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Congratulations Player One, Your Zombie Boss Didn't Fire You

South Korean unemployment inspires games about work; laugh at chief's jokes

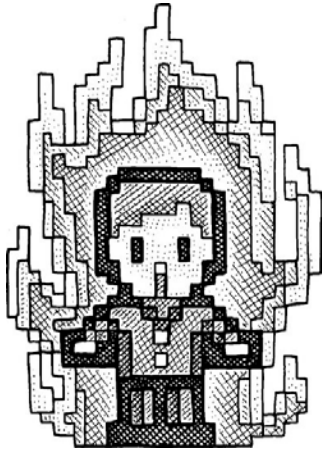


Lee Jin-po, the 29-year-old developer of 'Don't Get Fired!', a mobile-phone game that has become a cult hit in South Korea, works in a 200-square-foot apartment that is also his office. *Photo: Jonathan Cheng/The Wall Street Journal*

SEOUL—When Lee Jin-po was laid off last year for the third time in as many years, the 29-year-old mobile-game programmer expressed his frustration in his own instinctive way: He made a mobile game about it.

In Mr. Lee's "Don't Get Fired!," the object is to rise through the ranks at a nameless corporation by performing an endless string of mind-numbing tasks, while avoiding a long list of fireable offenses.

"It's just like real life," he says.



Don't Get Fired!

In South Korea, where youth unemployment has hit an all-time high amid sluggish economic growth, “Don’t Get Fired!” has become a certified hit—one in a small raft of mobile games that has found success by embracing the drudgery and absurdity of work.

The object of “Beggar King,” another South Korean mobile game, is to rise from a street hobo to the head of a corporation by outpanhandling rivals. In “My Dream Is to Get Off Work On Time,” players struggle to complete tasks like picking up the phone or dropping off the mail so they can slip out the door before a zombielike boss grabs them.

More than one in 10 South Korean young adults is jobless, a rate three times the national average. Even those who win jobs are often offered temporary contracts with few protections. One of the country’s most popular television dramas in recent years follows the story of a young intern who struggles to win a full-time position at a South Korean company. (He fails.)

The games have struck a chord with young Koreans, such as Song Min-joon, 22, who works at a South Korean shipbuilder.

Even though “Don’t Get Fired!” consists largely of getting fired again and again in a cycle of humiliation and false hope, he found it hard to put down, and estimates he’s spent about 20 hours in recent weeks playing the game. Ordinarily, his game of choice is “League of Legends,” a fantasy-themed computer game, where teams of ax-wielding warriors battle.

Mr. Song says he enjoys the pleasure of rising up the ranks, even if, as he notes, “it’s absurd how easy it is to get fired.”

Yun Sol-bi, a 19-year-old web designer living in a suburb of Seoul, loves the game and considers herself lucky never to have worked in an office like the one portrayed.

Ms. Yun prefers mobile games like “FarmVille,” but finds herself strangely drawn to “Don’t Get Fired!” She said she likes collecting things—in this case, all of the game’s 29 ways of getting fired, including opening a box of doughnuts that doesn’t belong to you. She also likes the fact that getting rejected in a job interview in the game takes just a few seconds, unlike the drawn-out silences her job applications receive.

“Don’t Get Fired!” is free to play. Users pay to buy items that help them in the game, such as getting faster promotions. It starts with a series of job interviews that inevitably end in rejection, with the character down on his hands and knees, weeping.

After landing an internship at a nondescript office, the goal is to appease higher-ups by scurrying from manager’s desk to manager’s desk, piling up work while fending off requests from various bosses to attend daughters’ birthday parties or to fetch a cup of coffee.

Jang Eun-jin, a 23-year-old freelance cartoonist, says she has played “Don’t Get Fired!” for about 40 minutes every day for more than a year.

After having her character get promoted, she began to nag workers, a perquisite of rising the ranks, only to have her underlings go on strike and get her fired. “I thought that when I got promoted that the game would get easier, but it hasn’t,” she said.

The list of potential pitfalls in the game is extensive. Addressing colleagues with the wrong level of formality or failing to laugh hard enough at the jokes of a company vice president can result in a major career setback.

“My passion is disappearing, and I have huge eyepockets,” the character moans after failing to land a promotion. “Overtime... evening work... Weekend work... When was the last time I had proper sleep...? I don’t even remember.”

The game reflects, in part, its creator’s own experiences. Mr. Lee says that after he dropped out of college because he couldn’t afford the tuition, he scored a job at a mobile-game development company, before he was laid off a few months later as his employer neared bankruptcy.

A similar experience followed and, after Mr. Lee was laid off a third time, he holed up in his 200-square-foot apartment set on turning his frustrations into a mobile game. Mr. Lee and his only employee, his girlfriend, tallied up his savings, checked their bank balance every day and limited themselves for three months to convenience-store meals of \$2.50 per person.

He released “Don’t Get Fired!” without fanfare in March last year, one of thousands of mobile games created each year by South Korean developers (the country is the world’s fourth-largest mobile game market by revenue, according to data tracker Newzoo). The game attracted a following among players, who downloaded it more than a million times.

Mr. Lee later found volunteers to translate it into 12 languages, helping the international version attract another million downloads. Griffin Crowley, a 20-year-old high-school graduate in a Cleveland suburb, couldn’t stop playing after stumbling on it while fiddling with his cellphone. “Sometimes, you just have to laugh at the futility of life,” says Mr. Crowley, who recently worked a stint at a telemarketing company.

Mr. Lee says he hasn’t earned enough from the game to move out of his cramped apartment, but is glad he no longer has to check his bank balance every day. “I can give my salary to my girlfriend and tell her to eat whatever she wants to eat,” he says.

He plans to develop more games, though acknowledges he may prove to be a one-hit wonder. If Mr. Lee says if he has to take work again at a big company, “I would look back and say that this was my happy time.”

—Min Sun Lee contributed to this article.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

“League of Legends” is a desktop computer game. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said it was a mobile game. (Aug.8, 2016)