

Day 11

Macron's government on the line

The world in brief • Mar 20th 2023 • 1 min read



On Monday France's National Assembly will vote on two motions of no-confidence, after Emmanuel Macron's decision on Thursday to force through a raise of the minimum pension age from 62 to 64 without a parliamentary vote. To pass, each motion needs to secure the backing of a majority of deputies in the 577-member assembly. If that happens Elisabeth Borne, the prime minister, and her government will be toppled, less than a year after taking office.

The opposition has the numbers, as Mr Macron does not command a parliamentary majority. But opposition parties are split, and some deputies from the centre-right Republicans are hesitating. Most of the French dislike the reform, and many call Mr Macron's actions anti-democratic. Unions have called for another national strike on March 23rd. In some cities, protests against the president's controversial use of a constitutional provision to bypass the parliamentary vote have turned nasty. The survival of Mr Macron's government hangs in the balance. → 悬而未决

~~101 Essays That Will Change~~

5

16 SIGNS of a SOCIALLY INTELLIGENT PERSON

While you may not know what makes someone socially intelligent, ^{inept} you have likely experienced the kind of social tone-deafness that leaves you feeling frustrated at best, and physically uncomfortable at worst. → ^{eyeroll-inducing}

Europe's construction sector holds on

The world in brief • Mar 21st 2023 • 1 min read



If there were a contest for the sector hardest hit by inflation and high interest rates, it would be a crowded field. Banks are currently in the lead, but construction firms could also be a solid bet. For them, higher rates means less demand from would-be house buyers. And higher prices for construction materials and energy shrink their margins.

So far, however, Europe's construction sector is holding up. New figures released on Tuesday are likely to show a rebound in January from a very weak December, when production in the euro area fell 2.5% in comparison with the previous month in seasonally adjusted terms. And surveys of construction managers suggest that the sector's overall confidence, while falling, is still higher than its average over the last twenty years or so.

Yet the number of new construction projects given the go-ahead is a cause for concern. In Germany, for instance, building permits issued for family dwellings fell by 26% in January compared with the year before. Europe's builders will hope not to rival the continent's banks for top spot anytime soon.

Tremors in the banking system

The world in brief • Mar 21st 2023 • 1 min read



Following another week of turmoil in global banking, UBS, a Swiss bank, announced on Sunday that it was acquiring Credit Suisse, its struggling Swiss rival, in a rescue deal that valued the latter at around SFr3bn (\$3.2bn). As part of the deal, holders of Credit Suisse's "additional Tier-1" bonds—a type of debt designed to absorb losses when a bank fails—were wiped out. This controversial move is reverberating through the market for similar debt, worth \$275bn, as investors revise their expectations of what might happen in the unlikely event of another bank failure.

The enlarged UBS will now begin a knotty integration process with Credit Suisse. The new mega-bank will hold nearly one-third of the Swiss market and manage \$3.4trn through its wealth-management division. The combined investment-banking business will see brutal cost-cutting in coming months, much of it inflicted on traders and dealmakers from Credit Suisse. Financial policymakers around the world will be fervently hoping the new union succeeds.

Boris Johnson faces the music

The world in brief • Mar 22nd 2023 • 1 min read



It will be the British equivalent of an impeachment hearing. On Wednesday Boris Johnson, the former prime minister, will appear before the Privileges Committee of the House of Commons to answer the charge that he lied to Parliament. The high crimes and misdemeanours in question are a series of ^{said} boozy parties that took place in Downing Street during covid-19 lockdowns. Mr Johnson admits the parties happened, and that when he told lawmakers no rules were broken, he was wrong. But he insists he did not “intentionally or recklessly mislead” the Commons because it was what he “honestly knew and believed at the time”, according to written evidence.

If Mr Johnson is found guilty, he could be suspended from Parliament—that might trigger a by-election, ejecting him from the Commons. It would be a fittingly dramatic end to one of the most turbulent and unpredictable parliamentary careers in British history.

Sweden's NATO vote

The world in brief • Mar 22nd 2023 • 1 min read



On Wednesday Sweden's parliament, the Riksdag, will vote on the country's application to join NATO. The bill will pass: every major party supports it. But President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, which as a NATO member can veto accession, is blocking the Swedes (though he no longer objects to Finland, which is also trying to join the alliance). Mr Erdogan wants Sweden to deport more than 100 people he calls “terrorists”, mainly Kurds who he claims back a separatist movement. And he thinks the country should forbid burning the Koran, as a far-right Danish MP did in Stockholm, Sweden's capital, in January.

Mr Erdogan faces an election on May 14th—some experts think Turkey's grandstanding will stop afterwards (regardless of who wins). In Sweden, support for joining NATO is strong. But most Swedes oppose restricting freedom of expression at Mr Erdogan's request. Some grumble that joining NATO is not worth bending over backwards to please him, and feel abandoned by Finland going ahead without them.

Tencent bounces back

The world in brief • Mar 22nd 2023 • 1 min read



Earlier this month Pony Ma, the founder of Tencent, a Chinese gaming and social-media behemoth, was left off a list of delegates attending the country's big annual political meeting. His exclusion, after serving two five-year terms in the National People's Congress, was yet another sign that tech bosses in China have lost clout, following a two-year crackdown on the internet industry.

高频量高频词

Investors may not be too bothered. Tencent's share price has surged since October last year. After a long wait, several of its video games have been approved by Chinese regulators. Greater consumer spending has increased the use of the company's payments tools. All this was reflected in its earnings report for the last quarter of 2022, released on Wednesday. After two quarters of annualised decline, revenues grew again, albeit only by 1%, to 145bn yuan (\$21.2bn) from 144bn yuan a year earlier. Forecasts for 2023 are even more optimistic. For Mr Ma that will go some way towards making up for any political snub.

The Fed's choice between stability and inflation

The world in brief • Mar 22nd 2023 • 1 min read



Stormy financial conditions pose a dilemma for the Federal Reserve, which will decide on Wednesday whether to raise interest rates. Before the turmoil that started with a run on Silicon Valley Bank earlier this month, a ninth straight rise seemed a foregone conclusion. Some Fed watchers had called for a jumbo increase amid signs of worryingly persistent inflation. But now there is uncertainty about whether it will raise rates at all.

→ 预料中的必然结局

High rates have been at the root of the financial chaos, so raising them again would risk further undermining troubled banks. Moreover, instability is itself a drag on the economy, meaning the Fed may have less distance to go to slow inflation. Set against these arguments is the extraordinary lending support that the Fed has already provided to stabilise banks. That could give it space to continue its fight against inflation, confident that the worst of the panic has passed.

THE BRIEF HEALTH

5 health benefits of houseplants

BY ANGELA HAUPT

COLLECTING AND CARING for houseplants boomed in popularity during the pandemic, especially among younger adults without abundant outdoor space. Americans spent \$8.5 billion more on gardening-related items in 2020 than in 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Vibrant communities blossomed on social media, like the #PlantTok corner of TikTok, uniting plant parents and making it easy to swap tips (and mail one another cuttings). The consensus among these enthusiasts: plants are an accessible, interesting way to make an otherwise drab space more inviting, and there's a unique thrill to watching them grow.

Plus, there's a robust body of research indicating they make us happier and healthier. "I tell people, 'Let them bring you life, the way you do to them,'" says Libby Bolles, who opened Fancy Leaf Plant Co. in Parrish, Fla., in 2021.



JADE PLANT

If these succulents break or get too big, "you can cut them and start new ones very easily," says horticultural therapist Gary L. Altman



CONTENTS

2. They can sharpen attention

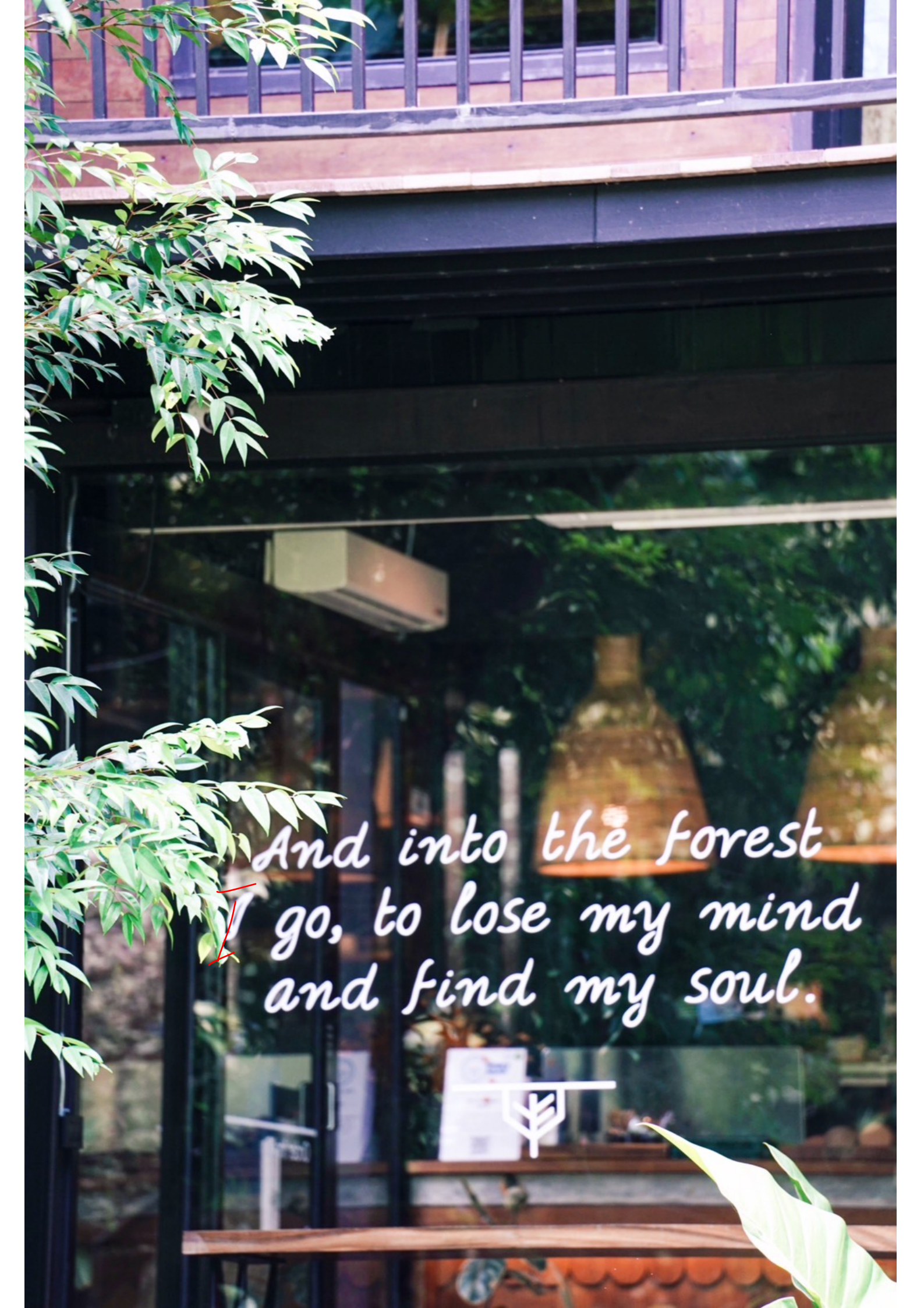
Numerous studies have suggested **greenery is restorative and increases the ability to concentrate**, including among kids. One found that elementary-school-age kids in classrooms with a “green wall”—a vertical garden where living plants cover an indoor wall—scored better on measures of focused attention than kids in standard classrooms. Knuth says she has 50 to 60 plants at home, and 45 in her university office. The research supporting attention and concentration “is one of the reasons I justify having so many,” she says.

SPIDER PLANT
They're very easy to propagate, which means lots of people enjoy giving their friends and family baby plants



3. They may speed up healing

Plants may quicken recovery from an illness, injury, or surgery. According to one paper, hospitalized people who had a view of plants or trees were **calmer and had better clinical outcomes**, including a reduced need for pain medication and a shorter hospital stay, compared with those who didn't. “They found that simply looking at plants had some benefits,” says Derrick Stowell, past president of the American Horticultural Therapy Association.



*And into the forest
I go, to lose my mind
and find my soul.*



Biden in Canada

The world in brief • Mar 24th 2023 • 1 min read



The convention for a new American president to make [Canada](#) their first foreign visit has broken in recent years. Donald Trump went to the Middle East first. And covid-19 meant that Joe Biden's first meeting in office with Justin Trudeau, Canada's prime minister, was a virtual one. Now Mr Biden has finally made it to Ottawa, Canada's capital, for a two day jaunt. On Friday he addresses the country's Parliament.

→ a short journey
简单粗暴背下来
The leaders mostly see eye-to-eye, but [migration](#) is one area where they differ. Canada wants to send back asylum seekers who make unofficial border crossings from America, which numbered around 40,000 last year. Meanwhile, America wants Canadian help in dealing with migrants illegally crossing its southern border with Mexico. Many of those migrants are from Haiti, where Mr Biden believes Canada should lead an armed force to help [restore order](#). Mr Trudeau says that "outside intervention" will not achieve that goal. Still, expect the leaders to trumpet their collaboration. In today's world, allies are not to be taken for granted.

