

North Korea's newest fad: *Boy General* mobile-phone game

By Eric Talmadge
The Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea — Millions of North Koreans are now using mobile phones, and not just to make phone calls.

The Associated Press recently got a sneak peek at *Boy General*, the North's hottest new game release, a spinoff of a new television animation series that is both beautifully produced and genuinely fun to watch — suggesting Pyongyang is trying to win back an audience drawn to the banned Chinese and South Korean dramas that flow across its borders.

The app became an immediate hit after its September release, particularly in Pyongyang, where there are more mobile phones and a population that generally has more money and time to spend on leisure activities. The even more popular televised animation series returned to the airwaves in August and runs on Sunday evenings.

In the game, players are prompted to go on missions to defeat the enemies of the young general Swoeme, which means “Iron Hammer,” a brave warrior-commander of the Koguryo kingdom that lasted for about 700 years and ruled most of the Korean Peninsula and the heart of Manchuria until its downfall in 668 C.E.

The concept and design of *Boy General* are simple, and its map-like scenery is reminiscent of the *Minecraft* game. Since there is nothing like the App Store in North Korea, the most common way of obtaining the game appears to be sharing it over Bluetooth.

Games are not new to North Korean mobile-phone users.

Not long after the use of mobile phones was opened up in 2009, some handsets came pre-installed with games such as *Tetris* or *janggi*, a chess-like game that is



NEWEST FAD. A man plays a piano game on his mobile phone in North Korea. Millions of North Koreans are now using mobile phones, and not just to make phone calls. Not long after the use of mobile phones was opened up in 2009, some handsets came pre-installed with games such as *Tetris* or *janggi*, a chess-like game that is popular across East Asia. As phones and to a lesser extent tablets have become more sophisticated, so have the games available for North Koreans to enjoy. (AP Photo/Eric Talmadge)

Korea — appears to be that it's just fun to play.

Another new or perhaps updated game that came out this summer is called *Tank Battle*, a shoot 'em up in which the goal is to destroy as many enemy tanks as possible. One might expect the American flag to be visible somewhere, but the nationality of the enemy tanks is not specified.

For those of a more nurturing nature, there is a virtual pet game, which explains why from time to time faint meows can be heard near gatherings of young North Koreans. The virtual pet in their pocket is lonely.

A game that looks a lot like *Angry Birds* is still popular, along with a *Bubble-Popping* game and for the very young, *Baby Piano*, for tapping out songs.

Though local users are unable to connect to the internet — North Korea instead has its own domestic-use-only intranet — they can send each other text messages, photos and, for high-end users, videos.

Phones also come with dictionaries and encyclopedias, and provide access to e-books and some state-run news sites. If you want to know the weather forecast, you can call 112. KoryoLink, the county's mobile-service provider, also recently introduced a selection of about 200 ringtones for a small additional fee.

But if North Koreans want to call or text a foreigner, they are out of luck. Foreigners are kept on a different network.

Eric Talmadge is Pyongyang bureau chief for The AP.

popular across East Asia. As phones and to a lesser extent tablets have become more sophisticated, so have the games available for North Koreans to enjoy.

With its state-of-the-art animation values, often beautiful artistry, and entertaining characters and plot developments, the television show has been a breath of fresh air for North Koreans, who are increasingly exposed to Chinese or South Korean entertainment. State-run television is dominated by bland fare of old propaganda movies and news programs praising the country's leadership.

Boy General may be North Korea's answer to that challenge.

Both the television series and the game clearly have the support of the ruling regime. The show is a revamped and vastly improved version of a 50-episode cartoon that started in the 1980s and ran on and off until 1997. In November last year, leader Kim Jong Un himself ordered the

production of the 50 new episodes from the April 26 Animation Studios. It's not clear who designed the game version.

The political message remains strong. For starters, there is the obvious analogy of Swoeme to leader Kim, who, while still in his early 30s, has among his many titles that of Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army. They also reinforce the official line that the nation must remain united against the constant threat of foreign invaders.

Koguryo, which like today's North Korea had its capital in Pyongyang, was overthrown by an alliance between the Chinese Tang Dynasty and the southern Korean kingdom of Silla. The dastardly and yet often comical villain is Hobi, a snaggle-toothed, pig-nosed Chinese spy who tried to assassinate Swoeme before he rose to the rank of general.

But the real appeal of the game — and many others now available in North

Band favored by North Korean leader cancels Beijing concerts

By Christopher Bodeen
The Associated Press

BEIJING — An all-female band formed by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un cancelled its concerts in Beijing and abruptly left the Chinese capital due to unspecified communication issues, possibly further cooling relations between the traditional allies.

The Moranbong Band was scheduled for three concerts in Beijing in what was viewed as a visit to cultivate ties between the countries.

The performance “cannot be staged as scheduled due to communication issues at the working level,” the official Xinhua News Agency said, citing a news release from unnamed “relevant departments.”

Band members arrived at Beijing's airport in North Korean Embassy vehicles in the afternoon and departed aboard a North Korean Air Koryo jet shortly after 4:00pm following a lengthy delay, Chinese news website sina.com reported.

A staff member at the National Theater, where the band was to give the invitation-

only performances, said the concerts were cancelled, but did not give a reason. An accompanying North Korean musical troupe, the State Merited Chorus, also pulled out because of the communication issues, Xinhua said.

Calls to the International Department of the Communist Party's Central Committee, which organizes exchanges with foreign political parties, rang unanswered and there was no statement available online.

Although North Korea is well known for

its unpredictability, the sudden cancellation of the concerts could hurt relations between Beijing and Pyongyang. Ties between the sides have been noticeably cooler since Kim assumed power in 2011.

The news release quoted by Xinhua said China attaches high importance to cultural exchanges with North Korea and was “ready to continue to work with it to promote the bilateral exchanges and cooperation in culture and all other areas.”

The band's abrupt departures might
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