> protoss is the only remaining foreigner in Code S [of the GSL], but has a relatively
> underwhelming several months since he went through Code A…The closest competitor
> is FOX.Moon [Jang], who has been disappointing in Korean competition, but has been
> owning white dudes at every opportunity."[35]

The "owning white dudes" comment is particularly amusing and requires some context. Jang

had previously earned second place at another international tournament, the IEM World

Championships; in an interview after the tournament (in which Korean players had placed in all

podium spots, first through third), he explained the results by joking, "Koreans own white

dudes."[36] The decision to entitle the tournament recap with that exact quote is telling of the

self-awareness among foreign players of their inability to consistently overcome their Korean

counterparts.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the statement made by staff writer "motbob",

who modifies the quotation: "But it would be more accurate to say that *Korean training owns*

white dudes." This is a fairly direct attempt to deflect the explicitly racial tone that the article

had taken on. The motivations for this are fairly obvious, as the boogeyman quality of any sort

of racial discussion has felled far more prominent figures than a writer for a professional

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[35] "[DreamHack] Summer 2011 Preview", accessed 2/6/2013:
http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=234538
[36] "[IEM] 'Koreans own white dudes.' " http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=200818

gaming community website. However, this stands as an example of an attempt to explain the

structural dynamics of Korean domination: it is most certainly their training regimen that has

resulted in their success, and therefore success must hinge on emulating the Korean model

(Several organizations have attempted to do exactly this, though with mixed success; I will

elaborate on this later).

Deeper characterizations of Korean players were more difficult to discern from the

sample. I prefer to assert that this is not so much because of any willful ignorance of Koreans

or the Korean context, but rather because of the language barriers that prevent the foreign

community at large from discerning him better. For this reason, community members with

translation skills are given special recognition for their ability to contribute translations of

Korean-language media that could offer deeper insight into Korean players (Appendix C.1). This

is not to say that if the language barrier were to fall, that racial understandings of Asian players

would simply fall away. Various attempts to account for the often unassailable Korean

dominance of *StarCraft* often focus on their superior discipline and hardworking qualities; these

characteristics exist alongside the easily observable modesty and general shyness under the

spotlight that Korean professionals often exhibit—characteristics that do not require language

translators. This combination results in characterizations that are highly reminiscent of the

Asian American "Model Minority" stereotype. There is some self-awareness among the writing

staff, however, to avoid devolving into essentialist, stereotypical portrayals of Korean players.

The following two passages are examples of this balancing act.

In the preview to the GSL Season 4 Finals (2012), writing staff editor "Waxanagel" builds an extensive narrative of one competitor, Jung "MVP" Jong Hyun, who has the distinction of being the most successful *StarCraft II* player to date.

> "…Maybe it's because no one really likes perfection. It's not that people can never empathize with a nearly flawless, almost robotic player (hello, Flash). But for them to do so, the player has to at least show a human side outside the game. In Mvp's case, he was modest and reserved to a fault. His matter-of-fact way of saying things would have been seen as haughty and overconfident coming from a player with actual flaws (and in a good way!), but with Mvp's ability to back up everything he said with results, it just seemed like he was stating the facts when he proclaimed a victory. Somehow, interest in cash can make other players endearing, while Mvp's frank admittance that he switched to SC2 for the money made him a less compelling character.
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> While Mvp's attitude hasn't really changed that much, he's been forcefully humanized by outside events. Heck, they've done more than humanize him, they've made him the lead role in a Hollywood sports movie. Once a champion on top of the world, Mvp was crippled by injury (his famous wrist problems) and plummeted rapidly before nearly hitting rock bottom (dropping out of MLG Winter Arena and Code S Season One early). Yet, the old champion found a way to overcome his physical limitations, and used his veteran savvy to defeat the brash, young stars who foolishly thought his time had passed (Code S Season Two). You couldn't have scripted it better."

"Waxangel's" comment on Korean player Lee "Flash" Young Ho stands out as echoing parts of the Model Minority. Lee is unequivocally the most successful *Brood War* player in the world, having dominated the Korean circuits prior to the release of *StarCraft II*. The above characterization of his playstyle during the peak of his *Brood War* career is not exceptional. In fact, emphases on the mechanical strength of Korean players—and by proxy the amount of disciplined effort required to learn such skills—are a common explanation for their excellence. Players like Lee—those that occupy the top of the upper echelon of *StarCraft* players— challenge this kind of one-dimensional characterization, however. Their excellence is the result of a combination of their mechanical strengths and their often shockingly deep understanding

of the game, an excellence that must be acknowledged. Lee's dominance in *Brood War* was the

result of this synthesis of strategic innovation and mechanical strength.

