

Online game addiction law divides SKorea

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Screens advertising an online mobile game are displayed in a subway train in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013. A law under consideration in South Korea's parliament has sparked vociferous debate by grouping popular online games such as "StarCraft" with gambling, drugs and alcohol as an anti-social addiction the government should do more to stamp out.(AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

A law under consideration in South Korea's parliament has sparked vociferous debate by grouping popular online games such as "StarCraft" with gambling, drugs and alcohol as an anti-social addiction the government should do more to stamp out.

The bill is winning support from parents, religious groups and doctors but has alarmed the Internet industry and enraged gamers. The legislation includes provisions to limit advertising while a separate bill would take 1 percent of the gaming industry's revenue to create a fund to curb addiction.

The uproar over the legislation highlights conflicting social and economic priorities in technology-soaked South Korea. Internet entrepreneurs are prized as a source of innovation in an economy dominated by gray conglomerates, but conservative lawmakers and many parents say online obsessions are taking a growing toll on schooling, families and workplaces.

"We need to create a clean Korea free from the four addictions," Hwang Woo-yea, a top lawmaker in the ruling party, said in a recent speech.

The legislative assault, backed by 14 ruling party lawmakers, is the latest phase in South Korea's version of American culture wars. Professional gamers in South Korea can gain wealth and status akin to sports stars but as a pastime it is framed by critics as threat to family and the social order.

Headline grabbing incidents such as the starvation death of the infant daughter of online gamers have fueled a moral panic. A law passed in 2011 that bans gaming between midnight and dawn for anyone under age 16 is being appealed at South Korea's Constitutional Court.

"There is a huge prejudice that gaming is harmful," said Lee Byung-chan, an attorney involved in the Constitutional Court case. "Games are as harmful as alcohol, drugs and gambling, that's the prejudice," Lee said.

Game companies have taken exception to being lumped together with

drugs and other vices. They say the bill is a death sentence for their industry.



People attend an online game forum to discuss the latest bill that groups Internet games with alcohol, drugs and gambling as the four addictions that the government should do more to prevent in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013. A law under consideration in South Korea's parliament has sparked vociferous debate by grouping popular online games such as "StarCraft" with gambling, drugs and alcohol as an anti-social addiction the government should do more to stamp out. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

"The 100,000 people employed in the game industry are not drug makers," Korea Internet and Digital Entertainment Association, which represents game companies, said in a statement.

Nourished by South Korea's rapid adoption of broadband Internet and

the ubiquity of cyber cafes, online gaming has become a significant export industry. In 2012, "MapleStory" and other online game titles earned more cash from abroad for South Korea than the YouTube sensation "Gangnam Style," K-pop music, movies and other cultural exports combined.

The government started studying Internet game addiction in 2011. Its latest annual study found that 2 percent of South Koreans aged 10-19, or about 125,000 people, needed treatment for excessive online gaming or were at risk of addiction.

"My parents tried to stop me but I kept playing. Even the government wouldn't have stopped me," said Shin Minchul, a 21-year-old college student as he recounted his heavy gaming past.

At elementary school he bonded with his friends at an Internet cafe playing StarCraft three to four hours a day after classes finished.

He dreamed of becoming one of the professionals with corporate sponsorship whose games are broadcast live on cable TV to audiences numbering in the millions. By high school, he was playing another title, "World of Warcraft," for up to 15 hours straight.

His parents barked at him but he didn't budge. Shin's rank at school plunged from the top to bottom half. Nothing but his own volition could take him away from Warcraft.



Shin Minchul, bottom, a 21-year-old college student, plays online computer games at an Internet cafe in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013. A law under consideration in South Korea's parliament has sparked vociferous debate by grouping popular online games such as "StarCraft" with gambling, drugs and alcohol as an anti-social addiction the government should do more to stamp out.(AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

"When I tried to think more broadly about my life, playing games wasn't that important," Shin said. "Then I lost interest."

Supporters of the bill say cases like Shin's show why curbs are needed.

Kim Min-sun, a mother of two, said online games take children away from real life.

"Without online games, kids would talk to their mother and play," she said.

Others say South Korea should do more to address the factors behind online game addiction, such as hyper competitive education and a dearth of other leisure options for teenagers.

South Korea had the lowest percentage of students who reported being happy at school in 2012 among 65 countries surveyed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

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