Politicising digital labour through the politics of body

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Abstract

By analysing the recent emerging labour movement of Korean digital game workers, this article seeks to explore a relatively novel issue – the importance of a politics of body in digital labour. By employing Elaine Scarry's concept of 'language of agency' and 'analogical substantiation', the article first investigates how digital game workers express their work experiences and their embodied pain by analysing the mechanism of 'crunch' practice. Second, by examining 'karoshi (overwork to death)' and a series of suicides of digital game workers in Korea, it seeks to explore the problem of death as the final form of bodily pain – focusing on how these death events led workers to develop new forms of politics and solidarity by organising labour unions. Finally, by analysing the newly established digital game worker unions' opposition to the violation of worktime regulation as a 'struggle for recognition', this research illuminates how digital game workers not only acquire self-respect but also achieve social recognition for their bodies as working labour. By examining this labour union organisation practice in Korea, the study ultimately argues that recognising the politics of body in digital labour offers the possibility that an emerging social category of precariat can actually co-exist and connect with the existing social class of proletariat.

JEL Codes: J50, J81, L86

Keywords
Digital game production, digital labour, digital labour union, immaterial labour, karoshi, precariat, struggle for recognition, work injury

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Introduction: Digital labour and the politics of body

Defining digital labour is a puzzling and confusing task at best. The concept of 'digital labour' was originally built into analyses using Marx's labour theory of value, aimed at exposing the hidden exploitation of the unpaid leisure activities of Internet users within the digital economy (Gandini, 2021). A series of articles in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* edited by Scholtz (2013) represents this research trend. Critically overviewing the historical development of the expression 'digital labor', Gandini (2021) argues that the original perspective has become less prominent as its usage has been extended to 'a much wider set of phenomena that concern the broader relationship between labor and digital technology' – from the unpaid activity of online users to emerging forms of paid 'platform labors' (Gandini, 2021: 370). In fact, the term has not only been associated with inseparable 'dimensions' of 'digital' and 'labor' (Gandini, 2021: 369) but is also inter-linked with similar yet different theoretical concepts, including cognitive labour (Berardi, 2009), immaterial labour (Bulut, 2020; Lazzarato, 1996) and creative labour (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011).

To more fully understand the various dimensions of human labour processes involved in the production and consumption of digital media, Fuchs (2014: 4) suggests analysing and theorising interrelated circuits of digital work. To briefly glimpse each of the different forms of digital labour and their related studies, these include (1) the extraction of minerals for digital device production in African mines based on a pre-modern slavery system (Maxwell and Miller, 2012), (2) ICT (Information and Communication Technology) manufacturing and assemblage like the Foxconn factory under the Taylorist labour control in China (Qiu, 2016), (3) software engineering labour and (4) call centre service work based on offshoring and outsourcing practices in India (Xiang, 2007), (5) software engineering in the Global North, represented by ICT workers in Silicon Valley (Neff et al., 2005), and (6) the digital labour of Internet prosumers/users (Fuchs, 2014). The important conclusion we can draw from reflecting on these interrelated circuits and multiple forms of digital labour is that the current digital economy encompasses more than flexible post-Fordist forms of labour control. Rather, it exposes the hard truth that Taylorist labour control regimes and pre-modern slavery systems *actually co-exist* with post-Fordist forms of more flexible labour control – and are even essential to sustain the global digital economy.

Therefore, it is evident that current scholarship on digital labour, focussing on labour processes, workplace politics and experiences of software developers and Internet prosumers in the Global North, covers only part of the real picture of the global division of digital labour involved in production and consumption of digital media. By conceptualising these workers as a 'precariat', studies based on Western digital workers tend to emphasise immaterial, cognitive and mental dimensions of labour to explore the creation of new labour subjectivities and sociality (i.e. Bulut, 2020; Lazzarato, 1996). But as Gill and Pratt (2008) rightly warn us, the research so strongly stresses immateriality that it neglects the existence of 'the all-too-material dimension to this labour' (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 9). The reality is that 'even zeros and ones that make up the Internet's codes have to be written, and entered, by someone, somewhere' (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 9).

It is worth noting that over-emphasis on the mental (or cognitive, immaterial, creative) dimension of digital labour unintentionally (or intentionally) presupposes the binary oppositional dichotomy between mind/body, mental/material and creative/manual. Furthermore, the inattention to the politics of body might not only promote social perception of a hierarchical dichotomy between mental and physical labour, but also possibly ignite a political divide between the traditionally existing class of *proletariats* and the newly emerging category of *precariats*. Emphasising digital labour as immaterial, cognitive and creative assumes that the traditional proletariat is an agent of physical (or material) labour, while the precariat is the agent of mental (or immaterial) labour. Even though the various interrelated circuits of digital labour presented by Fuchs (2014) show that global division of digital labour contains both the traditional *proletariats* and the emerging *precariats*, this dualistic separation implies an intellectual inequality between them, making it difficult to conceive a social solidarity – due to different socio-economic characteristics and interests. Simply put, digital labour is seen as only production of immaterial products (e.g. software codes), thus engaging only cognitive or creative power.