A happiness summit by Lake Como

The world in brief • Mar 24th 2023 • 1 min read



Spring has finally arrived in the northern hemisphere (the vernal equinox, which marks the season's start, passed on Monday). What better moment to think about happiness? Over the next three days, in the joyful surroundings of Lake Como in northern Italy, participants at the fifth World Happiness Summit will be doing just that. Karen Guggenheim, the event's founder, promises "three transformative days" filled with lessons on creating "positive mindsets".

The realisation that affluence does not necessarily correlate to [happiness](#) has led to a growing scholarly interest in what does. Speakers at the summit include intellectual heavyweights like [Daniel Kahneman](#), a Nobel prize-winning behavioural economist, and Richard Layard, who founded the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics. Moreover, cheerfulness is [serious business](#). The organisers are promoting a course on "Elements of Wellbeing" for the princely sum of \$2,599. Perhaps you can put a price on happiness, after all.

Kagame frees Paul Rusesabagina

The world in brief • Mar 25th 2023 • 1 min read



Paul Rusesabagina's life is already remarkable enough to have been turned into a Hollywood film. "Hotel Rwanda" (2004) shows how he saved hundreds of lives during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 while he was the manager of a plush hotel in Kigali, the capital. Mr Rusesabagina drew on his fame to criticise Paul Kagame, the country's autocratic president, and became an opposition leader. Mr Kagame increasingly saw Mr Rusesabagina as a threat, and orchestrated his [arrest on terrorism charges](#) in 2020. But, despite later being sentenced to 25 years in prison, the government has suddenly announced that Mr Rusesabagina will be released on Saturday.

Only Mr Kagame knows why. It may be that the president believes he has proved his point to his most famous enemy. Or he wants to rebuild bridges with the West (Mr Rusesabagina is a permanent resident of America and a Belgian citizen). Whatever the reason, filmmakers would have plenty of material for a sequel.

Asia's art elite gather in Hong Kong

The world in brief • Mar 25th 2023 • 1 min read



Not long ago the streets of Hong Kong were daubed in colourful [protest graffiti](#). The authorities scrubbed it away—and with it free expression—after a draconian [national-security law](#) was introduced in 2020. But that has not stopped Hong Kong from touting itself as a cultural hub. [M+](#), a swanky museum, opened in 2021. Now the city is hosting Art Basel Hong Kong, Asia's leading contemporary art fair, which closes on Saturday.

The fair marks [Hong Kong's](#) full post-pandemic return (attendees no longer need to wear masks) as the region's [art capital](#). It faces growing [competition](#) for that title. Seoul and Singapore hosted new art fairs while Hong Kong was shuttered by harsh covid restrictions. Yet Christie's, an auction house, says the city retains strong appeal for art collectors and dealers in Asia, who like its favourable tax system and access to China, the world's second-biggest art market after America. The city has lost many artistic [freedoms](#), but some buyers appear unbothered.

→ no more sleep over

Havoc on American spring break

The world in brief • Mar 25th 2023 • 1 min read



Each spring swarms of students flock to America's southern beach towns for a booze-fuelled week-long party. But this year in Miami Beach, a city on Florida's coast, things got especially raucous. On March 19th, after two deadly shootings, the mayor imposed an emergency curfew and banned the sale of takeaway alcohol after 6pm in part of the city.

Legally, the rules lasted just 72 hours. But the implication was clear: Miami Beach was warding off the frat bros. Spring break brings few benefits to the local economy. Compared with other tourists, college students barely spend money. And resort-tax revenues do not cover the massive cost of policing the crowds. Moreover, attempts to change a party culture are often thwarted: when Miami Beach withheld permits for beach parties, entrepreneurial hosts took to the sea. Still, the revellers are not unwanted everywhere. South Padre Island, off the Texas coast, spent \$15,000 to advertise on college campuses this year. It may come to regret it.



Weekend profile: Shou Zi Chew, TikTok's studiously boring boss

The world in brief • Mar 25th 2023 • 2 min read





TikTok's billion-plus users long to be famous for 15 seconds. But the social-media app's chief executive, Shou Zi Chew, avoids the limelight. Few of TikTok's users would recognise the 40-year-old Singaporean, whose personal TikTok account, @shou.time, shows only 13 videos posted in the past year. He seldom gives interviews and his Wikipedia entry runs to about 150 words. Yet on Thursday Mr Chew was thrust before the world's cameras as he gave evidence to a committee of America's House of Representatives.

Democrats and Republicans alike fret that TikTok, which is owned by Bytedance, a Chinese company, is a tool for spying on American users and feeding them communist propaganda. TikTok has always denied this. On Thursday Mr Chew did his best to persuade his inquisitors that he was not out to brainwash Americans, but merely to entertain them and show them ads. (TikTok will book nearly \$7bn in advertising in America this year, forecasts Insider Intelligence, a data company.)

Amid this fiery debate, Mr Chew is a reassuringly boring presence. He professes to enjoy golf (always plugging #golftok) and theoretical physics. A graduate of University College London and Harvard Business School, he worked for Goldman Sachs in London and interned at Facebook before returning to Asia for a stint in venture capital. He led the international business of Xiaomi, a Chinese smartphone company, before joining ByteDance in 2021 as chief financial officer. Two months later he took over at TikTok after its previous boss, a former Disney executive named Kevin Mayer, quit amid a failed attempt by Donald Trump's government to force the app's sale to an American buyer.

With President Joe Biden now reviving plans to separate TikTok from its Chinese owner—and with speculation that China might counter by withdrawing the app altogether—Mr Chew's job is to convince congressmen that TikTok is not a threat. He is also keen to remind them of the wrath they might face if they shut down one of America's favourite apps. In a rare video posted this week on TikTok, Mr Chew appeared in a Zuckerberg-esque jeans and hoodie to announce that the app had passed 150m users in America. The subtext to Congress: that would be a lot of angry current, and potential, voters.

Economic optimism in Germany

The world in brief • Mar 27th 2023 • 1 min read



→ Everything is coming up rosy
The mood among German businesses is getting rosier. At least that's what a business-climate indicator published by Ifo, a research institute, is likely to show on Monday. The German Council of Economic Experts, an academic body, is also growing more upbeat. Its expectations for the economy have improved, compared with those of late 2022, according to a recent report. It now expects [Germany's GDP](#) to grow by 0.2% this year, rather than contract. One boon: [energy](#) prices have dropped from last summer's dizzying heights.

Even so, inflation is declining more slowly than many had hoped, which is dampening consumption. The council expects price levels in Germany to rise by 6.6% this year, then by 3% next year. And Klaus Mueller, the head of Germany's energy regulator, warned recently that there was still a risk of natural gas running short next winter. The odds of that happening? It depends on the weather and on consumers (both industrial and residential) continuing to save gas.

Scotland gets a new leader

The world in brief • Mar 27th 2023 • 1 min read



The ruling party in Scotland will get a new leader on Monday. A ballot of Scottish National Party members was triggered in mid-February by the [resignation of Nicola Sturgeon](#), the leader since 2014. The winner will be sworn in as Scotland's first minister on Wednesday. The two frontrunners are Humza Yousaf, the health secretary, and Kate Forbes, the finance minister.

Whoever prevails will face several difficult tasks. One is [reuniting the party](#) after a contest marked by infighting and criticism of its record in office since 2007. All three candidates have promised to lead Scotland to independence, but with popular support for separation flagging, that's a distant prospect. And the SNP's governing coalition with the Scottish Green Party may be put to a test. Ms Forbes and Ash Regan, the third of the candidates, are opposed to gender-recognition legislation, which the Greens have heavily promoted. A rift would weaken the alliance the two parties have created over independence.

El Salvador's never-ending state of exception

The world in brief • Mar 27th 2023 • 1 min read



Monday marks a year since El Salvador introduced a “state of exception”. The emergency powers, which came in response to a spate of gang killings and are renewed monthly, suspend some constitutional rights. Security forces can arrest people without giving them a reason and hold them for long periods of time. Human-rights groups have criticised the heavy-handed tactics. Almost 2% of the adult population of 6.3m are now behind bars, including many innocent people.

But the crackdown remains popular. As does the man behind it: President Nayib Bukele enjoys an approval rating of over 90%. Many Salvadoreans are willing to overlook their leader’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies, which include co-opting institutions and threatening critics, largely because crime is falling. The murder rate has dropped and people say once-dangerous neighbourhoods are now safe. For now, the state of exception has become the norm.

Composting takes off in New York

The world in brief • Mar 27th 2023 • 1 min read



On Monday, curbside composting comes to Queens in New York City. A trial, last autumn, in which composting bins were set up throughout the borough was a success: residents kept 5,760 tonnes of food scraps and garden waste from landfills. Eric Adams, New York’s mayor, wants the service rolled out across the entire city by the end of next year, which would make it the country’s biggest composting programme. (New York residents won’t be compelled to take part, however, unlike those in San Francisco and some other cities.)

Composting bins have long been available at farmers markets, but such efforts reached only “true believers”, according to Jessica Tisch, the city’s Sanitation Commissioner. Instead of waxing poetic about methane reduction, Ms Tisch and others talk up the benefits of unifying against a hated adversary: rats. Reported sightings of the rodents doubled year-on-year in 2022. Keeping food waste out of rubbish bags, says Mr Adams, is “dealing a blow to New York City’s number one enemy”.

Re-re-read The Economist

Peacemaker or provocateur?

Big questions loomed behind the Chinese leader's trip to Moscow

Mar 19th 2023 | Moscow

saboteur



1 [N-COUNT 可数名词] 蓄意破坏者;从事破坏活动者;(英国)阻挠捕猎活动者; **A saboteur is a person who deliberately damages or destroys things such as machines, railway lines, and bridges in order to weaken an enemy or to make a protest. In Britain, people who try to stop blood sports such as fox hunting are also referred to as saboteurs .**

The saboteurs had planned to bomb buses and offices.
闹事者原本计划用炸弹袭击公共汽车和办公楼。

//...a confrontation between huntsmen and saboteurs.
狩猎者和反捕猎活动人士的对峙

End of the clown show?



“Honest” Boris Johnson looks done for

The former prime minister now provides more theatre than threat

Mar 22nd 2023



BORIS JOHNSON is an honest man. It is possible to tell this by the sheer number of times he declares his honesty. In his written submission to the committee of MPs investigating whether he intentionally misled Parliament over [Partygate](#), the word “honest” popped up around 20 times in one form or another. In a three-hour hearing on March 22nd he offered yet more honesty, at one point even “hand on heart.” And little speaks more of honesty than declaring your honesty 20-odd times in two days.

Mr Johnson first came to national attention on a BBC comedy show called “Have I Got News for You”. Watch it now and those episodes feel more like a prophecy: the privileges committee, with clapping. Everything is there: the hair; the bluster; the accusations of wrongdoing. And, of course, the honesty. When asked then about an alleged crime, he replied: “Honestly, I don’t remember.”

It didn’t matter then. He was so funny, so blond, so charismatic. As the show’s host at the time said: “Everyone’s going to love you.” And large

Rolls-Royce no more?

The machine that runs Britain's state needs an overhaul

Ministerial hostility and increased churn compound long-standing concerns about the civil service

Mar 23rd 2023



IN 2011 THE Ministry of Justice (MoJ) decided to roll out a new GPS-enabled ankle tag for criminals, in the hope of reducing reoffending. The design included 900 bespoke requirements and was split between four contractors—a high-risk structure in which the MoJ had no experience. Officials and suppliers fell out; managers came and went; hazy assumptions went unchallenged. In 2022 the programme was canned at a cost of £98m.

The tagging fiasco, and the ministry responsible for it, provide a lens into the way Britain is governed. The MoJ is the civil service in microcosm. It has a mid-sized budget. It comprises some 6,000 staff at its HQ, a brutalist citadel near the Houses of Parliament, and 80,000 more spread across the prison service, the courts service and a panoply of smaller agencies.

Generational divide

Younger Americans are friendlier to China

They are much less likely to see the country as an enemy than their parents

Mar 23rd 2023 | Los Angeles



THE COMPETITION between America and China is infiltrating college dorm rooms. Citing national security concerns, at least 29 states have banned TikTok, the video app owned by ByteDance, a Chinese firm, on government devices. Many universities also banned students from using the app on campus wifi. In practice, that means students will use data, not wifi, to watch videos of friends revealing their outfits for sorority recruitment. But young people's surprise over the TikTok bans may also reveal how differently they view China from their parents.



The Economist

Recent polling from *The Economist* and YouGov shows the startling difference in Americans' views of China by age group. Roughly 25% of Americans aged 18 to 44 said they view China as an enemy, compared with about 52% of those 45 and over (see chart). Almost as many young Americans said they view China as "friendly" as those who said the country was an "enemy". Just 4% of older Americans see China as friendly.

Young Americans were also less likely to see Russia as an enemy than their older peers, though all ages expressed more hostility towards Russia than China. This is probably due to the war in Ukraine, and older Americans' lingering dislike for the Soviet Union during the cold war.

