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Year: 2019

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## **Entertainment in a changing world: Vietnam and video gaming**

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Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich  
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-184607>  
Journal Article  
Published Version

Originally published at:

Phan, Quang Anh (2019). Entertainment in a changing world: Vietnam and video gaming. *SUVANNABHUMI: Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 11(2):107-124.



# Entertainment in a Changing World: Vietnam and Video Gaming



Phan Quang Anh\*

## [ *Abstract* ]

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the development timeline of video gaming in Vietnam. This paper would examine how Southeast Asia has become a key component in constructing the façade of the global gaming industry, focusing on Vietnam. As a communist country, Vietnam showed a distinctive pattern of video gaming reception. Video gaming has become a popular amusement among Vietnamese youth and has also helped Vietnam integrate into the modern world after the Vietnam War.

**Keywords:** Asia, development, online gaming, video games, Vietnam

## I . Introduction

Nowadays, digital games has become one of the most popular forms of amusement, even surpassing television, the Internet, or music, to name a few (Jin & Schneider 2016). Kerr (2006) pointed out that people consider gaming as pivotal in understanding the Western

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world This commentary has missed out on how it had also caught the world by storm since the 1980s. Iwabuchi (2004), as well as Chung (2011), noted globalization had also placed Asia in the map of gaming.

This is not lost on Vietnam where nightly, Internet cafés in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City attract gamers. Brown (2013) observed that the nation had about 13 million computer game players. Ives (2010) meanwhile pegged the number of Internet cafés in Hanoi at 4,000 regularly visited by gamers four or five times per week, each spending up to 10 hours per session. Vietnam has also led in garnering the biggest revenue gained in the region: 220 million USD (Niko Partners 2012) despite criticism.<sup>1</sup> Online gaming in Vietnam has become prevalent in everyday life, reflecting the transformations brought about by globalization, transnational cultural practices, even localization. This paper will show how the gaming industry in Vietnam has emerged by analyzing documents, a wide range of journals, newspapers, magazines, and game review websites in Vietnam. The paper is also informed by my personal experience; interviews of gamers during my fieldwork; articles in *The Gioi Game* and *Viet Game*, two defunct gaming magazines; and reviews in *Ictnews* and *GameK*, two notable gaming websites.

## II. Video Gaming in Vietnam

### 1.1. The introduction of video games

No studies have been conducted to trace the history of video games in Vietnam. One thing that could be confirmed is that in the 80s, as Asian countries were being swamped by arcade and console games, the extreme bureaucracy of a before-reform Vietnam prohibited gaming devices. Kelly (2008) and Schwenkel (2014) mentions that during the Vietnam War and after the unification in 1975, the country sent groups of students and workers to countries belonging to the former Soviet Bloc. This gave the Vietnamese their

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<sup>1</sup> As early as 2005, more than 1,000 Vietnamese articles on newspapers (Minh Duong 2010) considered online games to cause addiction and juvenile delinquency.

first taste of video games made in the Soviet Union, especially in the late 80s. The most popular gadget was the series of electronic toys marked ИМ, the abbreviated form of Игра Микропроцессорная, which means microprocessor-based game, manufactured by Soviet Union's Elektronika. *IM-02 Nu, Pogodi!* which was released in 1984 was a nearly perfect replica of *Nintendo EG-26 Egg* while the *IM-03 Mysteries of the Ocean* released in 1989 was no more than a clone of the *Nintendo OC-22 Octopus*. In fact, all of the IM devices were exactly the Soviet clones of the Game & Watch devices popularized by Nintendo in the 80s. As a communist country that was totally capable of manufacturing entertainment machines themselves, the Soviet Union did not import games from Japan but ironically borrowed the concept and made replicas instead. It was believed that because of the Cold War, the importation of gaming devices from Japan was banned. Russian companies tried to profit from the popularity of Nintendo and occupy the domestic market by producing their own work (Game & Watch 2014). These were packed in the pieces of luggage Vietnamese expatriates brought home.

