

ADDICTED TO DIGITAL

The world's first 'rescue camp' for teenagers addicted to the internet has been set up near Seoul. South Korea is on the leading edge of the digital revolution, as digital guru **Tomi Ahonen** found when he researched "Digital Korea" with co-author Jim O'Reilly. In South Korea the digital future has already arrived – is it the path to a virtual nightmare or to doing more fun things, in more fun ways?

The mobile phone plays a vital role in South Korean daily life. What are the most interesting aspects of its use?

First perhaps is the rapid rate of change. The world average replacement cycle for phones is about 18 months. In Korea it is 11 months, so every year the total population gets a new phone, on average. Older teenagers and young adults change phones every 6 months. With this rate of replacement, a real culture of fashion emerges for phones, there is an autumn fashion and a spring fashion for new phones! It goes very much beyond that. The European average usage level of SMS text messaging is about 2 messages per day. The USA is at about 1 message per day. Among students in South Korea, 30% of

students will average 100 SMS text messages sent per day!!! That means that the fingers are perfectly in tune with the keypad of the phone. Messages are sent at immediate and "near-telepathic" speeds.

You found that average daily consumption of DMB digital TV on mobiles was 129 minutes (Jan 07), that's over two hours per day. What are they watching?

TV viewing is not charged per session, it is either free (advertising sponsored) or it has a set monthly fee for unlimited watching, then as we have the phone always with us, it rapidly becomes a "background noise" device. We are not actively watching MTV or CNN all day, it means that the service is on in the background. Using a bluetooth headset we can privately listen to the TV programme while doing whatever it is we do. The same with mobile TV in the car, it is mostly ►

ME AND MY AVATAR

Avatars are "video game like" cartoon representations - digital puppets if you will - of people that are used in virtual chat worlds and environments, and on mobile phones as screen savers. Differing from how users are identified inside traditional chat programs where users have only text identification or perhaps a small picture of the face of the users, or cartoon representation. Avatars are actual "virtual robots" which are usually three-dimensional, have form, clothing, haircuts, etc. One of the most popular avatar sites in South Korea is Neowiz's "SayClub" that has over 20 million subscribers, which is over 40% of the total population of Korea. In SayClub, the avatar initially comes only with underwear. The user has to then outfit the avatar to fit the kind of persona that user wants his/her avatar to reflect in its virtual world. Some want their avatars to resemble their real world appearance. However, more often the avatar can gain attributes - a dark haired person to be blonde for example or an overweight person to be slim - and of course wear clothes that the real user might not be able to afford. Each additional item of clothing or accessory needs to be purchased and then dressed upon the avatar. As these kinds of environments grow, they soon gain a vast range of content such as clothing from the major brands and up to premium fashion designers like Gucci. It is not uncommon for South Koreans heavily into virtual worlds to spend more on the accessories and clothing of their avatar than their real wardrobe. An estimate by Daewoo Securities on the value of the avatar market in South Korea was \$114m in 2004.

VIRTUAL FRIENDS

The virtual world and social networking site Cyworld facilitates the forming of new friendships through its "Becoming Buddies" feature, which is a creative human relationship management system. Becoming Buddies allows sharing of information, pictures, blogs etc as well as bonding in friendship. Forming friendships and then building human relationships is a core element of Cyworld. South Korean teenagers measure how popular they are by how many friends link to their Cyworld home pages. However, even more, once you have two out of every five members of the population in your virtual world, the whole economy takes notice. Every brand and company wants a presence inside Cyworld. Today all significant South Korean businesses already maintain a presence inside Cyworld. It is no longer a question of "should" Coca Cola or Nike or Ford find marketing tools to join MySpace. In Korea, every consumer brand has to be inside Cyworld. 30,000 businesses, offer over 500,000 items of digital content for sale already.

listened to, not really watched. But if something worth watching happens, you can watch it.

Then there are certain specific peaks. At lunchtime, cellphone-TV viewers often use their phones to catch up on a favourite soap opera, and schedule their lunch break to allow for that. A particular use is the bathroom - we can take the little TV to the bathroom and not interrupt our viewing. There is significant use by kids as their "private" digital TV option. When mother is watching Desperate Housewives on the main plasma TV of the household, the kids can go to their room, use the digital tuner on the phone, and watch their show without disturbing mom's viewing.

How are broadcasters and programme makers adapting to more TV viewing on mobiles?

They are still only experimenting and trying to learn. Obviously the new peak watching times will alter the work of scheduling. Also totally new content types, various user-generated TV and video content will play an ever larger part in the equation. But it's too early to say yet.

Are people still watching TV on the big screen at home?

I'm certain that the majority of TV viewing will be on larger screens than our mobile phones for many years, perhaps decades to come - on the big projection screen, the big plasma screen, the normal LCD TV screen, the PC/laptop screen, on dedicated DVD players with much larger screens than pocketable mobile phone TV screens. But there are plenty of instances and places and cases where we won't have access to our primary TV viewing option, and then the fact that soon everybody will have a TV tuner in their pocket at all times on their phones, will mean that we all will consume a part of our daily TV use on the phone.

Out of a population of 48m, 42% maintain a blogsite and 14m play multiplayer online games - what does that say about South Korean society?