Meanwhile, views of China among partisans are shifting. Republicans have long been more likely than Democrats to view China as an adversary. But both parties have become more hawkish. When Donald Trump took office in 2017, just 10% of Democrats and 20% of Republicans said they believed China to be an enemy. As of last week, 34% of Democrats and 48% of Republicans took this view.

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Bring our bears home

Chinese nationalists are up in arms over the treatment of pandas

One has died at a zoo in America. Another is losing clumps of fur

Mar 23rd 2023



LE LE MEANS “happy happy”, but the giant panda known by that name appeared to be in a sad state. Last year animal advocates accused the Memphis Zoo in America of neglecting the bear and his female companion, Ya Ya. In February Le Le died, apparently of heart disease. Now Ya Ya (meaning “cute girl”) is looking less adorable. She has been losing clumps of hair, raising concerns about her health.

It is not just animal lovers who are distressed. The bears are on loan from China, part of the country’s “panda diplomacy”. Chinese nationalists allege mistreatment fuelled by anti-Chinese sentiment in America. “When even giant pandas are affected, it shows China-US relations are really bad,” said the *Global Times*, a nationalist tabloid.

An online campaign has been launched in China to bring Ya Ya back home. Giant photos of the sick-looking bear have been placed on billboards (see

picture). Chinese living abroad visit her and post updates on her condition. Others are checking up on pandas hosted by other zoos in America and elsewhere. Russia has been praised for its first-class treatment of two pandas at Moscow Zoo.

Chinese officials often fan nationalist anger. In this case they have called for calm. Diplomats stationed in America visited the Memphis Zoo and “confirmed that the giant pandas have been cared for”, according to official reports. Ya Ya, 22, is old and suffering from a skin condition, explained the Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens, which arranges panda loans.

Panda diplomacy is a boon for China. Zoos pay up to \$1m a year to rent a bear (extra if a rare cub is born). The animals highlight China’s fairly successful conservation efforts—the species was reclassified as “vulnerable”, up from “endangered”, in 2016. And, say critics, the pandas make an authoritarian state seem cuddly. Around 20 countries are currently hosting the bears.



Ya Ya is expected to return to China in April, when her loan agreement expires. But the affair has left some in China questioning the practice of panda diplomacy. “It should be reduced,” says a visitor to the Beijing Zoo who has been raising awareness by carrying a tote bag with Ya Ya’s picture on it. Pandas come from China, she says, but they do not belong to it.

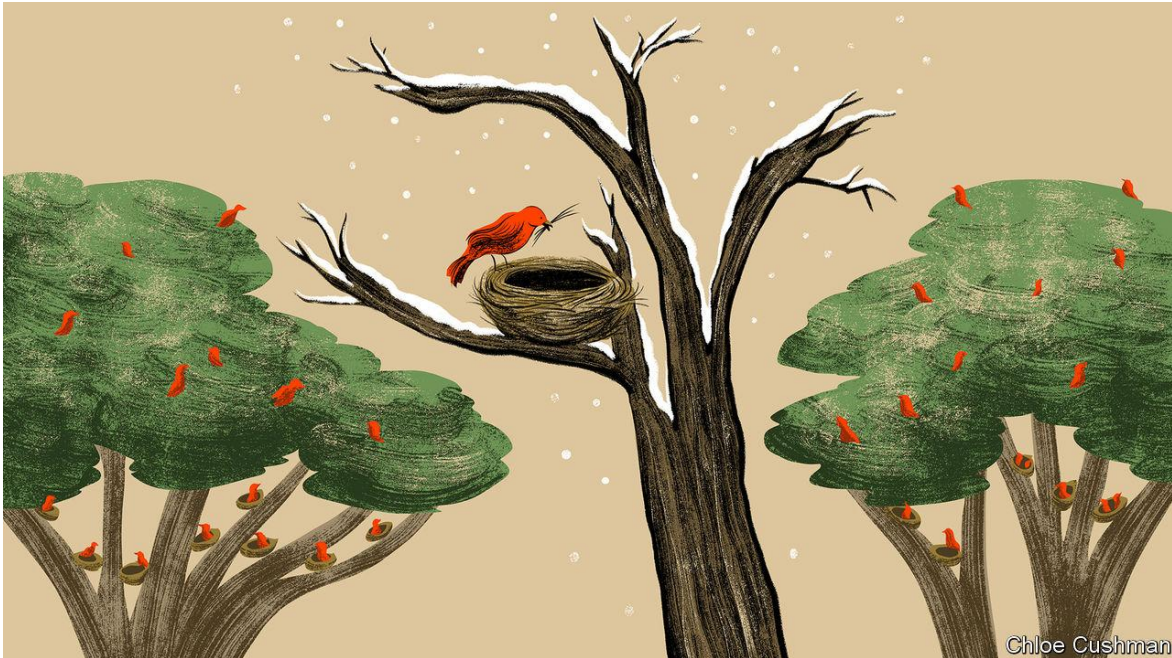
Subscribers can sign up to [Drum Tower](#), our new weekly newsletter, to understand what the world makes of China—and what China makes of the world.

Chaguan

The revealing appeal of China's cheapest city

Pressures of modern life push some to move to a sleepy former mining town

Mar 22nd 2023



CENTRAL PLANNERS have long shaped Hegang, a city in China's far north. Once, coal and other minerals made Hegang a pillar of socialist industry. When the richest seams were declared exhausted, just over a decade ago, the central government closed many mines and put its faith in green infrastructure. Shanty-towns of soot-blackened miners' huts were demolished and replaced with brightly painted apartment blocks, marching to the horizon beside new city parks. A high-speed rail line opened last December. There is proud talk of a graphite mine that will supply factories making batteries for new-energy vehicles. Alas for the technocrats, they could not prevent more than one in six locals leaving Hegang after 2010, fleeing low salaries, limited job prospects (especially for graduates) and long, dark, brutal winters.

Recently, that combination of a home-building drive and a shrinking population has propelled Hegang to an unforeseen distinction. It is by some

measures China's cheapest city at prefecture-level or above. In 2019 Hegang earned online notoriety after young outsiders made viral videos and blog posts boasting of buying sizeable apartments there for as little as 46,000 yuan (\$6,700). The claim is supported by more formal surveys. Hegang's second-hand housing stock sells for 2,152 yuan per square metre on average, making property 40 times cheaper than in Shenzhen, a high-tech southern metropolis.

This backwater of 790,000 people near the Russian border has now become an online byword for a place where strivers—as well as have-nots and misfits—can turn modest savings into a home. True, many give up and leave within months, often as winter temperatures plunge to -20°C. Others visit only briefly to decorate apartments bought online, before returning to lives in a factory dormitory as migrant workers in a giant eastern city. But even that remote form of ownership is “a form of emotional comfort” for migrants, who may spend years in Shanghai or Guangzhou but have no hope of buying homes there, says Liang Yunpeng, a Hegang estate agent. He sells perhaps 80 cheap flats a year to outsiders, typically on the upper floors of old buildings without lifts. His customers often have less than 30,000 yuan to spend.

It would be rash to predict Hegang's revival by incomers. Several successful new residents supplement local jobs by creating short online videos and posts that play on the novelty of their move to China's far north, earning millions of views for films about the cold or the cheapness of eating out. Only a limited number can become famous online for living in Hegang.

Still, this small city is a good place to observe a large trend. China faces a cost-of-living crisis. Between 1998 and 2021 urban Chinese homes became four times less affordable, as judged by the ratio of average housing prices to median disposable incomes. Today a flat in Beijing measuring 100 square metres costs, on average, 6.3m yuan, or about a million dollars. That is 34 times the average annual salary in China's capital. Unattainable housing is especially painful because property is seen as a safe, government-backed form of savings, and because a man without his own apartment will often struggle to find a wife. It also exposes deep inequities in modern society. Some involve yawning income inequality. But others reflect encrusted privilege from the socialist era, notably after urban housing was privatised in

Yes: “notoriety” is often used in a neutral and sometimes a positive sense, e.g.: She first gained welcome notoriety upon publication of her novel “To Hatch a Sparrow”.



quora.com

<https://www.quora.com/Can-you-use-notoriety-in-a-po...>

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Example Sentences

notorious adjective

no-to-ri-ous (nō-ˈtôr-ē-əs «) ne-

[Synonyms of notorious >](#)

: generally known and talked of

iron is a *notorious* conductor of heat

— Lewis Mumford

especially : widely and unfavorably known

a *notorious* gangster

an area *notorious* for soot, smog, and dust

— *Pliotron*

💡 Did you know?

the 1990s and sold off to state-employed workers and officials at steep discounts.

Visiting Hegang, Chaguan meets the owner of a small burger bar, surnamed Hou. He is locally born, and returned from Beijing in 2020 when the covid-19 pandemic halted his work as a guide taking Chinese tourists to Russia. Such holidays are not cheap: a family trip to Moscow might cost 30,000 yuan. Still, many of his clients were seemingly ordinary pensioners. The explanation is that long-time Beijingers might own two or three apartments, bought cheaply years ago. Now even a small flat can generate 60,000 yuan a year in rental income. In contrast, Mr Hou has noticed more Hegang friends heading home, after realising that—as migrant outsiders to a big city—they will never have enough capital to buy a home or start a business. He is glad to hear more customers or delivery-scooter riders with non-local accents, too. For one thing, such newcomers prop up Hegang housing prices.

Some locals resent Chinese bloggers who call the city a haven for those yearning to “lie flat”, or drop out and abandon material ambitions. Wang Dakai, who spent ten years in big cities before returning to open a barber’s shop, worries that Hegang is being called lazy. “None of us is lying flat, everyone is hustling,” he says. Proving his point, as his price for answering questions he asks to film an online video pretending to cut his British visitor’s hair to post on his social-media channels.

Individual dreams in a bastion of old collectivism

Some fresh starts are life-changing. Buying and renovating a flat for 70,000 yuan last summer allowed a 25-year-old vlogger who uses the name “Hua Hua” to make a home for herself and her ten-year-old sister. Each month she sends money to pay for her mentally impaired mother’s care at home in Jiangxi province, 3,000km to the south. She supports herself by selling pancakes and bean jelly from a street cart, housesitting cats, working as an online customer-service assistant and writing. Hegang is quiet and friendly, and has some good schools from its days as a mining centre, she says. Also, she likes snow. On a recent morning she was joined in her tiny, cat-filled home by a newly arrived friend, a divorced single mother. The friend has noticed that many arrivals have strained relations with families, as she does.

No central planner set out to make Hegang a city where young women can enjoy rare autonomy, without a husband or relatives to control them. This cheap ex-mining town is best understood as an accidental safety-valve. Its startling fame reveals that Chinese society is a system under terrible pressure. ■

Read more from Chaguan, our columnist on China:

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[*What party control means in China*](#) (Mar 9th)

[*Why aren't China and America more afraid of a war?*](#) (Mar 2nd)

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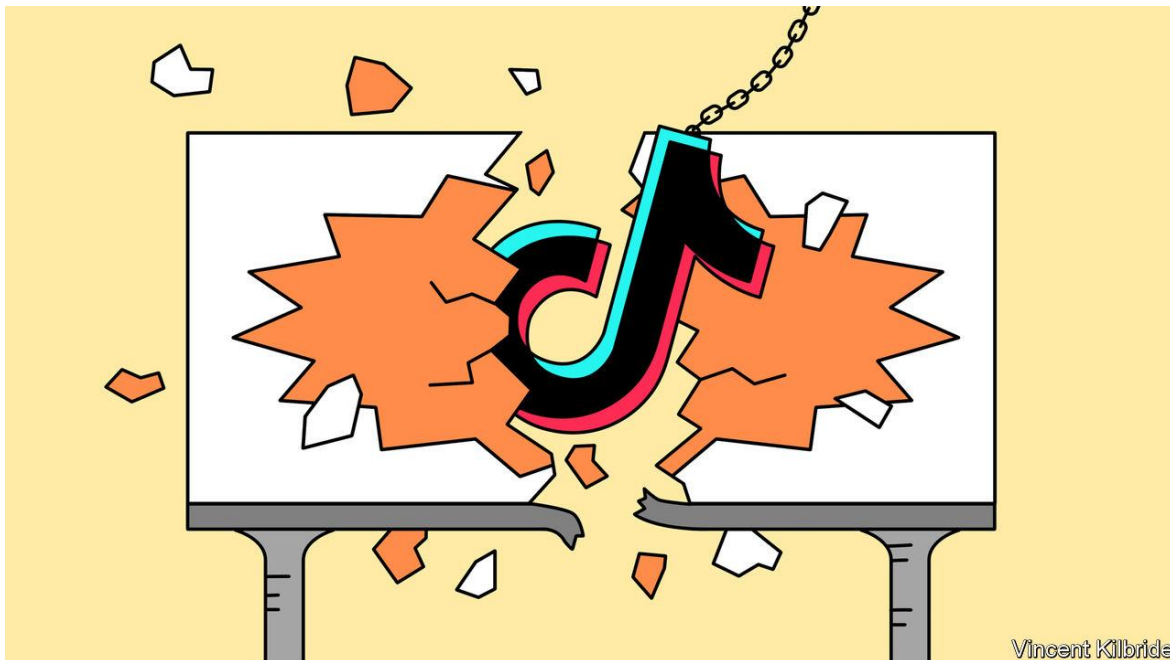
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Social media