The article builds upon Jung as player and seeks to add relevant details about Jung as

person, most clearly through the comical use of the "Hollywood movie" as an analogy for his

career (the humor of using such an analogy to describe a subject while already engaged in

building a narrative of that subject notwithstanding).

The second example is the preview to the Homestory Cup IV (2012). Staff editor

"Waxangel" again offers his thoughts in closing the article, saying:

> "If any tournament in the world can dispel the stereotype of the faceless, wordless,
> Korean prize-hunter, it's HomeStory Cup. No other tournament focuses on the
> personality of the players quite like HSC, and they'll be aware of the reputation those
> Korean pros bring. Though it could be tough to get them to cast games (Korean racial
> attribute: passive -50 in English confidence)[37], we might see some of their genuine
> character yet. Not everyone has it in them to be an MC, but there are real personalities
> inside them that the world would love to get to know. If they can do that, and win over
> our hearts, then maybe that will be the true victory."[38]

The Homestory Cup is distinctive for its self-conception as a *StarCraft* tournament. While the

other major tournaments focus on a high level of professionalism (that is, seriousness) in their

production, the Homestory Cup is presented as a casual LAN party, intended to showcase the

personalities of the competitors in addition to their skills. Competitors share the organizer's flat

as a gaming and living space. Their antics, as well as their tournament games, are broadcast to

audiences. That "Waxangel" explicitly engages the racial dynamics of *StarCraft* in as sensitive a

manner as he does is a startling show of self-consciousness. This shows a sensitivity to the

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[37]"Racial attribute" is a gaming reference, given some added significance here. In the Blizzard title *World of WarCraft*, which features a number of "races" in alliance and conflict with each other, each race is given a unique "racial attribute" that affects its gameplay.
[38] "Homestory Cup IV – Preview", accessed 2/6/2013
http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=300424

tenuous line that the writers must tread along—how to engage in this very racial project, of explaining the dynamics between the white and Korean players that are their subjects, without devolving into one-dimensional representations.

Thus, the representations of Korean players demonstrates a curious complexity that undermines the classical Orientalist understanding of the White Western Self and the Oriental Other. There appears to be a conscious attempt to deflect the racial dynamics of the game ("motbob's" emphasis on "superior Korean training), and yet there is a heightened sensitivity to it, demonstrated in Waxangel's comment. Where could these contrasting attitudes come from?

In order to explain this complexity, I turn back to *Racial Formation*, which provides some historical background for contemporary racial dynamics in the United States, where the racial "common sense" is defined by what they call the "ethnicity paradigm." The ethnicity paradigm is articulated as a conservative egalitarianism, defined by the "equality of potential", where all members of society start with the same resources, and through individual competition determine their socio-economic outcome.[39] Thus, racial "common sense" turned to that of a "color-blind" society, where race is a non-essential factor, and the individual exists in a vacuum, outside of influences from others. In fact, racial awareness in the form of affirmative action policies itself became taboo, being rearticulated in terms of "preferential treatment", or a sort of "reverse discrimination" against whites.[40] Looking back at "motbob's" comment, we can certainly see strains of colorblindness present in his attempt to deflect the racial lines made so explicit by Jang's joke. However, in the context of a *sport*, which predicates its existence on

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[39] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*. P 20
[40] Ibid, p 117

competition—much different from the dynamics of the state and society—this can also be seen

as an attempt to deflect the potential to essentialize Korean players—to deny that they might

have some sort of primordial quality that makes them excel at *StarCraft*, and instead appeal to

other differences that could account for their excellence, which he does by pointing out the

team house model that Korean teams use to develop their players.

In light of the colorblind paradigm explained in the above paragraph, "Waxangel's"

closing comment in his preview of the Homestory Cup IV is quite startling in its frank appraisal

of the racial dynamics of professional *StarCraft*. One possible factor behind this sensitivity that

is, honestly, quite lethal to my analysis is the possibility that the staff writers are not actually all

white. This thesis did not attempt to discern the identities of the writers themselves. As

mentioned before, the userbase of Team Liquid has a large Asian identifying percentage,

though not a majority by any means. The presence of the Asian diaspora provides some

possibilities: first, that interactions with members of the diaspora—Asian Americans, or Asian

Europeans, in this context—might have instilled some cosmopolitan, and racially sensitive

values in the white staff. What is more likely is that some of the staff members themselves are

members of the diaspora, and bring their own subjectivity as such into their coverage.