After the Reform in 1986, and especially after the US embargo was lifted in 1994, consoles started to get into the market. Nintendo Famicom became popular, and was also cloned in China.<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese called it “dien tu bon nut” (4-button video game), because the original Famicom and the later version NES only had two main buttons A and B. Chinese manufacturers added two more button controls—the auto control A and B, making it 4 buttons: A, B, Auto A and Auto B. The main function of these two newly-added buttons was very basic: as people needed to press the two original A and B a lot, these two would relieve that burden by carrying out some options automatically without hitting A or B multiple times (Vu, 2017). Those who could not afford to buy one normally went to gaming spots where they rented these devices. The original

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<sup>2</sup> It seems to be a common scenario in communist countries in the 80s. The very same situation also happened in the Soviet Union. Since no officially licensed version of the Famicom (also known as NES) was ever released in the former Soviet Union, Russian people were introduced to Dendy (Russian: Денди), a Taiwanese clone. It was released in the early 1990s by Steepler and rapidly gained the fame in the Soviet Union (Pichugin, 1992).

cartridge was only capable of storing one game but the modded cartridge from China or Taiwan used the 16-bit, then 32-bit technology to expand the storage of these ROM cartridges. This made yielded more games and reduced.

After, SNES was released in the 90s and was also quickly cloned by China. In Vietnam, it was called “dien tu dia vuong” (square-disc video game) as the cartridge called the “Game Pak” is square-shaped. However, the mega-blockbuster of the 90s and the 2000s is the Sony PlayStation which provided better graphic design and the hi-end technology. It also featured more disc storage, longer playing time, and more complex game scenarios. The Play Station was brought into Vietnam informally as Sony at that time did not have any authorized resellers in the country. These were also accessed by way of gaming spots.

It is also worth noting the Vietnamese referred to game titles differently as they could not speak Japanese, Chinese, and English. The gamers referred to the games based on content. For instance, *Chocobo Racing* released by Square in 1999 was called “Dua xe thu” (Animal Racing) because of its main plot.

In the late 2000s, PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Xbox One came to fore. Although living conditions and the GDP per capita in Vietnam increased, gaming devices such as the aforementioned were inaccessible to the public, and as said, were brought into Vietnam informally—in border trading activities or direct buying abroad. Buying game discs was also challenging, but resellers later found a way to reduce costs by hacking, or copying games’ downloadable ROM. This of course compromised the devices’ warranty nevertheless, it still provided access for Vietnamese gamers, especially in the gaming spots. From 2010 onwards, Sony has been officially distributing its products in Vietnam, but at a price that is 20% higher than unauthorized resellers (Nut Chuoi 2015).

Vietnamese market was also flooded with the hand-held Brick Game (Gia Bao 2017), the origin of which is yet to be determined by any Game Studies scholar. Comet (2015) called this device E.999, based on its markings, which claim that it features 999

games inside. In Southeast Asia the device surfaced to feature 888 or 9999 games (Wolf 2015). Being initially equipped with *Tetris*, the well-known game made in the Soviet Union in the 80s, later versions of Brick Game featured various modified versions of Tetris and other simulation games. It was cheap and portable, powered by 2 to 4 AA batteries. I suspect that it may have come from China or Taiwan as most of its components have been printed with Chinese characters.

In the late 90s and the early 2000s, Tamagotchi, the handheld digital pet originally designed and released by Bandai, was also introduced in Vietnam. Although this device was known as one of the biggest toy fads of this period that conquered the Asian market (Ng 2008), children in Vietnam knew about it mainly through cloned, China-made versions that did not allow players to link devices and whose batteries run out quickly. The original version that was released in 1996 and following generations of Tamagotchi were not popular in Vietnam since there were no authorized resellers in Vietnam. Besides, the bootleg version was also cheap, normally less than 3 USD, allowing youngsters to purchase it easily from street vendors. The Tamagotchis were pocket-sized and may be attached to a keyring or the backpack. Its portability also raised criticism. In Asia in general and in Vietnam particularly, children frequently took these digital pets to school because in the first two generations of this device, the character could die in less than half a day if it did not receive adequate care. Barayuga (1997) noted that concerns over class disruption as well as general distraction from schoolwork eventually prompted many schools to ban or confiscate the device.