I think blogging is a universal interest and aspiration. American blogging went from half a million bloggers in 2003 to over 80m today. But the point is that South Korea was first to have blogging go into

▲ From chapter 3 of "Digital Korea" by Tomi Ahonen and Jim O'Reilly, 2007



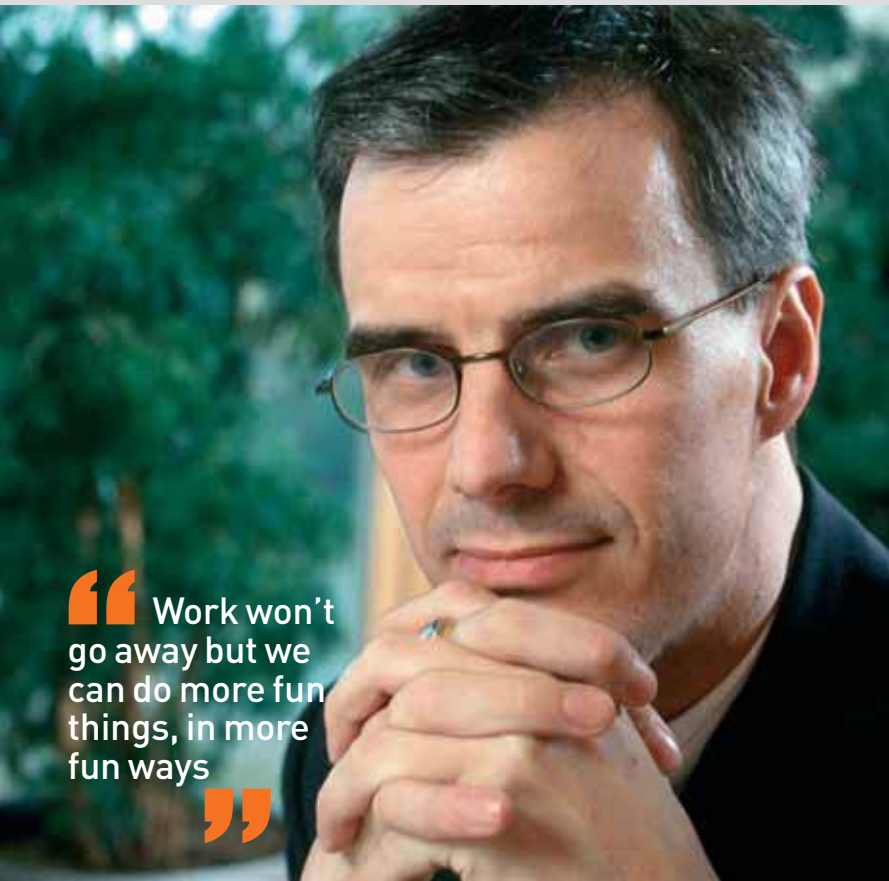
the mainstream. They released a movie where the main plot was about a teenager girl blogging, back in 2001, when even in Silicon Valley blogging was only for the die-hard geeks.

The multiplayer gaming is perhaps more a point that may have some Korean exceptional cultural interests. The South Korean videogamers regularly take a vast collection of the gold medals in the various cybergames world championships. In Korea there is a big culture around gaming, with dedicated TV channels. Top gamers are big celebrities with a massive fan following.

I do see in some of my nephews and nieces similar interests in gaming - rather play multiplayer games than watch TV for example. But will it become as big as in Korea - we have to see.

Why has South Korea embraced digital convergence in such a big way?

I'd say the biggest single cause was the government's pro-active role in driving this change. South Korea looked at Japan, and wanted to leapfrog Japan and find its own



“ Work won't go away but we can do more fun things, in more fun ways ”



economic engines to drive Korea. They focused on digital convergence, the information age, ubiquitous computing, etc. Then the government provided legislation and regulation support, enthusiastically supported international conferences and information sharing. And then the government fostered cooperation with academia and the industry, so the whole society worked very closely together. Korea also promoted competition as the driving engine. Rather than forcing all to use only one technology, Korea tends to want all rival technologies to co-exist, so that the country and the industry benefits from all those technologies. For the end-user this means the widest choice of near rival technologies.

In places your book sounds like science fiction – household robots reading bedtime stories to kids? Where is South Korea heading?

I like to think of technology becoming invisible, just doing its job. Think of the microprocessor. In the 1960s this was NASA science, put on the space missions, to get

computers onto rockets. Then the technology spread and by the 1980s we had several microprocessors in our cars. Today's cars have dozens and we don't think of the microprocessor any more. South Korea is now heading to a world where connectivity is everywhere, not just computing. So we get the intelligent floor. A hospital with an intelligent floor will have the ability to monitor the patient who has an accident and falls, for whatever reason – maybe a dizzy spell or a heart attack, or slipping on a floor that was just washed. But if the floor senses that someone fell on it, the floor can alert a nurse immediately.

This is the future that is emerging in Korea. Not only the science-fiction-esque robot in every home - which will happen in Korea first - but also the more obscure intelligence out of computing and connectivity that is built into our lives everywhere. So it's not just that we can pay for our parking by our cellphone, but if the car can tell me where the nearest available parking place is, that is real value to the user. And this technology is already being trialled in Korea.

◀ Tomi Ahonen

▲ 25% of Korea's population drive imaginary cars in KartRider

Finally, the pessimist's and optimist's view of the digital future?

I'm the eternal optimist! But yes, good question. The pessimist would say it's an all-pervasive, all-intrusive "network" that doesn't let us sleep well at night for all the messages interrupting us, various real and virtual employees, bosses, colleagues etc bothering us at all hours. The blurring of work and rest so badly that we all become neurotic and depressed. Virtual theft, identity theft, invasions of privacy etc will only get much worse...

Optimist? Work won't go away, but we can do more fun things, in more fun ways. Our services will be more fun. The way we consume things will be more fun. I think we will look back at the dawn of the Connected Age and think that the world back then was horribly complex, unpleasant, difficult, unfriendly, intimidating. But that it became a lot of fun along the way.

Tomi Ahonen, thank you. ■