Nonetheless, a number of researchers indicate that the main motivation for digital labour is related to emotional and affective pleasure, such as 'fun' (Bulut, 2020) and a 'sense of creativity' (Kim and Lee, 2020) in the work. Yet they also expose how emotional and affective pleasure can be degraded and transformed into pain under harsh labour conditions (Bulut, 2020; Kim and Lee, 2020). Here, the contradictory co-existence of emotional pleasure as well as pain is neither a purely mental experience nor totally separate from the digital worker's body. That is, human cognition and creative ability are not expressed using mental power alone – they occur through use of one's body. If we do not seriously consider the importance of the politics of body in this labour, it is difficult to understand how the key motivations for these workers – including emotional pleasure, self-realisation and creativity – are quickly disrupted and finally become bodily and mental pain. In fact, a number of studies report (Bulut, 2020; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Kim and Lee, 2020) that even digital labour in the ICT industry in the Global North is also known for notoriously long working hours (such as the 24/7 work culture in Silicon Valley and the crunch culture in Korea's digital game industry and elsewhere), presenting not only psychological pressures but also physical suffering brought on by the constant energy required to handle increasing labour precarity. These practices are directly related to the control of digital workers' bodies. Thus, it is an urgent necessity to accurately shed light on the types of control existing in digital labour – not only over one's soul (Berardi, 2009) but also over one's body.

To overcome this binary oppositional dichotomy between body/mind, mental/material and creative/manual in digital labour studies, and following the perspective of the sociology of body, we argue that it is critical to explore what in digital labour '*is done to the body*' (Crossley, 1995: 46) of workers. We assume here that 'mind (mental or soul) is not a separated substance from the body' (Crossley, 1995: 46). Shedding light on work experiences in the contemporary digital economy requires identifying the complex ways that labour controls processes through the 'mental-bodily-emotional' dimensions altogether. Furthermore, we suggest considering the politics of body in digital labour as an exemplary site of '*sensus communis* (common sense)' to invent social solidarity between the traditional proletariat class and the emerging precariat.

In doing so, we scrutinise the politics of the body in the experiences of digital game workers in Korea. When applied to the labour typology suggested by Fuchs (2014), the labour of Korea's game industry can be characterised as a complex compilation of the Silicon Valley type, the Indian subcontractor type and the customer service (CS) type. First, it is closest to the Silicon Valley model in that there are many Korean companies that produce and distribute games to the global market on their own, with excellent human resources, technology, capital and platforms. Second, however, there are small companies in charge of various subcontracting orders within the Korean game industry, and these are making profit by fulfilling orders from large companies and publishers or through services related to software other than games (Korea Creative Content Agency (KCCA), 2020). In that respect, labour in the Korean game industry shares similar characteristics to Indian IT labour. Finally, there are emotional/creative workers in charge of CS management, freelance illustrators or graphic designers having more vulnerable working conditions. Since these tasks are mainly handled by young women, it can be said that they reflect the hierarchical structure of gendered labour. Our research subjects include all three types of workers, who engage in various digital game production processes – including both above the line workers, such as producers, designers, programmers and artists, and below the line workers, such as quality assistant (QA) and CS staffs in locations ranging from big firms to indie sectors. Within media studies, digital game labour – a particularly mental, immaterial, or creative occupation – has been highlighted as a paradigmatic example epitomising 'conditions and transformation of labour under digital capitalism' (de Peuter and Young, 2019: 747). However, since there is scant research exploring how digital game production actually impacts the bodies of its workers, this study offers a meaningful perspective in understanding the ignored material characteristics of digital labour.

Approaching pain in digital labour: The concept of 'language of agency'

To more closely observe and analyse the bodily pain in digital game labour process, we pay particular attention to the concepts of 'language of agency' and 'analogical substantiation' developed by Elaine Scarry. Scarry (1983: 5) argues that bodily pain resists 'objectification in our language' because it lacks 'referential content' and has no object. Scarry (1983) explains that wounded soldiers need the image of weapons to talk about pain in a war. This is not because that pain can be understood *within* the image of a weapon, but because the pain can hardly be understood *without* that image (Scarry, 1983: 16). Because of the inexpressibility of bodily pain, she argues that it needs to be expressed through a certain 'language of agency' – expressions like a 'hammering' pain or a 'nail sticking' pain – which functions as a kind of 'agency' to 'externalise, objectify and make sharable' our internal and un-sharable bodily pains (Scarry, 1983: 15). Furthermore, she suggests 'analogical substantiation' as the social process of our belief (or idea, ideology or cultural construct), considered non-visible, being faced with a crisis – just like the existence of horrors in war, which are considered invisible, can be vividly revealed through seeing a tortured body (Scarry, 1987: 14).