The Game Boy series, Sony PSP, and Nintendo DS were in fashion in the late 2000s, though they were expensive. Because of the unaffordable price, and since there were no authorized sellers, the popularity of these devices was limited within the urban areas where there are available buyers who accepted to buy from unauthorized sellers. These sellers stocked in mainly through the border trade and grey markets. The existence of these unauthorized stored was also secured by new technology that enabled these devices to bypass copyright lock code, as in the R4 for Nintendo DS,

which allowed gamers to copy game ROMs to SD cards. That allows gamers to own more games while spending less money than purchasing authentic game cartridges. With a fee of 5 to 10 USD, sellers could help them copy as many ROMs as possible, thus expanding the option pool for them to play. In the consumption mind-set of Vietnamese gamers, that is more favorable. With the same amount of money spent, they could be introduced to hundreds of options instead of being tightened to one or two games whose replay value are still obscure.

Meanwhile, arcade games were only introduced in Vietnam later in the late 90s, by way of *Vu Tru Bay (The Flying Universe)* in Hanoi, and later in 2000, *Ngoi Sao Xanh (The Blue Star)*, a state-owned company. These offered a limited number of machines as each may cost around 10,000 USD (Tam Anh 2007). In the beginning, arcade games attracted Vietnamese gamers as these required combined skills other than sitting and pressing buttons. Game centers were also accessible and may be found near parks, cinemas, or malls. The token-operated machines eventually appeared to be expensive as the price for each token is about 2,000 to 5,000 VND. In the recent years, the token has been replaced by the top-up card. Instead of buying a stack of tokens, which might be inconvenient when carrying, gamers now decide the tentative amount of money that they want to spend on playing and ask the cashier to add this amount to the top-up card, which is a credit-card-sized smartcard. The rise of online gaming did not however decimate arcade gaming.

## **1.2. Online games as the current trend of recreation**

Online gaming in Vietnam was first made possible in June 2003 when the first Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) service was offered. Doan Giang (2010a) said this notable event in the development of online games “possessed the decisive characteristic of allowing all players to access a virtual world on a large scale with good speed and stable quality.” ADSL service flourished, which reduced prices of access to about 0.3 USD. ADSL ended expensive, low-speed prepaid and dial-up and also introduced Vietnamese online gaming to the global market.

Doan Giang (2010a) also added that in 2003, one of the first role-fantasy-playing games called *MU* was introduced to Vietnamese youth, “although it was in an unorthodox way.”<sup>3</sup> ADSL popularized *MU* with its ability to connect other players at a larger scale basis and instead of using LAN cable which is limited within the confines of an Internet café. Piracy also helped in its propagation with the game’s highly-shared source code.

Nevertheless, the period of piracy did not last long as these renegade servers manifested their connection instability, illegality of in-game items, as well as in-game errors which could not be fixed. According to Doan Giang (2010a) the first legal online game appeared on May 1, 2004 by way of the licensed Korean game *Gunbound*, a third-person shooting game using turn-based mode designed by Asiasoft. With two-dimensional graphics consisting of beautiful, bright colors and game rules that are easy to grasp, the game quickly picked up.

Online games distribution was professionalized by September 2004, initiated by VinaGame Company, a group of professional gamers led by Le Hong Minh, a core member of the Vietnamese National Team which attended the World Cyber Games in 2002. Rebecca Fannin (2010) in *Forbes* reported that VinaGame made up more than half of the online games’ revenue in Vietnam—up to 90% in 2005, and 65% in 2009.