How TikTok broke social media

Whether or not it is banned, the app has forced its rivals to adopt a less lucrative model

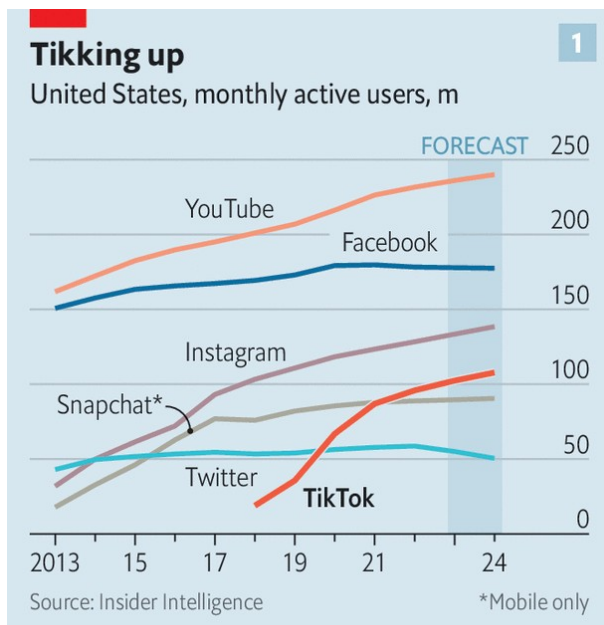
Mar 21st 2023



IS TIKTOK'S TIME up? As the social-media app's chief executive, Shou Zi Chew, was getting ready for a grilling before Congress on March 23rd, after *The Economist* went to press, TikTok's 100m-plus users in America were fretting that their government was preparing to ban the Chinese-owned platform because of security fears. Their anguish contrasts with utter glee in Silicon Valley, where home-grown social-media firms would love to be rid of their popular rival. With every grumble from Capitol Hill, the share prices of Meta, Pinterest, Snap and others edge higher.

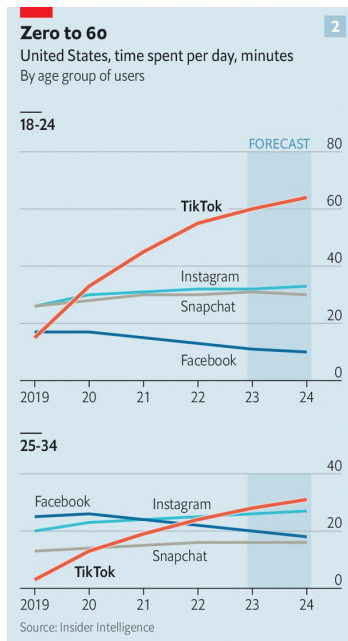
TikTok's fate hangs in the balance. But what is already clear is that the app has changed social media for good—and in a way that will make life harder for incumbent social apps. In less than six years TikTok has weaned the world off old-fashioned social-networking and got it hooked on algorithmically selected short videos. Users love it. The trouble for the

platforms is that the new model makes less money than the old one, and may always do so.



The Economist

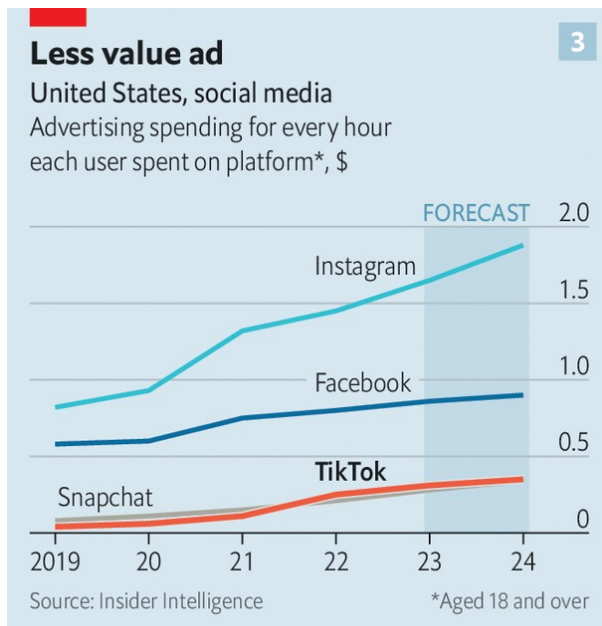
The speed of the change is astonishing. Since entering America in 2017, TikTok has picked up more users than all but a handful of social-media apps, which have been around more than twice as long (see chart 1). Among young audiences, it crushes the competition. Americans aged 18-24 spend an hour a day on TikTok, twice as long as they spend on Instagram and Snapchat, and more than five times as long as they spend on Facebook, which these days is mainly a medium for communicating with the grandparents (see chart 2).



The Economist

TikTok's success has prompted its rivals to reinvent themselves. Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, has turned both apps' main feeds into algorithmically sorted "discovery engines" and launched Reels, a TikTok clone bolted onto Facebook and Instagram. Similar lookalike products have been created by Pinterest (Watch), Snapchat (Spotlight), YouTube (Shorts), and even Netflix (Fast Laughs). The latest TikTok-inspired makeover, announced on March 8th, was by Spotify, a music-streaming app whose homepage now features video clips that can be skipped by swiping up. (TikTok's Chinese sister app, Douyin, is having a similar effect in its home market, where digital giants like Tencent are increasingly putting short videos at the centre of their offerings.)

The result is that short-form video has taken over social media. Of the 64 minutes that the average American spends viewing such services each day, 40 minutes are spent watching video clips, up from 28 minutes just three years ago, estimates Bernstein, a broker. However, this transformation comes with a snag. Although users have a seemingly endless appetite for short video, the format is proving less profitable than the old news feed.



The Economist

TikTok monetises its American audience at a rate of just \$0.31 for every hour the typical user spends on the app, a third the rate of Facebook and a fifth the rate of Instagram (see chart 3). This year it will make about \$67 from each of its American users, while Instagram will make more than \$200, estimates Insider Intelligence, a research firm. And it is not just a TikTok problem. Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's chief executive, told investors last month that "Currently, the monetisation efficiency of Reels is much less than Feed, so the more that Reels grows...it takes some time away from Feed and we actually lose money."

The most comforting explanation for the earnings gap is that TikTok, Reels and the other short-video platforms are immature. "TikTok is still a toddler in the social-media ad landscape," says Jasmine Enberg of Insider Intelligence, who points out that the app introduced ads only in 2019. Platforms tend to keep their ad load low while getting new users on board, and advertisers take time to warm to new products. "You can't really wave a magic wand and declare that your new ads are 'premium' without any performance history to back it up, so they start at the end of the line," says Michelle Urwin of Skai, an ad-tech firm.

Meta points out that it has been here before. Instagram's Stories feature took a while to get advertisers signed up but is now a big earner. Meta is

monetising Reels more aggressively and expects it to stop losing money around the end of this year. But the firm acknowledges that it will be a long time before Reels is as profitable as the old news feed. “We know it took us several years to bring the gap close between Stories and Feed ads,” Susan Li, Meta’s chief financial officer, said on an earnings call last month. “And we expect that this will take longer for Reels.”

Some wonder if the gap will in fact ever be closed. Even mature video-apps cannot keep up with the old social networks when it comes to monetising their users’ time. YouTube, which has been around for 18 years, makes less than half as much money per user-hour as Facebook or Instagram, estimates Bernstein. In China, where short-form video took off a few years before it did in the West, short-video ads last year monetised at only about 15% the rate of ads on local e-commerce apps.

For one thing, the ad load in video is inescapably lower than on a news feed of text and images. Watch a five-minute YouTube clip and you might see three ads; scroll Instagram for five minutes and you could see dozens. Watching video also seems to put consumers in a more passive mood than scrolling a feed of friends’ updates, making them less likely to click through to buy. Booking 1,000 impressions for a video ad on Instagram Reels costs about half as much as 1,000 impressions for an ad on Instagram’s news feed, reports Tinuiti, a big marketing agency, implying that advertisers see Reels ads as less likely to generate clicks.

Auctions for video ads are less competitive than those for static ones, because many advertisers have yet to create ads in video format. Big advertisers prize video ads (and report record engagement on TikTok, where products have gone viral with the hashtag #TikTokmademebuyit). But the long tail of small businesses from which social networks have made their billions find video spots tricky to produce. Just over 40% of Meta’s 10m or so advertisers use Reels ads, the company says. Getting the remaining 60% to create video commercials may be made easier by artificial intelligence. One senior executive imagines a near future in which a small retailer can create a bespoke video ad using only voice commands. Until that moment arrives, half the long tail is lopped off.

Short-video apps are also hampered by weaker targeting. For audiences, part of the appeal of TikTok and its many imitators is that users need do no more than watch, and swipe when they get bored. The algorithm uses this to learn what kinds of videos—and therefore ads—they like. But this guesswork is no substitute for the hard personal data harvested by the previous generation of social networks, which persuaded users to fill in a lengthy profile including everything from their education to their marital status. The upshot is that many advertisers still treat short-form video as a place for loosely targeted so-called brand advertising, to raise general awareness of their product, rather than the hyper-personalised (and more valuable) direct-response ads that old-school social networks specialise in.

Here, at least, TikTok's imitators have an advantage over TikTok itself. Using a trove of data built up over a decade and a half, when there were few rules against tracking users' activity across the wider web, Meta already knows a lot about many of the users watching its videos and can make well-informed guesses about the rest. If a new, unknown user watches the same videos as a group who are known to be rich female graduates with children, say, it is a good bet that the new user has the same profile. TikTok says it has made big investments in its direct-response ads, including new tools for measuring their effectiveness. But it still has catching up to do. "Meta are leveraging their history," says Mark Shmulik of Bernstein.

Social apps will not be the only losers in this new, trickier ad environment. "All advertising is about what the next-best alternative is," says Brian Wieser of Madison and Wall, an advertising consultancy. Most advertisers allocate a budget to spend on ads on a particular platform, he says, and "the budget is the budget", regardless of how far it goes. If social-media advertising becomes less effective across the board, it will be bad news not just for the platforms that sell those ads, but for the advertisers that buy them. ■

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Bartleby

How to get flexible working right

It is about schedules as well as locations

Mar 23rd 2023



THE WORDS “flexible schedule” have an attractive ring to them. They conjure up a post-pandemic workplace full of motivated workers, organising their time in the most productive and family-friendly way, and of enlightened bosses, attracting and retaining talented employees. But flexibility is in the eye of the beholder. Its appeal can vary depending on the type of job someone is in, and on whose interests are being served.

If you are a blue-collar worker in an industry that operates in shifts, for example, flexibility sounds less like nirvana and more like chaos. For low-wage employees in restaurants and call centres, predictability is much more important than flexibility. Various American cities have introduced laws that, among other things, require employers to give workers a set amount of notice when setting their shift rotas.

Recent research by Kristen Harknett of the University of California, San Francisco, and her co-authors into the effect of “fair workweek” legislation in Seattle found that the requirement for two weeks’ notice of schedules

improved workers' reported sense of well-being. It can also improve performance. A study conducted by Joan Williams of the University of California College of the Law, also in San Francisco, and others concluded that introducing more stable employee schedules increased sales and productivity at The Gap, a retailer.

Certainty matters less for other workers. Research conducted by Donald Sull at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and his co-authors found that predictable schedules had a marked effect on retention for blue-collar employees but did not affect white-collar ones. For desk-bound workers, the question is different: less whether flexible scheduling is appealing, more whose version of it prevails.

In the minds of some bosses, flexibility means that the work week has no defined boundaries. If their day starts at 4:30am on a Peloton, so can yours (minus the Peloton). If there is a blank space in your calendar, they grab it. If they have a question on a Sunday, they send it over by email—and then text, WhatsApp and voicemail, just to make sure that the weekend is genuinely disturbed. It is a wonder they don't turn up at the doorstep. A recent paper by Maria Ibanez of Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University found that offering schedule flexibility on job adverts increases the likelihood that people will apply. But it also discovered that applications decrease markedly when adverts require workers to work at managers' discretion.

If workers balk at the boss's version of flexible scheduling, managers have a different worry: that giving employees too much control over their hours can backfire. Asynchronous working, which involves individuals contributing to a project in their own time, is all very well. But if teams are to function effectively then they sometimes have to work as a group. Managers can have perfectly legitimate reasons to contact employees at odd hours and to expect an immediate response. Compressing work weeks into four days might well give workers more time to pursue their love of kayaking but be less brilliant for customers.

Just as a blend of home and office is a sensible answer to demands for flexibility in location, a mixed approach is the right way to think about flexible schedules. Brian Elliott runs research into the future of work for

Slack, a messaging firm. He specifies “core collaboration hours” for his own team, which is when most meetings and group activities happen. The company has instituted “focus Fridays”, a day when there are no internal meetings and employees get on with their own tasks. If Mr Elliott does need to contact people outside working hours, he does so by text so they are not logged in all the time.