In reality, if we know little about the pains and sufferings caused by this type of labour, or if we falsely believe that bodily pain is not a significant consequence of it, isn't that because we have not *attentively* heard enough about what 'language of agency' these workers bring to 'substantiate' their embodied pain? Therefore, we will attempt to investigate the politics of body relating to digital labour through three different avenues. First, we will examine the 'language of agency' workers use to express their work experiences and their embodied pain by analysing the mechanism of 'crunch' practice. Second, by examining the case of 'karoshi (to work oneself to death)' and a series of suicides of digital game workers in Korea, we seek to explore the problem of death as the final form of bodily pain – focussing on how these death events become 'analogical substantiation', leading workers to develop new forms of politics and solidarity. Finally, by analysing the digital game workers' opposition to the violation of worktime regulations as a 'struggle for recognition' (Honneth, 1996) rather than simply a 'struggle for distribution', this research will illuminate how digital game workers not only acquire self-respect but also achieve social recognition for their bodies as 'working labour'.

Within this research scheme, the data for the study are extracted from two different sets of in-depth interviews. To begin, we re-used earlier (Kim and Lee, 2020) interview data with 22 digital game workers including six game designers, five artists, seven programmers, two project directors, one QA and one CS staff in different-sized digital game companies. Since these data focus on more general labour conditions and processes, we restructured the written-interview questions to focus on concrete work experiences – including work cycles and patterns, body/health conditions, frequency and experience of crunch mode in terms of emotional, physical and mental impacts, opinions about the nature of their work (its emotional, physical and mental characteristics) and thoughts and experiences relating to karoshi. Based on these written questions, 23 digital game workers – 8 game designers, 3 programmers, 11 artists and 1 sound designer – were recruited. The size of companies represented by these workers was distributed among 10 big-sized firms, 6 medium-sized firms and 7 small/indie companies. The written interviews were conducted between October and November 2020, and the answers from research participants were reclassified and qualitatively coded. Subsequently, the content was thematically analysed in line with the theoretical perspectives and interpretive frameworks of the researchers, with particularly significant answers cited in the text. Supplementarily, the important media interviews between the game labour unions and mainstream newspapers were also collected. The next section will briefly explain the structural characteristics of digital game labour in Korea and why the Korean case is suitable for exploring the politics of body in digital labour.

Setting the scene: Characteristics and changes within the Korean game industry and its labour

The market size of the Korean game industry has been growing significantly until recently. Total sales of Korean games in 2019 were estimated at US$15 trillion, tripling in the past 12 years (KCCA, 2020). Despite its rapid industrial growth, the overall labour conditions for Korea's digital game industry reveal chronic problems including relatively low incomes, unstable employment contracts and long working hours. A 2017

Game Industry Labour Environment and Health Status Survey (Gurogu Worker's Welfare Centre, 2017) shows that of the respondents, 33.6% and 28.6% had monthly earnings of about US$2000–US$3000 and about US$3000–US$4000, respectively; 66.8% of them said that they do not receive any overtime payment (Gurogu Worker's Welfare Centre, 2017). Also, 84% of respondents who had experienced crunch mode at least once in the past year said that they experienced crunch an average of five times a year, spending about 24 days per crunch time (Gurogu Worker's Welfare Centre, 2017). In terms of unstable employment contracts, even though more than 95% of the respondents revealed that they have regular contracts with the companies, over 33% revealed they would leave the company in the event of a breakdown in annual salary negotiations, and 43% said they would leave the company in the event of a team breakup (Gurogu Worker's Welfare Centre, 2017). In other words, even full-time workers are experiencing unstable employment conditions. Although turnover occurs very frequently in the game industry, it is highly likely that workers' reputations will not remain contained inside the company, but will spread within a close-knit industry. The labour market in the Korean game industry is divided by project size, platform and genre, so individual workers are very sensitive and vulnerable to their reputation within the industry.

Since the 2010s, the game industry has rapidly shifted to a mobile platform – a transition negatively impacting the working and living conditions of digital game workers. The impetus for this change was expansion of mobile game consumption due to the spread of smartphones, the development of game production technology as well as the spread of free game engines (making producing mobile games much easier) and the strengthening of regulations on PC (personal computer) online games (Kim and Lee, 2020). With fierce competition in the mobile game industry around the world, the game production cycle has been shortened. To survive the intensified competition with foreign countries such as China, Korean game companies have chosen a strategy of developing similar games with proven profitability over making original games – speeding up game production and updating them more frequently, with increasing costs for promotion/marketing, IP fees and platform fees conversely decrease workers' wages and welfare costs (Kim and Lee, 2020).