In early 2005, *Vo Lam Truyen Ky*, a popular game until today<sup>4</sup> was introduced to Vietnamese gamers. It is notable for ushering in a period of Chinese martial-arts-based games massively imported to Vietnam. According to Minh Duong (2010), “with low hardware requirements, visible graphics, interesting gameplay, this role-playing game has rapidly become the most famous and successful online game in Vietnam.” After a long period of testing, the complete version of *Vo Lam Truyen Ky* was provided to players beginning

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<sup>3</sup> Illegal ways, to be precise. Players built personal servers to host the game without the permission from the game developers.

<sup>4</sup> Unlike other wuxia games which are slow in featuring new updates, *Vo Lam Truyen Ky* (*The Swordsman*) has been continuously updated in PC and Mobile versions with new maps and in-game events. It also has a bigger community of gamers and is known for being stable compared to other games.

mid-2005. Its first day offering however shocked gamers for its exorbitant playing rates: 20,000 VND (around 1 USD) for 25 hours and 60,000 VND (around 3 USD) for 100 hours. This led to protests which could have knocked out VinaGame. In the end, the final P2P (Pay to Play) plan was offered instead and until now enjoyed by the general public. VinaGame also kept players patronizing its products through “offline activities” like meetings and in-game items auction, among others. The business eventually created patron behaviour which managed limited resources. Vietnamese players opted to pay minimal fees to continue playing while others invested a considerable amount of money on their characters by equipping valuable in-game items or purchasing other strong characters for playing or reselling.

In September 2005, concerned parties and media outlets began to air objections to online games. A series of articles in *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, the mouthpiece of Vietnamese National Youth Union, discussed the supposed bad influence of online games like, for instance, VinaGame’s *Vo Lam Truyen Ky*, and how these became some sort of a digital opium for the youth. Within 3 months in late 2005, there were over 1,000 articles criticizing online games. However, this did not deter the players and investors from going on.

In August 2006, VTC Games released the popular Korean music game *Audition* in Vietnam. Doan Giang (2010b) has described it as “a solid product which has always been in the leading position of musical genre, usually played by female players and especially, by office staff.” If *Vo Lam Truyen Ky* was the first choice of male players, *Audition* was for females due to its colourful graphic design and music-themed dance content.<sup>5</sup> Besides, the gameplay does not require much time to play daily in order to make characters level up. Game quests are easily completed by using the D-pad or the four directional buttons on the keyboard) *Audition* was perceived to be the biggest opponent of *Vo Lam Truyen Ky*.

On the other hand, 2006 saw Vietnam’s first recorded the

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<sup>5</sup> Although the male-female ratio in *Audition* is nearly 50:50, according to the statistics result released by VTC- the distributor of *Audition* in Vietnam, this game is more popular among female players (Minh Nguyet 2014).

game closure. Fierce competition led to the demise of *Risk Your Life (RYL)*, which Khuyet Anh (2010) related to “the inability and weakness of the distributor Quang Minh DEC and the game’s management team.” The hardware factor was seen as the major obstacle for this game as it required a computer system equipped with high-end processors and high-ranked graphics card. It was a costly investment. For Khuyen Anh (2010) the case showed “the importance of the distributor and the organization work, (as) most players rated this game as an interesting and promising product.”

In April 2007, the first online game tournament for *Vo Lam Truyen Ky* was organized, and gathered numerous players. VinaGame hosted this event titled “The World Leading Guild,” described by Khuyet Anh (2010) as “the biggest game’s event ever in Vietnam.” This event marked a turning point for Vietnamese online games distributors in terms of advertising and marketing.

In March 2008, a new genre was introduced—the first-person shooting online games. It started with *Special Force*, and thereafter, a chain of three games distributed by VinaGame, VTC Game, and FPT Online. According to Doan Giang (2010b), “the presence of this genre has led to the fact that the role-playing games could not ‘seize the throne’ as usual.” The violent nature of the genre on the other hand forced the Ministry of Information and Communications to halt its operations in 2010 (Nghì Lam 2010a).