Boundaries of this sort will upset the absolutists. Managers have to think harder about interrupting people. Workers cannot pick and choose their hours at will. But a bit of thought can stop people from being their own worst enemies. For bosses, getting a swift answer to an unimportant question causes more trouble than it is worth. For employees, the flexibility to work outside standard hours is double-edged: Laura Giurge of London School of Economics and Kaitlin Woolley of Cornell University have found that choosing to work at a weekend or on a bank holiday reduces motivation precisely because these days are associated in their minds with non-work activities. For flexibility to be genuinely useful, it requires a firm skeleton.

Read more from Bartleby, our columnist on management and work:

[*From high-speed rail to the Olympics, why do big projects go wrong?*](#) (Mar 16th)

[*The small consolations of office irritations*](#) (Mar 9th)

[*The uses and abuses of hype*](#) (Mar 2nd)

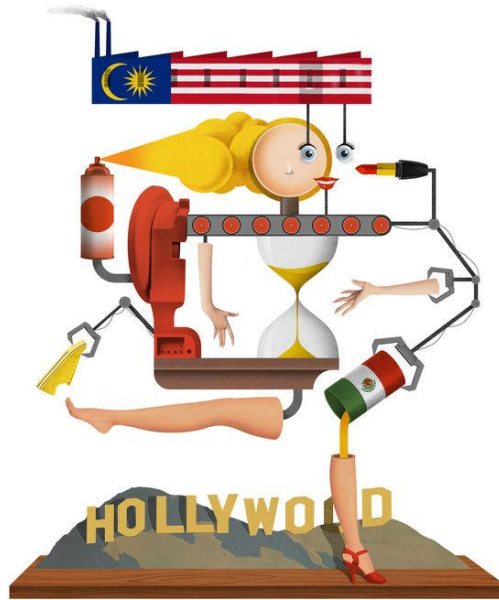
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Schumpeter

What Barbie tells you about near-shoring

Supply chains are neither global nor local. They are both

Mar 23rd 2023



Brett Ryder

CHUCKLE IF YOU will but Schumpeter is looking forward to the first live-action “Barbie” film, due out in July. It is directed by Greta Gerwig, maker of “Lady Bird” and “Little Women”, two movies with strong characters. Its trailer is a parody of “2001: A Space Odyssey”, which suggests that, love Barbie or loathe her, she will be treated with a knowing wink.

It is a business turnaround story, too. If the film is a hit, it could crown a comeback for Mattel, one of the world’s biggest toymakers, with brands like Barbie, Hot Wheels and Fisher-Price in its toy box. Five years ago it was in a funk, having lost three CEOs in four years, and a decades-old licence to produce dolls for Disney to its rival, Hasbro. Under Ynon Kreiz, its CEO since 2018, its cost base, balance-sheet, manufacturing footprint and morale have all improved. Last year, to the joy of staff, it won back the Disney contract. A Barbie red-carpet blockbuster would put icing on the cake.

So it was with a Ken-like spring in his step that your columnist travelled to Monterrey, in northern Mexico, this month to witness the way Mattel has

consolidated its North American manufacturing operations into a single Mexican factory, its biggest in the world. He was hoping that Barbie, as well as becoming a star of the silver screen, could also become emblematic of a hot new trend in trade: near-shoring. Among the brightly coloured toys on the assembly line, there was sadly not a Barbie in sight. The only one on display was a prop in the Barbie Dreamhouse, a Tinseltown-like mansion that is one of the plant's flagship products. In fact, Barbie is not made in Mexico at all. She is still made in Indonesia and China (the first blonde doll was made in Japan in 1959).

That makes Barbie emblematic of something else entirely: the paradox of today's supply chains. As well as bringing some production closer to home, Mattel is maintaining global manufacturing operations in Asia. In a business landscape where demand is increasingly hard to forecast, the environment is fragile and the geopolitics unstable, this is the new reality for multinational manufacturers. They need to be global and local at the same time, even if this adds to the complexity of their supply chains.

Despite what American politicians might have you believe, the overriding rationale for near-shoring is not to decouple supply chains from China. As Roberto Isaias, Mattel's supply-chain chief, puts it, it is to provide flexibility. In some cases, it [makes sense](#) to shorten supply chains, in order to be more responsive to changes in consumer demand. In others, it is better to prioritise low-cost production, however far away the factories.

To understand Mattel's two-pronged strategy, consider Mexico's pros and cons. On the plus side, it adjoins the world's biggest market. It has a free-trade agreement with America and Canada, which eases the cross-border flow of goods and services. The cost of labour has become more competitive with South-East Asia (Chinese labour has been pricier for years). Its workers may not be as target-oriented as their Asian counterparts, but they tend to be more collaborative. Mexicans treat benign employers and colleagues like family, pitching in ideas to make things flow more efficiently, reports Mr Isaias (himself a Mexican). Mexico is also more or less immune to the rising Sino-American rivalry, which introduces an element of risk into all Asian supply chains.

About 13,700 results (0.34 seconds)

Did you mean: **nearshoring** 供应



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近岸外包

近岸外包（**Near-Shore** Outsourcing）近岸外包是指转移方和服务方承接方分别隶属于邻近国家的服务外包。“近岸”外包是相对于“离岸”外包提出来的一个概念。



World Economic Forum

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“友岸外包”是什么意思？

Feb 24, 2566 BE — 友岸外包”（friendshoring）是一种日渐兴起的贸易做法，即将**供应链**网络重点放在政治 ... 和“近岸外包”（**nearshoring**）等，这样的词汇最近已普遍使用。

Yet Mexico, too, presents some business risks. Though Mattel and Lego, its bigger Danish rival, have been in the Monterrey area for years, the toy industry has yet to nurture an ecosystem of lower-tier suppliers to rival that across the Pacific. The plastic resins used at Mattel's Monterrey factory, for example, are transported by rail from America and Canada. The toy moulds into which the hot plastics are poured come from China. Asian infrastructure also remains more solid than Mexico's. In Monterrey Mattel has no complaints about electricity and water supply, the reliability of which can be patchy. But Roberto Durán-Fernández of the Monterrey Technology Institute, a university, says that the recent flood of investments by carmakers such as Tesla to Nuevo León, Monterrey's home state, could exacerbate the strain on all manner of infrastructure, including roads and housing.

Mattel's Barbie supply chain illustrates these trade-offs. Her Dreamhouse is three storeys high, heavy and expensive—the sort of item that parents splash out for mostly at Christmas-time. Making it in northern Mexico means it can be shipped within 48 hours to Amazon, Target, Walmart and other retailers in America, enabling Mattel to wait until relatively late in the run-up to Christmas to gauge the strength of demand. The proximity to its market also reduces transport-related costs and emissions.

Barbie, the doll, is different. She is just 11.5 inches (29cm) tall and famously svelte. That makes her fairly cheap to ship in bulk from Asia to America. Demand for the dolls is relatively predictable, so the long trans-Pacific transport time poses less of a market risk. And she is intricately made, with well-coiffed locks and tailored garments—the beneficiary of a tradition of handiwork built up over generations in Asian factories. If demand spikes for particular dolls, Mattel can have Chinese subcontractors make them quickly while it ramps up its own production capacity.

Dreamsolution

For Mattel, then, near-shoring is still a work in progress. It is trying to develop local tooling suppliers to reduce the dependence on China. To become a near-shoring powerhouse, Mexico needs that, too. Over time, the hope is that industries from carmaking to toymaking will develop fully integrated supplier networks across the country, in order to reduce overcrowding near the border. As for Barbie, the optimal supply-chain

strategy is probably to manufacture her as close to her biggest markets as possible, provided costs are kept reasonable, in order to respond quickly to consumer demand. Though Mr Kreiz, the CEO, no longer thinks of them as consumers. He thinks of them as fans. ■

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“We have lived for a quarter of a century in the world Mr McMahon made,” begins the book’s final chapter. “Not just wrestling fans—all of us.” Those sentences encapsulate its more tenuous story, which is that [wrestling’s fakery](#) and Mr McMahon’s ruthlessness somehow define contemporary America, rather than simply being an aspect of it. Doubtless this thesis will find favour on both America’s Trumpian right and the far left, albeit for opposite reasons: the Trumpsters wholeheartedly embracing McMahonism, the left-wingers believing it reveals America’s fundamental cynicism and moral bankruptcy.

But readers who do not already agree with the author are unlikely to be persuaded. Cut-throat businessmen and dishonest politicians predate Messrs McMahon and Trump. They do not thrive only in America. Most Americans do not watch wrestling, just as most did not vote for Mr Trump. And if people find either the 45th president or wrestling distasteful, they can vote for someone else—or change the channel. ■

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Back Story

A bold “Guys & Dolls” holds lessons for the future of theatre

As Sky Masterson would say: it isn't wrong to gamble, only to lose

Mar 23rd 2023



LIKE SHOOTING craps, theatre is risky business. Actors can miss cues or forget lines, dancers and jokes may **fall flat**. Punters risk **forking out** royally for tickets only to hate the play. Producers are subject to the vagaries of the economy and (if they rely on it) statutory funding, not to mention the lightning strike of a pandemic. If the show bombs, they risk losing their shirts.

That fate will not befall the new “Guys & Dolls” at [the Bridge Theatre](#) in London. Set in a charmed, harmless New York underworld, Frank Loesser’s musical of 1950, adapted from Damon Runyon’s stories, features two pairs of wires-crossed lovers. Sky Masterson is a hustler who bets he can take a mission leader, Sarah Brown, on a date to Havana. For 14 years, meanwhile, two-bit craps promoter Nathan Detroit has been engaged to Miss Adelaide, a fixture at the Hot Box—a night spot where, in this version, some of the choreography is downright filthy.

The performances are uniformly strong, especially Marisha Wallace's knockout Adelaide. The salient feature of this revival, however, is its immersive staging. About a third of the audience stands, doubling as bystanders to the high jinks that unfold in their midst (an approach that [Nicholas Hytner](#), the director, used for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Julius Caesar", which enlisted punters as the Roman mob). Stage platforms rise and fall from the floor in assorted configurations, lampposts and manholes artfully indicating new locales. Ushers dressed as cops keep order.

Configuring the theatre this way, says Mr Hytner, means that the people "paying the least are closest to the action". The intimacy and exuberance rub off on the folk in the posh seats, too. "Sheer bliss," cooed the *Times*. "Sure to be a smash hit," said the *New York Times*. If this show were a gate, it'd be swinging.

The same cannot be said for the gates of theatre in general. Audiences in Britain are still down on pre-pandemic levels, as are those on Broadway. Although it spurred innovations in streaming, the coronavirus [wrecked productions](#) and careers. In Britain it has been followed by a squeeze on state funding for some high-profile playhouses (but not the Bridge, which doesn't take any).

Beyond the pandemic loom the spectres of Netflix and changing tastes, and a fear that the [TikTok](#) generation will be disinclined to sit through "King Lear", or even "Guys & Dolls". Impresarios differ over the right fix: whether to trim costs or invest in razzmatazz, put on cutting-edge work or classics (staples such as "Chicago" and "The Lion King" are doing best on Broadway, says Charlotte St Martin of the Broadway League, a trade association). Star names sell, if you can get them.

In a way, "Guys & Dolls" is a much safer bet than most of Nathan Detroit's. As the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein did after the second world war, it supplies neon-lit flamboyance after pinched grey years, and a sequence of earworm songs that you didn't realise you knew. In an artistic sense, though, the moral of this triumphant tale of chancers lies in its boldness and risks.

If theatre is a tightrope walk, Mr Hytner raises the rope, not only because of the pinpoint choreography in cramped spaces. The immersive method adds another risk: that the spectators won't play ball. They are called on to take leaflets from Bible-bashers and share drinks with gamblers. Each night one finds himself at a table in the Hot Box and is clasped to Adelaide's cleavage (ushers forewarn him, Mr Hytner confides).

The real trick, in other words, is not what happens on the shifting stage but in the crowd. "In the theatre", wrote the great director Peter Brook, "the audience completes the steps of creation." This is an age-old insight. It can be traced through Antonin Artaud's interwar "theatre of cruelty"—which aimed to unsettle viewers with sound and light—to Shakespeare's collusive jokes about mad Englishmen, all the way back to the origins of Greek drama in religious rites. The magic happens when a group of strangers, typically sitting in the dark, conspire in turning spectacle into art.

But in a digital age, that principle is more urgent than ever. Just as high-street retailers are surviving by selling what websites cannot, from oven-fresh bread to tattoos, theatre will prosper if it "doubles down on its liveness", as Mr Hytner puts it, offering people "an experience that they can't have looking at a screen". At the end of this "Guys & Dolls", the cast dances with a jubilant audience. As Sky Masterson almost says: it isn't wrong to gamble, only to lose.