As a result, game workers have begun to suffer from severe overwork, as their careers have become more precarious (Lee, 2019). This domination of a homogeneous genre-oriented and cost-focused business model generates a simple and repetitive labour process, depriving game workers of opportunities to gain autonomy, pursue creativity and accumulate expertise; ultimately the workers lose positive satisfaction or recognition regarding their work (Lee, 2019). This deteriorating work situation heightens issues of job insecurity, economic vulnerability, work-life breakdown and loss of meaningful work (Lee, 2019). Even though the problems of increasing labour insecurity and degradation of professional skills are commonly shared across the entire digital game industry, the intensity and severity of the impact and damage depend upon the size of the company (big firms vs medium/small/indies), the job description (specialist focussing on one expertise vs generalist, controlling the entire game production), the length of career (longer vs shorter) and gender (male vs female) as well (Kim and Lee, 2020). Although the Korean game industry has undergone dramatic changes within a short period of time

and has grown into the world's fourth largest game market, the rapid development has caused these problems in the work environment to surface.

Thus, the Korean game industry provides an appropriate construct to understand and analyse the politics of body surrounding digital labour. This is especially apropos considering the industry's rapid development – including the evolution of production technology, the expansion of mobile platforms and change in the consumption market over a short period of time. All of these changes have greatly impacted the work environment.

Crunch mode and 'embodied pain': Making unpredictable labour predictable

Berardi (2009: 148), whose work focusses on characteristics of 'cognitive labour' in the post-Fordist era, rightly argues that calculable labour productivity in a set time under a Fordist assembly line production system (industrial capitalism) has been replaced by an incalculable one in 'aleatory' [randomly determined] time under the flexible post-Fordist production system seen in semio-capitalism. From the viewpoint of capital, unlike the factory system, which is designed to produce a certain number of products in a set time in production facilities, immaterial products such as digital games are not produced *in proportion to* working hours. So how then can capital possibly acquire the *predictability* that immaterial products will be produced accurately by a specific time? In other words, how does control of capital occur, in a labour process not able to ascertain when (and at what rate) a particular product will be created?

This unpredictable feature of digital game labour seems to be intractable for capital, because the outcome of the labour is hard to guarantee. To remediate this, the practice of 'crunch' as a labour-controlling technique was created and implemented by capital to overcome the contingency of labour 'productivity' – and ensure the production outcome of immaterial products like digital games. 'Crunch' is a common practice used in the software development industry (including digital games), referring to long hours of overtime work performed *unconditionally* to meet deadlines such as game launches and updates. Crunch practice is notoriously associated with digital game production; the industry is negatively linked to a scenario in which 'the rhythm of the biological cycle of workers is regularly destroyed due to prolonged working hours' (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 168). In the Korean context, when workers enter into 'crunch mode', it tends to mean intensely concentrated overworking over a few days' time; however, it is also common for workers to put in 80–100 hours of work per week, when meeting deadlines for sales seasons or media events.

The implicit logic of crunch practice is that it is possible to guarantee the production outcome of immaterial products through extreme control of workers' bodies through an almost infinite proliferation in work hours. In other words, to transform the aleatory nature of immaterial product creation into an inevitable outcome, crunch practice follows the idea of prolonging infinite opportunity as long as there's a chance for the outcome to occur. The problem, though, is that in return the workforce experiences a high risk of increased stress, health problems and workaholic side effects – including major disruptions to sleep, nutrition, hygiene and social opportunities by depriving workers of essential rest.

Almost all of our interviewees said they have experienced crunch, although with differences in intensity and frequency. They related that entering crunch mode requires working at least 10–12 hours a day, and they often return home at dawn after long overtime work, even on weekends. Crunch can last as long as 2–3 weeks and sometimes extend even to 2–3 months (among our interviewees, the most serious cases were 8 months long). In addition, during important events such as deadlines for a new release, there are cases of workers staying up for two to three nights in a row without going home, often sleeping in the company's rest room or motels located nearby. It is said that many people take their work home, because they cannot 'officially' continue working overtime after the introduction of the recent working time regulation – limiting the weekly work time to 52 hours.

This overtime practice has become a chronic norm in Korea's digital gaming industry and has been tolerated and justified as a long-term industry tradition. In terms of implementing and controlling this mechanism of crunch, capital does not explicitly require overtime work because it cannot officially enforce long hours currently, due to the working time regulation set in 2018. However, our interviewees reveal that companies 'naturally' or 'covertly' control the atmosphere and the mood of the workplace, ensuring that workers 'automatically' and 'voluntarily' perceive the necessity of a crunch. A typical strategy involves putting pressure through their managers, seniors or colleagues on those who do not participate in overtime or weekend work – by negatively evaluating them or considering them 'lazy people'. One interviewee reported that

> The company encourages competition among employees and induces voluntary overtime work by positively evaluating the work attitude of those who work overtime. In this way, we don't leave a record of overtime work in the system, but we do crunch mode in a way favourable to the company. (Game designer/3 years of experience/female)