In sampling the news coverage of Team Liquid, I have demonstrated that it is certainly a

racial project in that it is involved in interpreting, representing, and explaining the racial

dynamics of professional *StarCraft*. However, in analyzing these interpretations,

representations, and explanations, I have encountered some startling complexity. Thus, in

response to the first component of my framework—"are the representations Orientalist-racist

in quality?" the frank answer has to be no.

Professional *StarCraft* as contra-flow

Extending from the primary narrative of Korean superiority is the "foreigner's hope," a sort of collective expression of hope that foreign players could be considered equal to their Korean counterparts. Where the previous section was an engagement with the racial dynamics of professional *StarCraft*, the foreigner's hope directs can be read as an attempt to direct the energies of foreign communities towards solving the Korean-foreign divide. Nowhere is this theme made more prominent than in the early seasons of the GSL. A brief overview of my data pool shows that eleven "foreigner special" articles were written to exclusively cover the results and standings of non-Korean players, giving in-depth recaps of the games played and interviews with the foreigner in question. Here I refer back to "motbob's" reference to the perceived superiority of Korean training. The observation that the team house model could be the reason behind Korean players' success resulted in several attempts to replicate that model by foreign teams, though with mixed results.

The team house model is an interesting point in the development of professional *StarCraft* in that it was an exclusively Korean phenomenon; its appearance in the West only began when foreign entities, convinced that such a model was crucial to Korean players' success, began to implement it for their own players. Looking to other traditional sports for comparison also draws a blank—such an institution does not have a direct counterpart. In sports such as American football and basketball, players live separately from each other and travel to their training facility; by contrast, team houses encompass both training and living facilities, providing an intimate space where players live quite literally according to the "eat, sleep, play *StarCraft*" maxim. In this regard, we can see this as a part, and the result of the

racial project—Korean players' success was interpreted and explained as a result of their superior training model. The decision to recreate this decidedly Korean model in the Western context also supports the argument for contra-flow, mentioned in Chapter 2. Jin and Consalvo provide evidence of contra-flow through the video games industry, as well as more broadly through other forms, such as film and news media. I argue that professional *StarCraft* is another example of contra-flow, with Westerners seeking to replicate the success of Korean e-sports in their own locales. T. L. Taylor notes in that "The story of South Korea holds an interesting place in North American and European pro gaming because it is regularly held up as a model for the future of e-sports worldwide. It works as evocative fantasy. The refrain around it often seems to be 'if they can do it there, we can do it here!'"[41]

Though KeSPA, the Korean e-Sports Association has provided a definition of e-sports on their website,[42] for the purposes of this argument, I propose a different one that emphasizes the interactions and activities between the different entities involved in e-sports. "E-sports" is the consummate activity of the players engaging in competition through digital games, the institutions that organize these competitions, and the governing bodies that manage these activities. Thus, the trend of internationalization, as noted in the previous section, can be cited

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[41] T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2012), 18

[42] A two-part definition:
"- Abbreviation for 'Electronic Sports'.
 - This is a term meaning a leisure activity done in a [sic] electronic virtual world, utilizing the spiritual and physical abilities to determine the win or loss. This includes the at the place audience[sic] and broadcasting of competitions and matches. All the community activities and the cyber culture as a whole is[sic] included in e-Sports activities."
"Korean e-Sports Association", accessed 3/12/2013, http://www.e-sports.or.kr/
[the coding of the website is atypical, as the URL here does not directly link to the page mentioned. I originally accessed English version of the "e-Sports INTRO" section, visible in the header navigation bar.]

as evidence of Westward contra-flow: Western players and organizations are attempting to import Korean e-sports into their own locales.

That non-Koreans were interested in playing professional *StarCraft* in Korea is taken for granted at this point. The initial reaction to the development of e-sports in Korea was to travel there. Documentation of the early days of foreign involvement in Korea is few and far between, though a general narrative and some noteworthy personalities have emerged. Several foreign players did make the trip to Korea to attempt to establish a stable career as professional gamers, with some being invited to join an all-foreigner team, Hexatron, complete with a Korean-style team house. This venture eventually failed, and the players involved left professional gaming. Of these, however, Guillame "Grrr…" Patry, was the only one to achieve a major tournament win, earning a first place finish in the Ongamenet Starleague (OSL). In general, foreign efforts to break into Korean *StarCraft* prior to the release of *StarCraft II* were abortive attempts, generally ending in the foreign player's return home.