In August of the same year, there emerged *De Quoc Quat Khoi (The Empire)*, a web-game built on the web browser instead of a client package to be downloaded. Although not very successful, it was described by Doan Giang (2010b) as a leader, “especially when the web-game’s sector in Vietnam has exploded since 2011 with dozens of games launched and distributed by small publishers.” Browser games like *Magic King*, *Gunny*, *Linh Vuong*, or *Pockie Ninja* benefitted from the fact that online games installed using game’s installation package have yet to receive permission for distribution (Nghì Lam 2010b). These also came with simple graphic designs, as well as colorful, eye-catching content. Browser games have thus become the trump card of many distributors to recover and compensate while the 2010 ban on the importation of online games

using client packages.

In early 2009, the online game market in Vietnam welcomed more compelling content and graphics technology through three role-playing games with 3D graphics: *Atlantica* (distributed by TDE), *Granado Espada* (distributed by FPT Online) and *Doc Ba Giang Ho* (distributed by Asiasoft). Ngau Giang (2010) argued that the appearance of the said games “‘heat(ed) up’ the role-playing game market which was showing signs of ‘cooling off’ due to the rise of shooting games and web-based games.” These however suffered poor player patronage, low turnovers, as well as hacking issues such as the use of “cheat” codes.

In August 2009, the first Vietnamese online game *Thuan Thien Kiem* debuted in the market and brought Vietnam in the Asian games production map. There was so much interest in this made-in-Vietnam wuxia game produced by VinaGame and which was said to be influenced by Chinese games. Ngau Giang (2010) recalled that “in the first hours, the game was overloaded because the number of login accounts was much more than the distributor had predicted.”

The year 2010 saw the closure of 20 games. According to Ha An (2011), “this was also the largest number of closures in the history of online games in Vietnam, even equal to the sum of all deactivated games from previous years.” Games such as *PTV*, *Taan*, *Cabal*, *Cuu Long Tranh Ba* or *Billionaire Online*, among others, closed down because of the expiration of the distribution contract, the cost of maintaining business, and the producers’ inability to attract more players.

Meanwhile, 2011 was a banner year for online games with the strong performance of nearly 20 web-games released, accounting for more than 80% of new games in the said year. The presence of a new platform that required client package installation gave online games a boost. Vietnamese players also had more choices games to play. However, Viet Hai (2011) also echoed that “the huge number of web-games in Vietnam also made players complain about excessive release of these games.”

The license directory of online games from the Ministry of Information and Communications (2011) listed a total of 59 games, including browser games, released in Vietnamese market until March 2012. There are also 11 major companies officially operating online games—VinaGame (VNG), VTC Game, FPT Online, Asiasoft, SGame, VDC Net 2E, DECO, Saigon, NetGame, NSC Media, and Tamtay. Many companies or small distribution groups have also emerged.

In terms of revenue, VinaGame led the pack with more than 2,500 billion VND in earnings (GenK 2013). It had continued to lead in terms of patronage, and by way of its portal Zing, which eases the purchase of game cards and brings the community of gamers together. Moreover, Chinese companies producing games tend to make deals with VinaGame because of its reputation. Copyright costs were also maintained to a minimum, diversifying VinaGame's game offerings.

With the rise of web-games, mobile games retained revenue domain to 6% of the total revenue of the whole industry. In previous years, the cost to buy the copyright of one web-game from China fell between 60,000 and 80,000 USD. In 2012 and much later, it was at least 70,000 USD and could rocket to 200,000 USD for a game with 3D graphics—almost the price of a normal PC online game. The year also saw the expansion and clarification of game titles' concurrent users (CCU). In digital marketing in general and online gaming in particular, CCU is the indicator of the total number of users accessing a digital product within a predefined period of time (Seif El-Nasr et al. 2013). The higher the CCU, the more successful the product. In previous years, the CCU between games did not yield good outputs. In 2012 however, some notable games yielded 50,000 CCUs while others only peaked at 10,000 CCUs, with some others lagging behind with 5,000 CCU. From this perspective, FPT, one of the Big Four in Vietnam saw that although gaming industry is a growing, it still entailed risks, especially after the strict policies enforced in 2010. FPT's revenues dropped to 32% as it could not release new games and while other old games had no updates (Kal 2013).