One of the main motivations for digital game labour as a creative occupation, as it is known, is passion for creative work and self-realisation (Bulut, 2020; Kim and Lee, 2020). Thus, the label 'lazy person' in this industry is applied to someone classified as having no enthusiasm or desire for self-growth and who lacks a passion for creativity in their work – all of which might produce a bad reputation. Thus, workers say they are 'forced' to accept crunch practice so as not to ruin their reputation in the industry. Another strategy companies use is to assign an unreasonably large amount of work – more than generally can be done – by setting an unrealistic, dire timeframe for reaching the deadline. Workers are left no choice but to stay longer at work, or go home and work more on their own, to finish the project within that time.

The main characteristic of the physical pain that workers experience during crunch is often expressed as 'slowly permeating pain'. In other words, it does not initially feel like a serious pain, just as a day or two of overtime work does not make a person fall sick. However, our interviewees admitted that as they experience crunch on a regular basis, they can feel pains that seep in slowly and gradually accumulate in their bodies. The interesting tendency that we find is that younger workers, who have only just started this career, tend to recognise their work as a merely mental/cognitive labour, but the longer they work – the more often they experience crunches – those workers tend to perceive

how physically demanding this work is for them. In fact, the longer workers have spent in digital game production, the more they sense the complex nature of labour control that can harm them physically, mentally and emotionally. For example, in response to our interview question about how they consider the key nature of their work in terms of its physical, mental or emotional dimension, one interviewee, who has worked over 15 years in the industry, wrote that

> I'll pick all three with confidence. Every time I work over-long hours it demands physical strength. Every time I try to revise a design that doesn't come out well, I'm mentally stressed out, and I exhaust my emotions on the likes and dislikes of a design that I'm forced to finish. (Graphic artist/15 years of experience/male)

Regarding the physical pain, there were many testimonies revealing various expressions of physical fatigue and pain resulting from sitting in a specific space for a long period of time. Typical symptoms include eye fatigue (eye dryness), headache, neck pain, back pain, pain in joints such as shoulders and wrists, carpal tunnel syndrome in the hand and arm, reflux esophagitis due to stress, chronic gastritis and chronic fatigue due to lack of sleep. These physical pains and symptoms are further maximised when entering crunch. Workers who have experienced extreme crunches tend to describe their painful bodies and exhausted mental conditions using the expression 'I'm becoming like a machine'. Here, the word 'machine' as 'language of agency', epitomises their deteriorating physical and mental state, in which no bodily sense and emotional stimulus can be properly felt any longer. In other words, workers describe a state of extreme exhaustion of all pain thresholds by using the word 'machine', a material tool without any senses or thoughts. This represents a severe condition in which the slowly permeating cyclical pains have ultimately exhausted both the physical and mental resources that human beings naturally have. Another common expression they used to describe their exhausted state was that they are 'milling' or 'grinding' their lives, bodies and souls into crunch, which reminds us of Karl Polanyi's famous analogy of the Satanic Mill representing the brutality and human devastation possible under industrial capitalism. Just as Polanyi (1944) depicted how brutally the industrial factory regime destroyed the humanity of industrial workers, our interviewees revealed that through suffering from elongated crunch, they literally 'grind' their bodies in the Satanic Mill of digital game production until they feel as if something inside them has been permanently lost (Kim and Lee, 2020).

Along with the extreme physical pain from long, continuous labour, workers also cite mental and emotional pressure throughout crunch. They are regularly stressed out when they have to receive the internal performance evaluation based on their performance in a specific phase of the project from their managers or seniors. The results of the performance appraisals naturally become their 'reputations', and because their future job mobility and wage enhancement depend on the solidity of their reputation, the psychological pressures to meticulously manage their reputation and career intensify. However, owing to the nature of digital game labour, as mentioned earlier, working for many hours does not guarantee a high-quality outcome – the outcome is always uncertain. Crunch adds even more anxiety to the challenge of 'unconditionally' creating high-quality products in a set timeframe – by ignoring these factors of uncertainty and unpredictability.

Thus, the already fragile and unstable mental and emotional situation for game workers is even further intensified and maximised when experiencing crunch. Forced into this dire situation, workers become more emotionally sensitive and physically exhausted, often complaining of lethargy, fatigue and depression.

Moreover, the physical fatigue and mental exhaustion during crunch makes workers more sensitive to workload distribution, leading to an atmosphere of depression as colleagues collectively are feeling burnt out. If desired and expected goals are not reached in timely fashion, the relationship between different departments tends to be intense and intimidating – so workers try to be extra careful about their business-related communications. They feel pressure to suppress their feelings of fatigue or frustration so as not to irritate colleagues and thus cause more emotional stress.