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[*It's war at this year's Oscars*](#) (Mar 8th)

[*How an Ethiopian prince came to be buried at Windsor Castle*](#) (Feb 23rd)

[*The genius of Johannes Vermeer is on display as never before*](#) (Feb 8th)

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New platforms, old habits

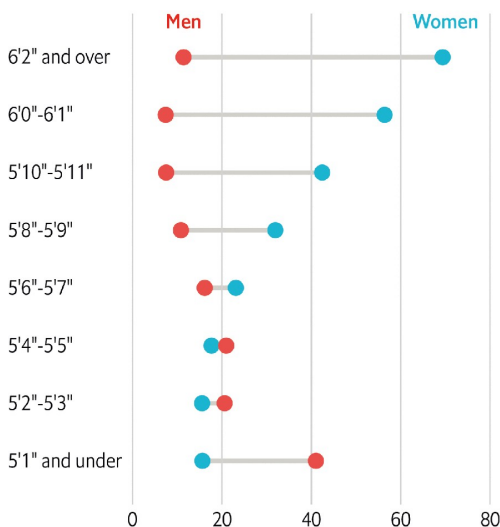
Online daters are less open-minded than their filters suggest

Users with permissive settings show similar biases to those with restrictive ones

Mar 22nd 2023

% of possible matches removed via height filter

The League dating app, January 2023



The Economist

ONE OF THE biggest differences between online dating and the old-fashioned sort is the size of the pool. The number of people using dating apps dwarfs offline social networks. So sites offer filters that let users exclude unwanted groups.

The diversity of tastes among giant user bases should make apps a haven for people who struggle with dating offline. And data provided by The League, an American dating site aimed at educated professionals, show that the strictness of users' filters varies, with many saying they are open to a broad range of traits. However, when users do apply filters, they mostly reflect familiar dating preferences that long predate the internet. And although users with the broadest filters find matches more often, the types of people they end up with mirror the tastes of their heavier-filtering peers.

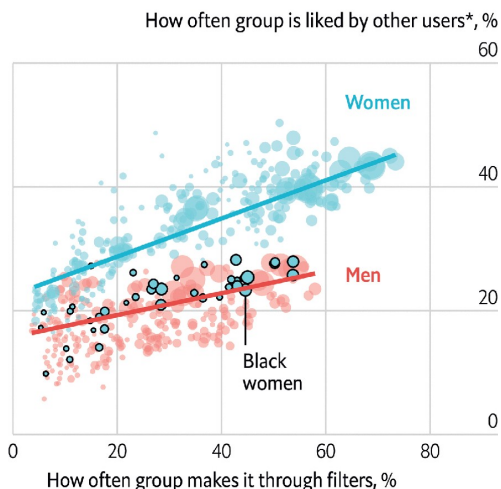
The League's data cover 80,000 users across ten cities in January 2023. The site chooses pairs of users who pass each other's filters and present them as "prospects". If these users both "like" each other, they can chat. Users see a fixed number of candidates per day. This makes it possible to distinguish explicit dating desires (filters) from implicit ones, revealed by how often users like their prospects.

Filtering choices follow demographic patterns. Women block 70% of potential matches, compared with 55% for men, mostly because they tend to exclude users who are shorter or younger. Whereas women 5'5" (165cm) or shorter eliminate just 17% of people based on height, those 5'10" or taller remove 45%. And women in their 50s filter out 86% of users based on age, compared with 48% for those aged 25-34.

Because users with strict filters weed out most unsuitable people preemptively, you might expect them to like many of the remaining candidates. But the data show the opposite. For both sexes, the share of prospects liked by the 10% of users with the tightest filters is 11-13 percentage points lower than by the 10% with the broadest ones. This probably stems from overall pickiness. People looking for a specific type of partner can filter out many weak candidates, but can select based on other criteria, such as looks, only one by one.

The League dating app, January 2023

Grouped by age, height, race and sex



*When presented as a prospect. Size=number in group

The Economist

Users might find matches more often if their filters better reflected their tastes. One of the best predictors of whether someone will like a prospect is how often other users filter out that prospect's demographic group. For example, men 5'5" or shorter get through only 7% of other users' filters, compared with 33% for taller men. Moreover, just 13% of users whose filters allow such short men fancy them when they are presented as prospects—just over half the rate at which taller men are liked.

Such differences are even more striking when it comes to race. Users deploy racial filters sparingly. For example, black women pass through 36% of other users' filters, compared with 44% for women of other races. This gap is similar to the effect of one inch of height for men. However, just 24% of black women are liked as prospects, versus 37% for non-black women—an impact as great as 11 inches of male height.

This suggests that many users who decline to filter out black women often still pass them over at the prospect stage. Singles might find better matches if they gave a chance to more of the candidates whom they claim to be open to dating. ■

Chart source: The League

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Storm forming

As video games grow, they are eating the media

The games business has lessons for other industries and for governments

Mar 23rd 2023

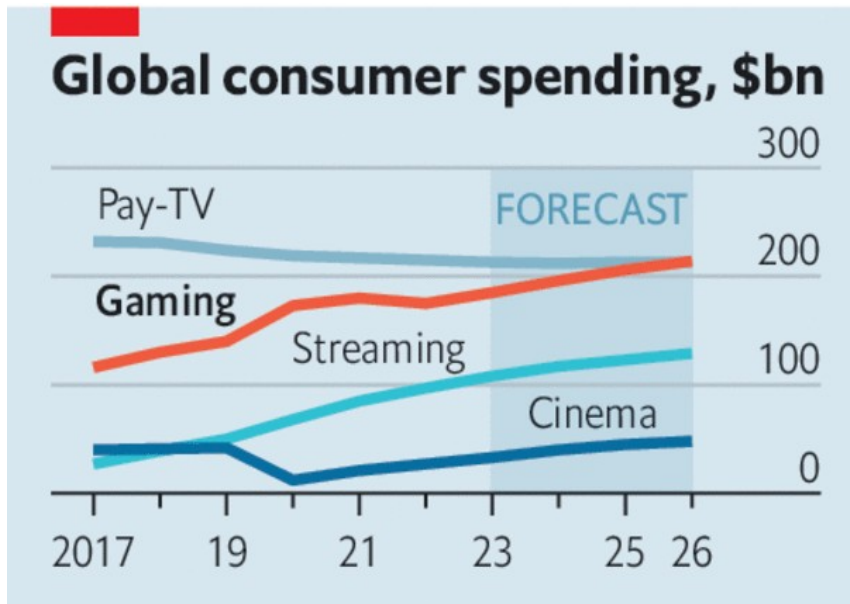


WARNER BROS released a new Harry Potter title last month and took \$850m in two weeks. That made it the second-most-successful Potter launch in the film studio's history. But "Hogwarts Legacy", the title in question, was no movie: it was a video game.

Warner's hit is an example of how gaming is besting older media, both as a business and as a way for people to entertain themselves. Consumers are forecast to spend \$185bn on games this year, five times what they will spend at the cinema and 70% more than they will allocate to streamers like Netflix. Once a children's hobby, gaming has grown up. Console players in their 30s and 40s now outnumber those in their teens and 20s.

Yet as gaming matures, it is not just rivalling other media. Rather like a ravenous Pac-Man, it is gobbling them up. While such intellectual property as Harry Potter may be finding success in game form, game franchises have themselves become the most in-demand kind of IP in other media. Apple's "Tetris" movie, due out later this month, is the latest (and perhaps oddest)

instance of Hollywood mining games for ideas as audiences tire of comic-book heroes. Amateur creators are doing the same. After music, gaming clips are the biggest content category on YouTube.



The Economist



At the same time, audiences are increasingly consuming old media through games. The latest season of “The Walking Dead”, a long-running television drama, took the form of an interactive game on Facebook. Musicians such as Ariana Grande perform concerts in “Fortnite”. The fitness video is giving way to the fitness game. Even social networking is partly migrating to the gaming arena. Platforms like Roblox provide children with a place to play—but also to hang out, chat and shop. In so far as anything resembling a metaverse yet exists, it exists in games.

Expect more growth. Smartphones put a powerful console in people’s pockets and unlocked hours of playtime on the commute and at the back of the lecture hall. The next boost may come from smart TVs and streaming, which bring high-fidelity games to living rooms without the need for dedicated hardware.

New business models are another source of growth. Gaming’s latest boom was propelled by free-to-play games, which suck users in before monetising them with ads and in-game purchases. A new phase of expansion is coming

from game-library subscriptions, which already show signs of increasing consumption and accelerating discovery, much as the cable bundle did in television. These new distribution mechanisms and business models promise more choice for consumers—which is why regulators should allow Microsoft's \$69bn acquisition of Activision Blizzard, a big gamemaker whose titles Microsoft would make available for streaming and subscription.

All this holds lessons for other industries—chiefly that, if you are in media, you need to be in gaming. Apple and Netflix are scrambling to complement their streaming offerings with games. Others are already there. In August Sony Pictures will release “Gran Turismo”, a film based on a Sony game which features songs by artists from Sony Music. Media firms that ignore gaming risk being like those that decided in the 1950s to sit out the TV craze.

Governments should also pay attention. Their main concern so far has been whether games rot young minds (almost certainly not, especially if playing diverts them from social media). As gaming grows, bigger questions loom. Film and television, the  engines of popular culture in the 20th century, are dominated by Hollywood. The contest in new media is more open. Western governments are waking up to the implications of the world's hottest social-media app, TikTok, being Chinese-owned. Next they might consider what it means that China also made two of last year's three highest-grossing mobile games.

When video games were just electronic toys, this might not have mattered. But as games expand and spill into other formats, it is becoming clear that whoever dominates gaming is going to wield clout in every form of communication. In every sense, the future of the media is in play. ■

Distribution

Battles over streaming break out for video games

Streaming subscriptions have revolutionised music and television. What will they do to games?

Mar 20th 2023



IN AN AIRY Los Angeles office with a view of the Hollywood sign, Netflix executives are plotting the next stage of their streaming strategy. The company is the leader in digital streaming of video, with 230m subscribers paying for access to its huge online library of films and TV shows. But now Netflix is looking into whether it could stream something else: video games.

Over the past 15 years the music and TV industries have seen huge changes in digital-media distribution. In 2008 Spotify began offering online access to a catalogue of music for \$10 a month. Similar services were offered by Apple and Amazon. Streaming now generates two-thirds of the recorded-music industry's revenue. Netflix has since done something similar for movies. Most Hollywood studios now have their own streaming platform, selling shows direct to consumers. Streaming accounts for over a quarter of TV viewing in America.

Many wonder if streaming could now disrupt another media industry. Like records or DVDs, video games once came in boxes. Technology now allows them to be streamed over the internet, Spotify-style. And companies are trying out subscription access to game libraries, rather than selling games as one-off purchases. The twin innovations of streaming and subscription could “reshape the competitive landscape” of the gaming industry, says the Competition and Markets Authority, Britain’s antitrust regulator.

Streaming-only services account for less than 1% of games spending, says Ampere Analysis, a research firm. But some are placing bets on it. Microsoft’s Xbox Game Pass Ultimate service lets users stream games to devices ranging from phones to smart-TVs. Sony’s PlayStation Plus Premium offers streaming to its console and to PCs. Nvidia has a game-streaming platform called GeForce Now. Amazon has one called Luna, available only in America. Netflix, which began offering mobile games just over a year ago, says it is “seriously exploring” launching a streaming service.

Streaming games may be more rewarding than streaming music or TV. The most demanding so-called AAA games require users to invest in expensive, often bulky hardware, in the form of a high-end PC or console. Streaming allows a game to be processed in a remote data centre, while its video and audio are relayed to the user’s screen, so the latest games can be played on any internet-connected device. Users can start a game on their TV and pick it up later on their phone or laptop. Removing specialised hardware opens a bigger market. Phil Spencer, chief executive of Microsoft’s gaming division, sees its potential audience as not just 200m households with a console, but 3bn-plus people who play games on any device. In some markets nearly a third of Xbox customers play only by streaming, he says. “We definitely find more and more customers where streaming is the only platform we see them on.”

Yet streaming is a tough business. Google closed its Stadia game-streaming service in January after barely three years. One obstacle is technical. Games’ interactivity makes them less forgiving than video or music over “latency”, or internet speed. Stadia worked well but was not the console replacement that some had expected. “[Google] said, ‘It’s going to be awesome from day one.’ And then that wasn’t true, and I think they turned consumers off as a

result,” says Strauss Zelnick, head of Take-Two Interactive, some of whose games were on the platform. Mr Spencer says it is hard to beat the reliability of a console. He expects Microsoft to be making Xboxes for “years and years”.

Even if streaming will not be the main way of distributing games, it could be important. Customers may accept imperfect performance if streaming is a backup when away from home, for instance letting children play games on their grandparents’ TV. Many use the technology to sample games that take hours to download but seconds to start streaming. “We see a healthy percentage of people stream games just to try them out before downloading,” says Jim Ryan, chief executive of Sony’s gaming division. Streaming’s real potential may be for games that are more  of the technology’s limitations. Netflix, which says it is not trying to build a console replacement, has in mind casual and middling games that are not too latency-dependent.

Buy one, get lots free

Many platforms are pinning hopes on subscriptions to sell games. Most gamers buy titles individually, or play free ones that make money from advertising or in-game purchases of power-ups[?]. But paying a monthly fee to download a whole library of games is slowly becoming more common. Subscriptions represent about 7% of consumer spending on games, says Ampere Analysis. Microsoft, which lags behind Sony and Nintendo in console sales, has built an early lead. Its Game Pass, with some 25m members, had 57% of the market for game-library subscriptions last year, says Ampere. Sony’s PlayStation Plus and Apple’s Arcade are trying something similar. Some game developers, such as Electronic Arts and Ubisoft, offer subscriptions to their back catalogues.