With the release of *StarCraft II,* however, foreign players no longer had to leave for Korea to participate in e-sports, as the Western e-sports began developing its own tournaments. The North American Starleague (NASL) is one example of an attempt to adapt the success of Korean e-sports in North America. However, the NASL would choose to make the tournament international—that is, open to Koreans, and those based outside of North America. This move is particularly interesting because of its acknowledgement of the importance of Korean players to the competitive legitimacy of the tournament—that simply establishing a league is not enough, even Korean players are needed to reproduce e-sports in the West. As a result the majority of the league was played online, with only the final bracket stage (the

"Grand Finals") being played in a physical, LAN setting. The introduction of the league itself

garnered rabid enthusiasm from the foreign community. In the aftermath of the LAN finals,

which was plagued by production errors, writer shindigs reflects,

> "The event demonstrated what made ESPORTS a reality in the west…what we really want is to create the best possible experience for players and fans alike - players receiving the appreciation and support they deserve for their tireless effort, and fans awarded a viewing experience commensurate to their fervor."[43]

Here, he expresses the same general sentiment of the western participant in e-Sports—of

making the e-sports they had seen in Korea a reality for them. In this example, it is through the

creation of leagues for foreign players to compete in, considered a landmark achievement for

Western e-sports.

Partnerships between foreign and Korean teams are also an attempt to grow

competitive gaming in the west—with the interesting caveat of StarCraft II's more tenuous

position in Korea providing an opening for foreign investors to establish a position within

Korean e-sports. Perhaps the most notable developments are the creations of two Korea-based,

but foreign-sponsored teams, FXOpen: Korea and AZUBU. FXOpen Korea, as mentioned before,

was formed following the acquisition of sponsorless For Our Utopia (abbreviated fOu). AZUBU,

a Germany-based media company, meanwhile acquired various free agents before establishing

a physical presence in Korea. Their entrance into the e-Sports Federation (a counterpart to

KeSPA for teams formed around *StarCraft II*) and participation in the Global *StarCraft II* Team

League follows FXOpen Korea as the second team composed of Korean management and

players but supported by a foreign backer. Many other partnerships between teams are also

evidence of this trend. Generally, foreign organizations have approached Korean teams with

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[43]"[NASL] The Verdict", accessed 4/2/2013, http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=245513

the promise of mutual support. The foreign team could offer support if Korean players were to

compete overseas, while foreign players could potentially receive similar help if they were to

travel with Korea. In other cases, partnerships could provide both teams with a combined

roster (though this typically would only benefit the foreign team).

It is my assertion that these examples of the various attempts to reproduce Korean e-

sports support the argument for contra-flow and complicates the Orientalist model of the West

as dominant and the East as dominated. With this foundation therefore disrupted, it becomes

difficult for me to evaluate the news coverage of Team Liquid as racist, as so defined in my

framework. Within that content lies several different voices, with each voice articulating

different discourses of race. These discourses are influenced by the mediated nature of the

sport, an extension I have made from Hutchins' observation of e-sports as a structural

unification between sport and media. In conclusion, this analysis renders my theoretical

framework as inadequate and suggests that further investigation in globalization studies and

perhaps a closer ethnography of Team Liquid, along with other website covering professional

StarCraft would be beneficial in developing a better understanding.

Conclusion

Where I am now

What began as a whimsical decision to take a scholarly approach to my hobby erupted into a monstrous project that somehow managed to encompass race, globalization and hegemony, and media theories. Although I initially began with one simple question—is the news coverage of Team Liquid racist?—my theoretical approach, based on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, resulted in multiple other questions rearing their heads, demanding to be answered. Considering that Korea is the center of the professional *StarCraft* universe, what kind of implications does this imbalanced relationship have for globalization? What kind of relationship does e-sports, or sports *as* media, have with these questions? Despite my initial panic, I somehow managed to approach each of these questions.

In Chapter 1, I provided some historical context for the development of *StarCraft* and the e-sports that developed through it. Originating from an American developer, *StarCraft* found its way to South Korea, which at the time was struggling with the Asian Financial Crisis. The resultant push by the Korean government to restructure the economy to focus on service and information technologies, combined with the large amounts of unemployed youth, provided the impetus for the remarkable success of Korean e-sports. This success already points towards the confluence of sport and media technology—the rapid penetration of the Internet in Korea at the time of *StarCraft*'s release provided the infrastructural basis for the game's success. The competitive multiplayer aspect of the game demonstrates Hutchins' assertion of the "ontological inseparability of the local and global" in the globalized era. *StarCraft*'s multiplayer allowed for global competition. Korean players' developing skills could not occur in

a vacuum; the rest of the world became increasingly aware of their developing superiority. The

result was the creation of a curious case where Korea became the center of the niche universe

of e-sports; the rest of the world could only watch and hope for a chance to match Korea's

success. That hope would be partially fulfilled by the release of *StarCraft II*, which was quickly

picked up as a competitive title in a number of foreign tournament circuits. The Korean-

foreigner divide, which had grown relatively latent in the latter years of the *Brood War* period,

was shot back into the foreground as a result. The racial dynamics of *StarCraft* were now at the

forefront.