After all, physical pain, emotional difficulty and psychological suffering resulting from experiencing crunch are not clearly distinguishable. These three dimensions overlap and combine in workers' experience – long hours of uninterrupted labour during crunch physically exhaust them, and this physical pain drives them to extremes mentally and emotionally. Ultimately, workers often lose their future aspirations and positive feelings about their jobs, and become sceptical about the sustainability and pleasure of their work. During crunch, employees feel that their work 'pulls' them, rather than they themselves being in charge. Furthermore, they see their labour not as a tool or an opportunity for self-realisation; conversely, they feel they themselves are the tool for the realisation of the work. This situation of the tail wagging the dog exactly parallels what Marx calls the worker's 'alienation' from their labour and their humanity, under the industrial production system. In other words, when self-realisation, the desire for career success, passion for creativity and the fun of work itself, which allowed them to tolerate crunch mode to some extent, disappear through crunch, they ultimately realise that they have become 'machines' in the game production process – and a 'broken' machine at that, with the near depletion of their physical and mental energy. In the next section, we will explore the problem of 'death' as the final form of bodily pain in digital labour, by focussing on the problem of 'karoshi (to work oneself to death)' and mention of suicides caused by overwork of Korean digital game workers.

Karoshi as a limit experience

Karoshi (overwork to death) is a socio-medical term first identified in Japan in the early 1980s, gradually adopted globally around the 1990s (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2011). In the medical field, karoshi includes two different types of deaths: (1) 'sudden death caused by cerebral/cardio diseases corresponding to karoshi' and (2) 'suicide or attempted suicide due to mental disorders corresponding to karo-jisatsu (suicide by overwork)' (Kanai, 2009: 209). It is not our intention to closely examine the medically explained mechanism of karoshi's causes and effects. But we must at least recognise that extreme levels of long-term or short-term stress from excessively long working hours can fatally damage the functioning of workers' autonomous nervous systems – which can lead to a sudden death, as a direct physical (karoshi) or mental (karo-jisatsu) consequence. This medical explanation is significant in at least two respects. First, digital game labour as a representative form of immaterial/creative/mental/cognitive labour,

which is often perceived as using only human mental/cognitive power, can directly affect our bodies as well. In other words, stress is not just a mental pain. It can directly impact our autonomic nervous system, blood vessels and heart to the point of death. Second and more importantly, karoshi is not just a purely medical phenomenon – not merely a physical problem for individuals. Rather, Kanai (2009) argues that the main cause of karoshi, overwork, is not 'the preference of individuals, but rather the result of the adaptation to the work environment' (Kanai, 2009: 209).

Most of our interviewees were aware of the problem of karoshi in the industry – several interviewees even relayed the experience of seeing a colleague commit suicide due to overwork. The notable point in their thoughts on death by overwork is the perception that karoshi is not a matter of one special individual case which is unusual, sensational or distant from them. Rather, they sense a shared experience, even that '*I might die like those victims'.* The below testimonies illustrate this reaction:

> When I was working in the previous company, I saw a 26-year-old female employee take her own life at the company due to frequent crunches and bullying. Also, I saw with my eyes that one of my seniors was foaming and bitter because of overwork. Because of these sightings, I thought that I could hurt myself greatly because of stress and overwork. (Art (background)/3 years of experience/female)

> The longer crunch mode gets, the more I get sick in one or two parts of my body, the more I think about it (Karoshi). Also, whenever friends in the same industry often go to the hospital or say that they are sick, I think that they and I might get sick and fall down someday just like those (Karoshi) victims. (Programmer/3 years of experience/female)

As these testimonies reveal, most digital game workers have an awareness of the seriousness of the problems of karoshi and karo-jisatsu within the industry. In fact, according to *A 2017 Game Industry Labour Environment and Health Status Survey* (Gurogu Worker's Welfare Centre, 2017), about 55.5% of respondents said they had experienced suicidal thoughts and 2.1% said they had actually attempted suicide. In other words, the danger and fear of deaths and suicide from overwork exist as a stark reality for them.

So how then do Korean digital game workers respond to this notorious crunch and its potential consequence of death? One coping mechanism they have developed is a recent, unexpected strategy – 'organising unions' related to the invention of a new self-identity as 'digital labourers' – ignited by the reality of the deaths of some colleagues. In the winter of 2016, three workers died from Netmarble, one of the biggest digital game companies in Korea – one from sudden death and two from suicide, and one of the victims was officially recognised by the government in 2017 for being the first karoshi case in the game industry. After this unavoidable recognition of karoshi's connection with the industry, the Korean public began to be aware of the serious labour issues underlying this 'fancy' good-looking digital game world. Media started reporting on game industry workers who suffered from excessive overtime work, low wages and an unreasonable organisational culture, some of whom were dying of overwork or suicide (i.e. Kim, 2017). In addition, governmental surveys on labour issues in the industry, discussion meetings at the National Assembly, and labour supervision by the Ministry of Employment

and Labour followed. Along with this increasing social awareness ignited by the series of worker deaths, the Korean government reformed the Working Hours Act in the digital game industry in 2018, which reduced the working hours per week from 68 to 52 hours.