Games are less ripe for subscription than other media because their consumption is concentrated, says Utsumi Shuji, co-chief operating officer of Sega, a Japanese giant. Mr Utsumi, who was at Warner Music Japan when music moved to subscription, says listening to a song “takes only two to three minutes, whereas when you play a game it’s going to take a long time.



What Does Power-Up Mean?

A power-up is an object in a video game which instantly adds to the life, armor, strength or score of a player. Power-ups can be an individual object or a group of objects specifically designed and placed inside a game for the player to win. Obtaining power-ups may vary in difficulty depending on the game and/or benefit given.

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Techopedia Explains Power-Up

Power-up items are programmed into a game and sometimes require a player to overcome a challenge, such as winning a difficult fight with an enemy or solving a complicated puzzle, in order to achieve the benefit. They are commonly found in action-oriented games where the player must fight or outrun the enemy, but are also found in nearly every type of game, including maze games, run and guns, shoot 'em ups, first-person shooters, platform games, puzzle games, racing games and vehicular combat games.



Some well-known examples of power-ups are in the Super Mario game series, where a red mushroom makes the character larger, a green mushroom gives an extra life and a star provides invincibility.

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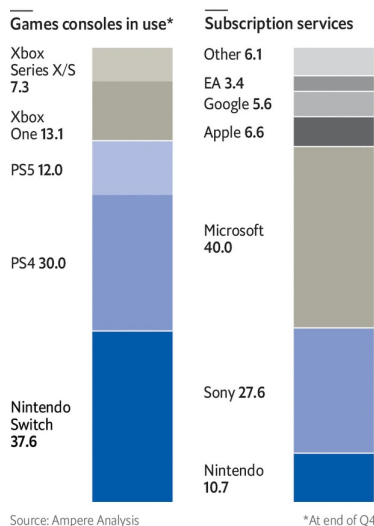


You don't play 30 games at the same time, but with music you listen to 30 [songs] easily." Mr Zelnick, who before Take-Two was president of 20th Century Fox's film studio, says a household may watch 100 TV shows a month, but play only two or three digital games. "If that's the case, does it really make sense to pay to have access to a couple hundred titles?"

As with music and television, game subscriptions increase people's consumption. Game Pass subscribers "spend more hours, they play more games, they take chances on games from creators that maybe they haven't heard of," says Mr Spencer. He cites the example of "Hi-Fi Rush", a lighthearted game from a developer better known for horror titles, which recently became a hit on Game Pass. Matthew Ball, a media investor, argues that subscriptions allow gamers to do the equivalent of TV channel surfing. "Frictionless discovery is an underacknowledged part of why TV became the dominant medium," he says. Cable consumers have always complained they are paying for channels they don't want, but their consumption has gone up anyway.

Switching shares

Worldwide video-game market share, 2022
% of total



Source: Ampere Analysis

The Economist

*At end of Q4

As in Hollywood, subscriptions involve trade-offs. Film studios have agonised over whether to give their blockbusters a window of exclusive theatrical release or make them available for streaming on day one, delighting subscribers but cannibalising box-office revenue. Similarly games

developers face a dilemma over when to add them to subscription libraries. Sony delays putting games like last year's "God of War Ragnarök" on its PlayStation Plus service until they have had a window as one-off purchases for \$70. "For us, a day-and-date approach doesn't work with the massive AAA games developed by PlayStation Studios," says Mr Ryan.

Microsoft, which is pushing its Game Pass, takes the opposite approach, releasing most games immediately to subscribers. "Starfield", a much-hyped title due later this year, will be on Game Pass from day one. The question is "whether they're going to see enough incremental subscriber growth to more than offset what they otherwise would have expected through just direct sales of those games," says Nick Lightle, a media consultant formerly at Spotify. If Microsoft buys Activision Blizzard, it promises to make Activision's bestselling "Call of Duty" series free to Game Pass subscribers—the equivalent of Disney putting a new Star Wars movie straight on Disney+. As Microsoft makes more new titles available, "That's where I think we'll start seeing some pressure on that model," says Mr Lightle. Hollywood studios such as Warner Bros have returned to theatrical windowing, after the cannibalisation of box-office receipts proved too costly.

The hardest task for subscription services is getting third-party developers to add their latest games to a library. Google, which gave up making games of its own, struggled to keep Stadia sufficiently stocked. Some developers see subscriptions as a good way of gaining exposure to wider audiences. Mr Utsumi of Sega says subscription libraries are good for reaching families and occasional "hobby gamers", so putting "Sonic Racing" on Apple Arcade has got the famous hedgehog in front of more people when Sega is also pushing Sonic movies and other spin-offs.

The biggest games tend to make more money by maintaining a long period of exclusive retail release. With subscriber numbers an order of magnitude lower than those of Netflix, "The subscription services typically don't have the financial wherewithal to buy us out of our windows," says Mr Zelnick, who sees subscription working mainly for older titles "at the far end of the value chain". Some smaller developers are reluctant to sell because their venture-capital backers want to maintain unlimited returns that come with unit sales, rather than cash out upfront. Many of the largest games, such as "Fortnite", already have direct-to-consumer subscriptions of their own.

Subscriptions are likely to grow. Microsoft's Game Pass should get a big boost with Activision Blizzard, whose trove of popular titles would make the bundle much more attractive (perhaps too attractive, say regulators in America, Britain and the European Union, who are scrutinising the deal). As consumers manage their inflation-eroded budgets more carefully, subscriptions may also appeal more. A year's access to hundreds of games for roughly the price of two new ones can seem good value. Yet gaming's concentrated consumption patterns, and the difficulty of acquiring third-party content, will limit their appeal. Unlike music and television, streaming and subscription seem more likely to complement existing forms of distribution than replace them. ■

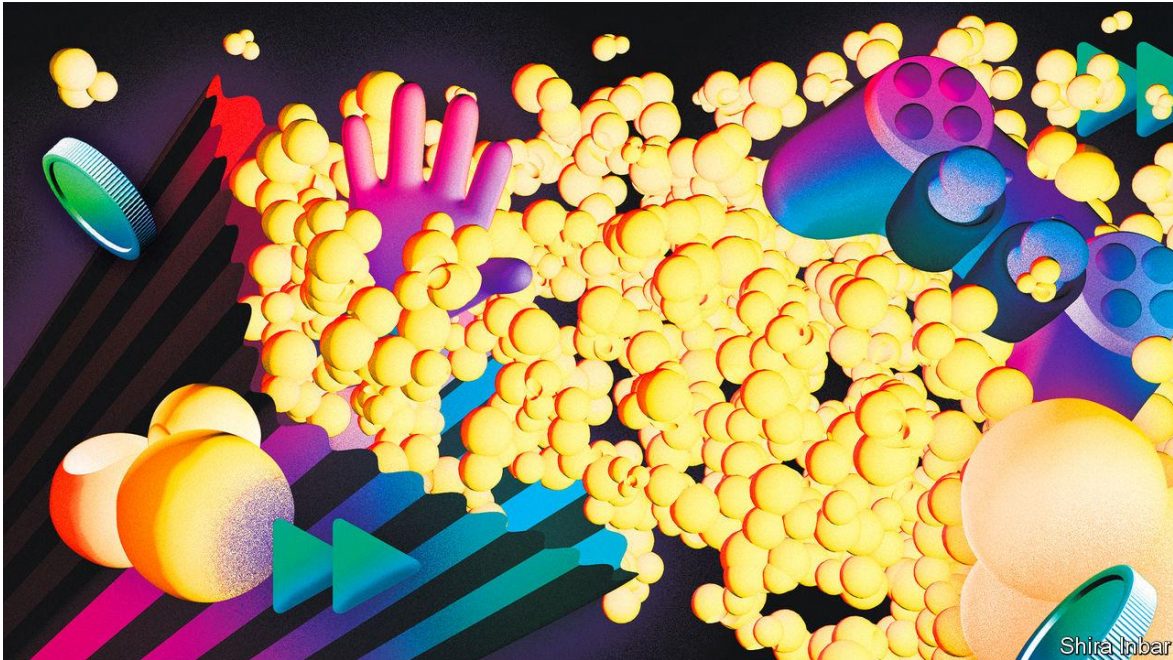
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Mouse, keyboard, action

Moviemaking and gamemaking are converging

But game developers have a better business model than Hollywood

Mar 20th 2023



HIGH TECHNOLOGY fills the headquarters of NCSoft, a South Korean developer of such popular video games as “Lineage”. But in a basement studio, Lee Seung-gi is a master of low-tech tools. Mr Lee, who spent eight years in the film industry, makes sound effects. To conjure the noise of a skeletal monster rising from the ground, he crunches crab shells. For a laser gun, he hooks a slinky to the back of a chair and flicks it: *peeoww*! Hardest, he says, are simple footsteps, recorded in a tray of gravel: the trudge of a sad character sounds different from the light step of one in love.

Making a blockbuster game is now like making a blockbuster movie. As technology lets games grow larger and more lifelike, they have taken on Hollywood-style budgets and timetables. And as the line between film and digital games blurs, that has two effects. One is that labour markets and production techniques for gaming converge with those of the film business, to the point where some envisage a single production process. The other is

that game studios become more focused even than film studios on monetising a few successful franchises.

When Allen Adham and two college chums founded what is now Blizzard Entertainment in 1991, making a game didn't require many people. "Rock n' Roll Racing", one of Blizzard's early hits, had a development team of ten, he recalls. Today at Blizzard's campus, south of Los Angeles, some games are developed by teams of over 500. Leaps in graphical fidelity have created jobs that did not exist; six or more people might work only on lighting effects. In some ways creating a game is harder than making a film, says Rod Fergusson, who is in charge of Blizzard's "Diablo" series. "Movies have a language and a process that everyone understands," he says. With games, "you have to reinvent the camera every time."

Across the industry, an AAA game (the highest-fidelity sort) might take anything between three and seven years to make. Budgets are kept quiet, but "Cyberpunk 2077", one of the biggest releases of 2020, was said by its Polish developer, CD Projekt, to have cost 1.2bn zlotys (\$275m), which represents a chunky amount even by Hollywood standards.

As games become more like films, movie people move in. "There's a lot of crossover now with these various labour markets...the skill set is very interchangeable," says Asad Qizilbash, head of PlayStation Productions, which makes films and TV series based on Sony's games. Neil Druckmann of Naughty Dog, who created "The Last of Us", a hit PlayStation game, co-wrote a TV adaptation released by HBO in January; HBO's cinematographer paid a return visit to Naughty Dog to share TV techniques. In Los Angeles actors and writers increasingly divide their time between filmed and interactive entertainment: Keanu Reeves had a role in "Cyberpunk 2077", and George R.R. Martin, creator of the Game of Thrones series, wrote the backstory for "Elden Ring", one of last year's biggest games. The only bit of Hollywood that hasn't translated to gaming is comedy, which one developer attributes to games' long gestation periods: "No joke is funny for three years."

As the video-game industry sucks in movie talent, Hollywood feeds off games' intellectual property (IP). Film adaptations of games have a poor record ("One of the worst movies I've ever seen" is the verdict of one

gaming boss on Hollywood's interpretation). But things are changing. Sega's "Sonic the Hedgehog 2" and Sony's "Uncharted" were among last year's highest-grossing films. A new "Mario" movie from Nintendo is due in April and a "Gran Turismo" film from Sony in August. Netflix has dozens of game adaptations out or in the works; future ones include spin-offs of "Assassin's Creed", "Splinter Cell" and "Bioshock".

More sophisticated games make better material for film adaptation, notes Mr Qizilbash. Today's producers, who grew up with games, are keen. "If you talk with Hollywood people, they're big fans of gaming. They know all our IPs," says Utsumi Shuji of Sega, who likens his company to a "treasure island" of properties that are ripe for exploitation. Julia Alexander of Parrot Analytics, a research firm, says "Gaming will be in the 2020s what comics IP was in the '00s and '10s."

Turning games into films and vice-versa is becoming easier as the two use the same technology. Game "engines", 3D-modelling tools used to make realistic playable environments, can also make virtual sets for TV productions such as "The Mandalorian", a Star Wars spinoff made by Disney with the help of Epic Games' Unreal Engine. For the "Gran Turismo" movie, digital models from the PlayStation game rehearsed stunts and shots, says Mr Qizilbash. The process works in reverse: Sony plans to scan cars from the movie and put them in the next update of the game.

The same digital "assets" (sets, cars, etc) could one day be shared between games and movies. For now, a game's environment is more interactive than a film's; and films' backdrops are higher fidelity than games'. But the two production processes are converging from the gaming side. "The gamemakers have a more demanding set of requirements for these virtual worlds than the film-makers do. So somebody's going to invest in a [gaming] simulation that's photo-realistic. And then they're going to shoot a movie in it," says one Hollywood executive. "It will happen. And it's probably not too far away."

Companies that span films and games are well placed. Sony has sat out video "streaming wars", declining to launch its own version of Disney+. But it has a pilot in Poland where subscribers to its PlayStation Plus gaming service get access to Sony movies. Such a service could one day let

customers watch films like “Gran Turismo” before seamlessly switching to a game, or vice-versa.

