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## Games People Play: Can Singapore Power-Up Fast Enough to Claim a Share of the Bounty?

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*According to PricewaterhouseCooper's latest "Global Entertainment and Media Outlook" released in late June, the video game sector is set to overtake global spending on music this year. Over the next five years, the Asia Pacific region is projected to top overall global spending on games with average annual gains of 10%, amounting to nearly US\$19 billion by 2011. In Singapore, the government invested half a billion Singapore dollars (US\$325 million) in 2006 to encourage research and development (R&D) in the interactive digital media (IDM) services sector as a whole. Singapore Management University professor of management Ted Tschang specialises in the areas of technology policy, technology management and industrial development. He has been paying especial attention to the gaming and related industries, sub-sectors of IDM. In an interview with Knowledge@SMU, Tschang discusses the role of global culture as a critical success factor, and Singapore's efforts get into the game.*

**Knowledge@SMU:** What is the outlook for Singapore's gaming industry?

**Tschang:** Singapore is one of two or three countries that I know of where the government is making a concerted effort to develop the gaming industry and get its ecosystem up and running, such as providing funds for talent development, R&D and companies. I think you can only wait and see. In an industry like gaming, sometimes you might have one company come out of nowhere to make it big. You don't need a cluster or an industrial park to create a national advantage.

For instance, around the world you find interesting game studios in countries that don't even have a gaming industry such as Czechoslovakia, Denmark and parts of Sweden. What they do have are interested college students who know the local culture, are exposed to global culture, and have the passion to get together and do something. It takes a special kind of mind to be a developer. The vast majority of people, in Singapore and elsewhere, would rather play than develop. Having said that, a couple of years ago, there were already 40 gaming and animation companies in Singapore. Most are smaller outfits including a few branch studios of multinational and other foreign companies. But whether you have one company or a good-sized industry, a prerequisite for creating a well-positioned industry is to have the depth of culture that the market enjoys. Important gaming countries such as Korea, Japan, the U.S., or even the UK and Germany, possess unique characteristics which enable them to make games people like to play. That brings up the question, what is Singapore's culture and can you put it into a game?

**Knowledge@SMU:** Why is culture important for developing games?

**Tschang:** I'm thinking of culture very broadly to include popular culture, history and current events which, collectively, represent the diversity of that nation. Some of the most recent popular games, or even genres of games, in the U.S. had content that drew heavily from popular culture. For instance, the earliest first-person shooter games involved enemy combatants such as demons from hell, or space colonies in a game called 'Doom'. The references in 'Doom' were to science fiction and horror movies -- teenagers in the U.S. were already immersed in that kind of culture. Even preceding 'Doom', the first first-person game to have significant pick-up was *Wolfenstein 3D* developed by the same company. It was inspired by an earlier arcade game called *Castle Wolfenstein* -- where players fought Nazi troops -- and took it further to a three-dimensional form of projection and play.

These are the sorts of cultural reference points that we need. If we're not deep enough into history, or have a broad cultural expanse, can we still build unique products that reflect something of ourselves? [In Singapore] we're in a thriving global culture so we might be able to. To develop a game that provides a meaningful experience for people, I think you need to have broad familiarity with your own culture, another culture or popular global culture.

**Knowledge@SMU:** What sort of global appeal would a game developed in a country like China have?

**Tschang:** Well, it definitely has regional appeal. For example, Chinese online games are especially popular in Vietnam. They are also being marketed in Malaysia, Korea and Japan. Korean games are actually very popular in China. The earliest Korean online game, *The Legend of Mir II*, was such a hit that the Chinese game industry woke up to the fact that online games, as opposed to PC games, could make money. There is a shared mythological background and cultural similarities between Korea and other Asian countries. Last year, 70% or more of the Chinese online games market was dominated by Korean products.

**Knowledge@SMU:** How successful will the Singapore government's efforts be to develop a gaming industry here?

**Tschang:** Well, when the government puts its head to something, it usually gets it done. Without government

support, I don't think we would have the level of activity that we are seeing today. One difficulty is that you can't select the most creative idea in advance, and you can't tell what kind of product is going to be the next winner. This industry is what you call hits-based; you don't know where a winner is going to come from until it has already happened -- unless you're relying on existing intellectual property like the *Spiderman* movies.

Making incrementally innovative products that are similar to past hits has been one way of partly ensuring success, because existing players often want to play what they are familiar with. But you could also argue that you will be making a pale imitation of another product if you are not embedded in that culture, or if you don't put enough of yourself into it to make the product different and enticing. And if you're after innovative products, or the next big market segment -- which includes most people outside of the teen-to-30-something-male group -- that's another matter. Most times you won't know if the product will be a success until it has gone well into production.

**Knowledge@SMU:** Do you think there's a success formula for the gaming industry we could follow in Singapore?

**Tschang:** I don't think there's really a formula -- it's a chicken and egg thing. You need to find the most creative people but you don't know who these people really are. You need to give them a chance to develop themselves, and that can take five to 10 years. I think the government is doing the best it can but it's too early to start picking winners. People need time to work on their ideas, to polish them and try them out, fail, and try again. Making a ladder which people have to climb to get to the top might not be the way to find the best people or nurture them. Winning a competition isn't necessarily going to lead to a successful career. Think back to school -- the person who won the writing competition isn't always the prize-winning author today!

**Knowledge@SMU:** What other challenges does a fledgling gaming industry in Singapore have to consider?

**Tschang:** While there are many, I would say it is mainly the need to nurture, and learn about, cultural diversity, to explore yourself and enjoy the space in which to do that. For instance, if you want to develop game designers, what kind of education should they get? Do you tell them to go get a degree in business, literature, programming or "life"? I've seen designers come from the last three areas, but it seems many Singaporeans are after the first one. Programming helps a lot, but if you're concerned about content, you need to go through a series of unique life experiences to draw on, including wider exposure to historical, current and futuristic influences. Some of the best game designers I met in the U.S. were broad and deep in their reading habits. They didn't just read within their field. Some were educated in literature; others went into movie script-writing and had really great ideas. Some were programmers but they were fierce readers of psychology, war history, cultural history, architecture; they got their ideas for new kinds of game play by piecing many of these things together. One of the most famous designers I met was Will Wright who came up with 'SimCity' and 'The Sims'. He reads up on all kinds of things -- from systems theory to extraterrestrial intelligence. You see all these reflected in his games.

**Knowledge@SMU:** What constraints do you think Asian developers face as compared with those in the U.S. or Europe?

**Tschang:** Why is it that many more people outside of China prefer to play futuristic alien games and not Chinese history games? I think when you're stuck in the past, it's a bit hard for people to appreciate [those games], but if you're tapping into the future it might be easier. Japanese games and media that have really sparked interest in the West are a real *mélange* where they've taken western culture and mixed it in with their own mythological beliefs and the future. If you look at the animator, Hayao Miyazaki, and his creations such as *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, you'll find cities that look like old Europe, characters with big eyes that look Japanese with European features, robot civilisations, and large airships that didn't originate in Japan. It's a whole blend of different elements woven together so expertly that many people around the world can identify with different parts, and yet experience something completely new and different which is more than just the sum of the parts.

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