As momentum grew on this issue, two labour unions were established in the fall of 2018 at two of the largest game companies in Korea – Nexon (6000 employees) and Smilegate (3000 employees). Formation of these unions was a first for Korea's game industry. This was unexpected not only for industry workers but for the Korean society at large, since game workers tended to identify themselves as 'progressive artists' or 'liberal freelancers' rather than as 'workers' based on their flexible employment mobility (Kim and Lee, 2020). Thus, unionisation was considered impossible within this industry. So how on earth did these workers – who actually didn't consider themselves 'workers' – possibly form a union? And how did they come to think of unionisation as a way to fight against a notorious crunch practice and its consequential karoshi problem? In an interview with the news media, the first three 'workers' who attempted to unionise spoke about the importance of experiencing the death of their fellow workers and the sense of 'death' they themselves felt from those experiences. They discussed why they formed the union (Park, 2018):

> (When I first heard the news of the death) I had this thought first even before I could feel the sadness of the death. 'Oh, I really need to go home today. If I don't want to die like them'. (Bae Soo-chan, 33, the president of Nexon's labour union)

> This field is very narrow. They (the karoshi victims) were known only by one bridge. That death was like the death of a colleague right next to me doing the same thing. (Kim Tae-Hyo, Secretary General of Nexon's labour union)

> Everyone wanted someone to put up a forearm and change it. Probably everyone was like that. However, the hope of 'changing someday was broken when it reached the realization that it could not change by itself'. (Hong Jong-chan, senior vice president of Nexon's union, 32)

These comments reveal that these three game developers were inspired by the deaths of their fellow workers to create a union. The significance of the birth of a labour union in this sector should be considered in connection with the kinds of social image that Korean 'workers' traditionally have borne in Korean society. As Korean labour historian Koo (2001) points out, in Korean society, the word, 'labour (nodongja, 노동자)', has been perceived as a term referring to a person who works by using his or her body, not his or her mind. In other words, the word 'labour' in Korean society has solely meant manual labour. On top of that, a social stigma exists from the nation's rapid industrialisation period that manual workers do manual labour because they are 'poor' and 'uneducated' (Koo, 2001). In contrast, digital game workers represent a form of immaterial and creative labour that has evolved into an identity as 'creators' and 'freelancers' rather than 'workers' – presupposing that they have a relatively high level of knowledge and qualification (such as a college degree in computer science) and, thus, utilise mental skills such as creativity in their work (Kim and Lee, 2020). Here, the important thing is that the identity of 'being (or un-being) labour' is directly connected to the notion of body. In other words, there has been an ideology in Korean society that 'workers' are people who

live by selling their 'bodily labour (physical power)' because of their poor mental and intellectual abilities. Conversely, society sees digital game workers as creators, using only mental assets – so for them, 'being a labourer' is the identity of the other, not their own. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of capital, this perception can be used to excuse and justify the notorious crunch practice, on the notion that 'You can work long hours, because your work only uses mental power'. However, experiencing death and suicide of fellow workers and recognising the politics of body in their work became a watershed moment for digital game workers – the critical event spurring them to tear down the existing viewpoint that digital labourers are not really workers but creators, whose bodies are not impacted so much.

Scarry (1983: 30) views death as a radical and absolute form of pain in the sense of 'the most intense forms of negation, the purest expression of the anti-human, of annihilation, of total aversiveness'. Scarry (1983) argues that the experience of confronting death as a final form of pain can function as a kind of 'limit experience', radically transforming the given subjectivity.[1] As we have seen in the case of Korea's digital game workers, karoshi has made them unable to remain identified as mere creators or freelancers, because in that identity, faced with death by overwork, the disappearance of the subject at the edge of living becomes a 'limit experience' for them. In other words, karoshi has prompted digital workers to frame a new identity – from performers of immaterial labour to labourers who also use their bodies and are thus workers as well. Consequently, this new perception of digital labour and newly acquired self-identity ignited by recognising the politics of body expressed in deaths of fellow workers *politicises* them to withdraw themselves from the control of crunch imposed on their bodies and make them ask for more just and fair working conditions in the name of *workers*. In the final section, we will take a closer look at their struggle over work time regulations and its important connection to the politics of body in this labour.