In chapter 2, I described my attempts at approaching the racial realities of professional

StarCraft. Edward Said's *Orientalism* provided a relevant basis to approach the East-West

dichotomy; Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* provided a

framework to understand the Orientalist process in terms of race. And so my first question

became, is the news coverage of Team Liquid Orientalist? This question was complicated by

the research that I had done for e-sports, specifically in Jin Dal Yong's *Korea's Online Gaming

Empire*, which introduced the concept of contra-flow as a challenge to the classical Orientalist

East/West dichotomy. If the basis of Orientalism, the imbalance of power dynamics between

two groups, was disrupted as such, then my question was already partially answered—no, the

news coverage was not Orientalist; having lost a part of its premise, it actually could not be.

The matter of representations, however, was still left unanswered; and a deeper discussion of

e-sports as contra-flow was still required.

Thus, chapter 3. In analyzing my data, I was able to definitely assert that while the news

coverage of Team Liquid is not *racist*, it is certainly a racial project, in that it engages directly

with the racial dynamics present in professional *StarCraft*; and that the product of this

engagement is knowledge that helps inform how players approach the game. However, the

representations of Korean players in the news coverage was overall characterized by depth and

complexity, which I understood as reflecting the complexity of racial discourse within America.

So there was no definite essentialism, then. What about Western hegemony? I found that the

internationalization of professional *StarCraft* after *StarCraft II*'s release had an impetus that was

based in a desire to recreate Korean e-sports in the West. This was evidence of a peripheral

nation influencing the center, thus supporting the case of contra-flow. Thus, Western

hegemony was absent in this specific context, and being undermined in the larger context of

globalization. So if those things weren't there, what did I find? I found that the players'

representations by the news coverage foregrounded their mediated selves—that is, the players

were first characterized as players of the game, and the rest of their persons were built around

that foundation. Understandings of Korean players begin by understanding them through their

interaction with e-sports (as I defined in Chapter 3). Thus, the process of racial formation was

directly influenced by e-sports.

I believe this thesis highlights the importance of online game and media studies by

foregrounding how the rapid development of new media technologies have drastically unified

the local and the global, and perhaps more significantly, have made this development *normal*. I

bring up a personal anecdote to illustrate this point. I once played the online game *Guild Wars*

(NCSoft, 2005) a significant amount, and through my in-game play developed friendships with

German and British players. Though there was certainly novelty in interacting at an

international level, the fact that the online nature of the game provided me with the capacity to

interact outside of my physical locale was nothing remarkable to me. The experience was, as

Hutchins notes in an earlier quotation, "banal", and something I expected from any online

game. And given the normality of this experience, these interactions also gain added

significance when Western players interact with their Others, and are thus tasked with the

project of re-articulating their understandings of them in this new context.

Appendices

Appendix A: Major Tournaments by Region
North America:
Major League Gaming (MLG)
North American Starleague (NASL)

Europe:
Dreamhack
Intel Extreme Masters (IEM)*

Though the organizers of IEM, the Electronic Sports League (ESL) is based in Europe, the IEM circuit is global. The locations for each season's set of tournaments take place in different locations throughout the world; for example, the locations of Season VI were Cologne, Germany; Guangzhou, China; New York, USA; Kiev, the Ukraine; Sao Paolo, Brazil; and Hanover, Germany.

Korea:
Global *StarCraft II* League (GSL)
Global *StarCraft II* Team League (GSTL)

Appendix B: Example Articles
Korean league:
http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=372829

International league:
http://www.teamliquid.net/forum/viewmessage.php?topic_id=376722

Appendix C: Images

C.1: Translator's icon. The overlapping speech bubbles are present next to the username of the translator, denoting that user's bilingualism.

Translators translate Korean and Chinese texts from articles, interviews, and sometimes videos, to English.

C.2: Announcement thread for the first season of NASL, with a forum moderator's bulletin posted above: "Before you post, read the title of this thread slowly and out loud," a request for the users of Team Liquid to remember the significance of the NASL as a premier *StarCraft II* tournament, on a similar scale and level of prestige as the GSL, albeit *on United States soil*.

C.3: The Global *StarCraft II* League branding itself as "Global Standard"—taken from a 2012 broadcast

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