In 2013, the industry bounced back. More imported PC online games were patronized after the release of Decree 72, the first complete guidelines released by the government to manage the online game market in Vietnam. GameK (2013) pointed out aside from the 2010 policy limiting the number of imported games, browser games outranked PC online games because of the volume of the installation package. In comparison with a package that could reach several gigabytes to download and install, a browser game only utilized a few hundred megabytes of graphics plug-ins. The opening of more hi-end gears-equipped Internet cafés allowed the return of PC online games. Besides, the most sought after game genre of 2013 was shooting games, which attracted more gamers who already tired with the saturated market of wuxia-themed role-playing games.

In the same year, Vietnam also witnessed the burgeoning of many Chinese game companies running private servers and doing business illegally in Vietnam. Although many Chinese companies worked through legal means and collaboration with Vietnamese companies, others like Koram Games or Lemon Game challenged the Vietnamese government by releasing a lot of unregistered games, avoiding tax, and even embedding obscene images in their advertising (Le My 2014). On the bright side, the year welcomed the emergence of mobile games which were also starting to make waves across Southeast Asia.

Highlighting 2014 were two milestones. The first was the unbelievable success of *Flappy Bird*, an indie mobile game made by Nguyen Ha Dong. It featured a simple scenario and an unsophisticated graphics that resembles 8-bit games in the past. Despite this, it became popular around the world, earning for Nguyen millions of dollars (Lan Huong 2014). He was not able to replicate his one-hit wonder, though he was able to overcome a tax evasion case filed against him. His example inspired indie developers to invest in designing and releasing their own games in the digital market using the notable application stores. The second was the tragic shutdown of FPT, one that could have been averted. The knock-out punch was given by VinaGame when it took the copyright of FPT's highly successful *Thien Long Bat Bo*, which led

to the eventual turnover of FPT Online (Nut Chuoi 2014).

Since 2015, online gaming in Vietnam has been robust and leads in the region with a total revenue of around 300 million USD (Trinh Tran 2016). The number of players and tournaments have increased noticeably while the attention towards online games has also been fostered with the birth of live streaming, making streamer and game commentator endeavors very lucrative. However, the industry is still beset with challenges. 2game (2016) and Trinh Tran (2016) both agreed that although Vietnam has achieved quite a lot, it still needs to build a reputation for itself. For instance, in 2016, the top 10 games were all imported from China or South Korea, and the benefit-sharing ratio between Chinese or Korean companies and Vietnamese distributors are always 80:20 or 70:30; even the most favorable deal could only lead to the ratio of 50:50. Thus, as Trinh Tran (2016) mentioned, what Vietnam really earns is just a portion of what foreign companies get. It needs to make more local products like *Sky Garden: Farm in Paradise* or *Loan Dau Vo Lam*.

### III. Conclusion

In Vietnam, video games in general, and online games in particular, represent the success of the Doi Moi (Reform) process. The movement allowed Vietnam to be more open to the outside world after such a long time. IT and other digital platforms were eventually considered one of the four pillars of Vietnam as it catches up with globalization. Video games showcase the emergence of free, market-driven Vietnamese economy. As the Internet in Vietnam becomes more stable and steady enough to even host a heavy-loaded digital entertainment format, Vietnam continues to make its mark as it explores the vast possibilities of online games in the global sphere.

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Received: Feb. 22, 2019; Reviewed: May 2, 2019; Accepted: July 15, 2019