Some conclusions: The struggle over work hours as a struggle for recognition

After the establishment of unions at Nexon and Smilegate, their first struggle focussed on the abolition of the comprehensive wage system to eliminate crunch practice. The comprehensive wage system is the inclusion of overtime pay in the basic salary in employment contracts, where the allowance for overtime is not calculated as hourly, but is comprehensively included in the basic salary. For capital, this has the effect of paying only the same amount, regardless of whether the worker puts in 50 or 80 hours weekly. In other words, this wage system enables capital to maintain crunch practices without paying proper wages – prompting the unions to seek to eliminate it. They boldly said in a media interview:

> What happens if we abolish this (the comprehensive wage system)? What would happen if the company had the 'responsibility' to pay workers in proportion to their actual working hours? I dare to say that companies would never force workers [to] work as long as they do now, because the costs would be astronomical so that they probably would be afraid of it. (Park, 2018)

In fact, thanks to the unions' agendas, the comprehensive wage system was abolished through negotiations at Nexon and Smilegate, and the companies promised to comply with the 52-hour workweek regulation. When we asked workers' opinions on this regulation since its establishment in the industry, they reveal that due to the introduction of the 52-hour workweek, they began measuring their working hours for the first time. In other words, workers were not even aware of exactly how much time they were putting in. After the introduction of the 52-hour system, this awareness led them to notice how the long hours affected their bodies and minds. Furthermore, we discovered the interesting phenomenon that workers in companies where unions exist prefer 'job security' to 'employment mobility', feeling that their creativity at work seems to be better served under stable working conditions and well-adjusted working hours. Digital game workers are challenging the conventional idea that freelancers working in a free (but unstable) work environment are more creative than people working with a routine – but stable – work schedule.

Historically, since the 8-hour day movement influencing the formation of May Day (International Workers' Day), the struggle over work hours has been a common agenda of labour unions under industrial capitalism. As illustrated in the slogan of the Boston and Philadelphia carpenters' seminal workday movement in 1827 – 'All men have a just right, derived from their Creator to have sufficient time in each day for the cultivation of their mind[s] for self-improvement' (Foner, 1986: 8) – one reason why this struggle is a key agenda for unions is that work time was not only connected to the struggle for redistribution (such as seeking higher wages) but also related to the struggle for recognition: to be respected as a human being with dignity in one's workplace and social life. In this sense, we think that the issue of work time in digital labour can function as one important indicator revealing the *physicality and materiality of digital labour*. The struggle over hours at work itself recognises that even digital workers, who are considered to be immaterial/cognitive/mental/creative workers, cannot continue to work for extremely long hours as machines can. It is clear also that workers can also face 'death' when forced to work continuously. For workers, therefore, the length of the workday is not simply a time calculation but a directive reminding them that they are not just the sum of nerves sitting in front of a computer, but are actual living humans. In this regard, the significance of proper regulation and distribution of work hours is associated with the consideration of what the proper conditions for human beings should ideally be – humans who exist in certain *times* and spaces. This consideration is the most basic factor allowing them to be recognised as social, productive humans who experience their existence through the mediums of time and space. Therefore, their struggle over how long they work – and under what conditions – should be regarded as a 'struggle for recognition' (Honneth, 1996) that seeks respect for their existence as meaningful members of society, rather than simply a struggle over distribution.

As Rose (1999) points out, in post-industrial societies we increasingly tend to believe that the primary purpose of labour is the realisation of individual freedom – self-realisation or self-exploration. In this sense, working just to make ends meet is often disparaged as meaningless and worthless. This is one of the reasons why many young people fall into the trap of 'self-realisation', voluntarily entering risky labour markets characterised by 'precarity' (McRobbie, 2018). However, the more essential function of labour – at

least at the social level – is as a fundamental activity through which one is recognised as a member of society. In this regard, Korean game workers are attempting to not only acquire self-respect, but also to achieve social recognition of their bodies through labour union struggles, just as the proletariat received recognition for their 'ordinary(physical/manual)' labours. Scarry (1983: 11) claims that 'the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be verbally represented also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be politically represented'. In this regard, digital workers have not been socially recognised and politically represented as 'workers' because both digital workers themselves and society find it difficult to recognise and speak about the materiality and physicality of this labour. In this article, we analyse 'the language of agency' in which digital workers represent their bodily pain and show how the experience of facing death as the absolute form of pain ultimately leads them to recognise the materiality of their work and how such limit experiences make them create new identities and different relationships with themselves and society as *workers*. Through this social and self-awakening process, they have successfully *substantiated* the physicality and materiality of their labour. We believe that this process of confirmation and recognition as *workers* – a process by which 'precariat becomes proletariat' – illuminates a feasible possibility that an emerging social category of precariat can actually co-exist and connect with the existing social class of proletariat. This offers us a meaningful clue of how 'precarity' *may be* transformed into 'solidarity'.

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Note

1. We borrowed this concept of 'limit experience' from Foucault (Foucault and Trombadori, 1991: 32). Foucault (Foucault and Trombadori, 1991: 32) describes 'limit experience' as one in which 'the subject can no longer remain its former self and [is thus] unable to be who they were before', with facing death being a prime example (see Foucault and Trombadori, 1991).

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