Gamemakers have found different new ways to wring money from old hits

The growing cost of gamemaking makes them like Hollywood in another way: repetitiveness. Many film fans complain that the box office is overrun with sequels and remakes, as studios become less willing to risk blockbuster budgets on unknown products. All of 2022’s ten highest-grossing movies in America were part of a franchise, from “Avatar” to “The Batman”. Games, whose lead time makes it even riskier to try new things, have become more predictable. Seven of last year’s ten most-played games on PCs and consoles featured in the previous year’s top ten, says Newzoo, a data company, which studied 37 mainly rich markets. One of this year’s big releases is the 16th instalment of Square Enix’s “Final Fantasy”, a Japanese series running since 1987.

Subscriber models

Where movies are locked in endless sequels and prequels, game-makers have found different new ways to wring money from old hits. Developers used to finish making a game and go on holiday. Today, “Shipping the game is just the beginning. The real work starts after that,” says Mr Adham. Rather than merely release sequels, Blizzard has turned “World of Warcraft” into a subscription service, with regular updates to maps, missions and characters for those willing to pay. This setup, which is known as “games as a service”, keeps gamers engaged (and spending) year after year.

The model has proved itself. Take “PUBG”, a “battle royale” shooting game released by Krafton, a South Korean publisher, in 2017. In its first four years the game sold 75m copies at \$30 each. But, facing competition from rivals such as “Fortnite”, it went free in January 2022, instead charging players for extra features. “To get more users we went free-to-play, because more users is more fun,” says Kim Chang-han, Krafton’s chief executive. It is also lucrative. Last year the mobile version of “PUBG”, which has been free to play since 2018, was the second-highest grossing mobile game in the world, generating revenue of \$2.1bn, says Sensor Tower, a data firm. In the past

five years, updates and new features have persuaded “PUBG Mobile” users to part with more than \$9bn.

“Games are no longer simply consumer packaged goods. They have become live services. That means the name of the game is no longer just to attract players, but to retain them,” says Jack Buser, who runs gaming at Google Cloud. Having failed to crack the game-streaming business with its defunct Stadia platform, Google has repositioned itself to focus on helping developers run live-service games. A live platform needs servers, scalable databases and analytics tools, says Mr Buser. His pitch to developers is: “Let us solve the hard computer-science problems...and that means you can focus on building the world’s best game.”

Live-service games have made the industry less hit-driven, says Strauss Zelnick of Take-Two Interactive. His company releases blockbuster sequels to franchises like “Grand Theft Auto” (GTA). But it also runs “GTA Online”, a game with continually refreshed content. Last year it launched GTA+, a \$6-a-month subscription giving players access to more in-game features. It has similar online versions of games like “Red Dead” and “NBA 2K”. These bankable properties keep revenue coming between sequels, making the business less lumpy. “It used to be a much more volatile business than it is today,” says Mr Zelnick. “If you want to use an old media analogy, we looked a lot more like the movie business—and now it’s much more like the television business.” ■

Spectator sports

The rise and rise of e-sports

Broadcasting gameplay has become a big business

Mar 20th 2023



KIM KYU-MIN is an admirably dedicated student. Even in his winter break, the 18-year-old goes twice a week to a cramming school, where he has four hours of intensive tuition followed by four more of individual practice until 10pm. In a classroom furnished with desks for 28 students, he sits in quiet concentration as a teacher holds forth. The unusual thing is his subject of choice: not English or maths, but “Valorant”, an online game.

At Seoul Game Academy, a chain of schools in South Korea’s capital, 3,000 students aged nine and up (roughly 99% of them boys) hone their skills at nine games in hopes of becoming full time “e-sports” athletes. The school, which charges about \$500 a month for three sessions a week, advertises itself as “the quickest way to become a pro gamer”. Gleaming trophies in the principal’s office show off recent successes at games such as “KartRider”.

E-sports are a national obsession in South Korea, where Lee Sang-hyeok, a “League of Legends” player with the *nom de jeu* of Faker, reportedly earns more than any player in the country’s football league. Parents were sceptical

when the Seoul Gaming Academy opened in 2011, says its director, Park Se-woon. Today they see gaming as a good living, not least since those who don't make it as e-athletes often forge careers in game development. Parents are increasingly gamers themselves, says Mr Park. "Some even come in for lessons."

For game publishers, e-sports serve two purposes. First, broadcast and sponsorship rights to e-leagues raise money, as in any other sport. Riot Games, the California-based, Tencent-owned company behind "League of Legends", has sold five years' streaming rights for its Chinese league to Huya, a Chinese streaming service, for a reported \$310m. Its Korean league is sponsored by businesses ranging from a local barbecue-chicken brand to the jeweller Tiffany & Co.

Second, publicity from e-sports drives adoption of the game. One American rival of Riot says it designs games to be popular in South Korea, hoping they will be picked up by the e-sports crowd. Com2uS, a Korean developer of games including "Summoners War", says athletes' fans are useful networks for promoting games. It is planning a "Summoners" match between teams from South Korea and Japan. In September the Asian Games, a continental sporting contest, will include digital games for the first time.

E-sports have yet to engage Western audiences quite as much. About 20% of Americans take an interest, according to a poll by Morning Consult—slightly less than follow horse-racing. Instead they soak up hours of other gaming-related content. In America 69% of Generation Z watch gaming videos, ranging from how-to guides to time trials or stunts. YouTube, which sells \$30bn in ads per year, counts gaming as its second-largest content category after music. "Minecraft" is among the most-searched terms on TikTok, according to DataReportal, a research firm. On Twitch, a live-streaming service owned by Amazon which focuses on gaming, the most popular channels are not professional e-sports but general gaming chat. Epic Games recently launched Postparty, an app for sharing "Fortnite" clips.

Back at the League of Legends Arena in Seoul, a game is under way. After referees check their computers, ten slender, track-suited athletes do warm-up exercises with their mouse. As two-dozen sports journalists munch quails' eggs and kimchi in the press room, Faker's team, T1, proves victorious.

Players pack up their keyboards and bow, while fans (mainly girls) wait outside with love-letters and flowers. Mr Kim, the gaming student, has known this is the career for him since, as a schoolchild, he saw a professional gamer lift a trophy in triumph. As his principal, Mr Park, puts it, “It’s not just about a game, it’s about a dream.” ■

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Censorship

Complexities of moderating and classifying video games

Classification borrowed from the film industry is adapting to resemble that of social media

Mar 20th 2023



CENSORS AT THE British Board of Film Classification were puzzled in 1986 by a copy of “Dracula”. The BBFC normally reviewed films and videos. But after playing the game it deemed its gory scenes, splattered with red pixels, too shocking for children and banned its sale to those under 15. The game’s publisher, CRL, delighted by the publicity, set its sights on getting an “18” certificate for its next game, “Jack the Ripper”.

As games became more realistic they attracted more regulation. After the home release in 1993 of “Mortal Kombat”, which set a new standard in gruesome violence, America’s Congress pushed the games industry into setting up an Entertainment Software Ratings Board to dish out age ratings. In 2003 the Pan European Game Information rating did a similar job. Games settled into a classification regime similar to that of movies.

Nowadays concerns about content in digital games are less about what developers have included than about other players. Most big games are online, multiplayer affairs, in which players are exposed to strangers who communicate by text or microphone. The main challenge is moderating what millions of users say and do. The content debate has moved from being similar to the movie industry's to one more like arguments over regulating social media.

Meta, which has experience of content moderation on Facebook, has found problems on its virtual-reality platforms. When users of "Horizon Worlds", its main VR space, complained of being virtually groped, it introduced a minimum distance between avatars. After the Christchurch shootings in 2019, users of Roblox, a platform on which they can create games of their own, began re-enacting the event before the company intervened. Roblox employs "thousands" of human moderators, as well as artificial intelligence, to check user-submitted games and police chat among its 60m daily users, who have an average age of about 13.

As with social media, regulators are unsure how far to go in censoring speech. Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's boss, has said social networks are like newspapers, because users can publish to a mass audience, but also like phone companies, since they allow one-to-one communication. In 2018 Germany introduced a new law holding social networks responsible for content on their sites, treating them like publishers. Politicians debated including video games as well, before deciding in-game chat was more like one-to-one conversation, which is protected by the constitution, says Niko Härting, a tech lawyer.

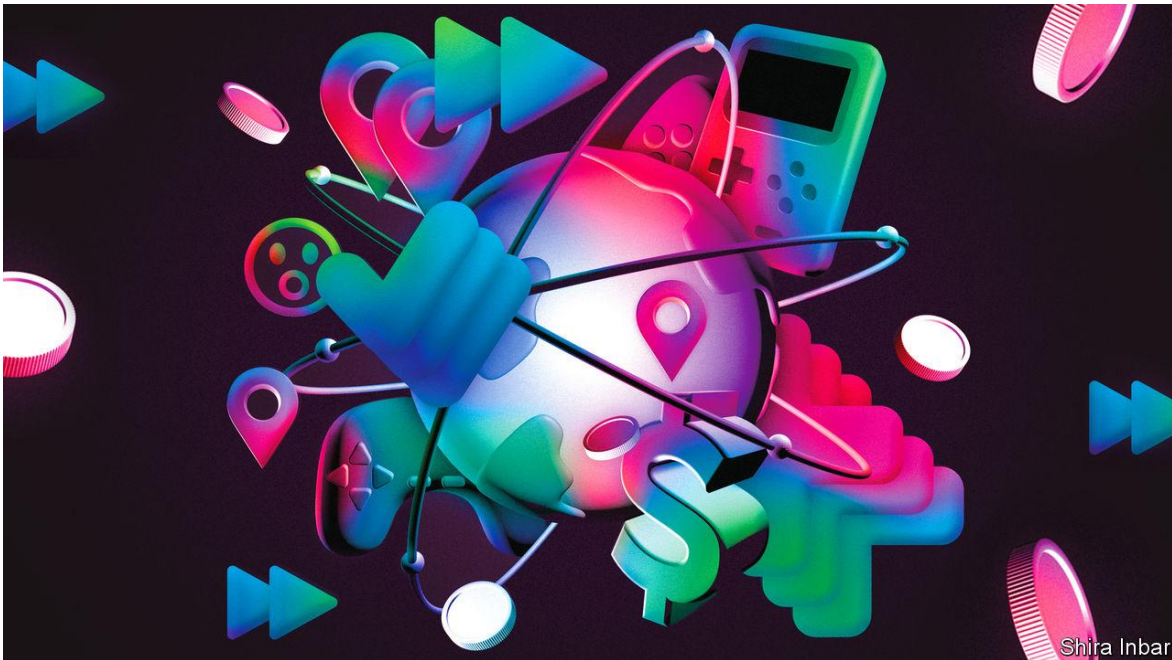
Gamemakers are doing their best to design out bad behaviour before it occurs. In "World of Warcraft", players join either the "Alliance" or the "Horde". They can talk to their own team, but if they try talking to the other side, their speech is translated into unintelligible orcish or elvish. The result, says Allen Adham of Blizzard Entertainment, which makes the game, is that "players play really nicely with each other, because they have a common enemy."

Geopolitics

Video games, power and diplomacy

Gaming is a growing source of soft power, influence—and perhaps espionage

Mar 20th 2023



OF ALL THE shrines in Kyoto, the most sacred for some is in the south. As snow falls, a guard stands watch, making sure no pilgrims get too close. The site is surrounded by a wall, but over it a grey building is visible, marked with eight characters that spell out its name: Nintendo. Japan's gaming industry has a following bordering on the religious. In Tokyo foreigners flock to Akihabara, the "electric town" of game arcades, or roar around by go-kart in homage to "Mario Kart". Osaka has a Super Nintendo World theme park. When Japan shows off to the world, it reaches for games as often as for samurai or sushi. Collecting the Olympic torch in Rio in 2016, its then prime minister, Abe Shinzo, emerged in the stadium from a green drainpipe, dressed as Mario.

Popular culture's "soft power" has been evident ever since Hollywood began. In 1950 Walter Wanger, an American producer, said film exports were more important "than the H bomb". Every movie reel exported was an

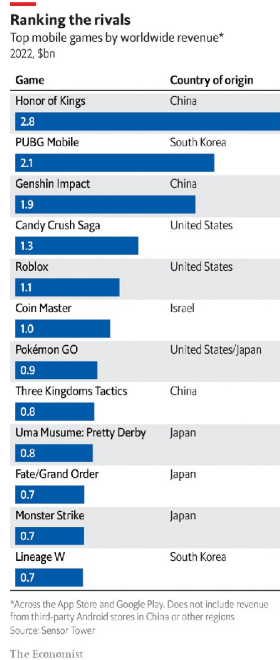
American ambassador, he said, dubbing this “Donald Duck diplomacy”. A new soft power is now on the rise: Super Mario diplomacy. As games take up a bigger share of people’s time, they become a weapon in the battle of ideas. And unlike movies, in which America remains the world’s only superpower, the contest in gaming is wide open.

Japan conquered Western living rooms in the 1980s when Atari, an American game pioneer, collapsed and Nintendo saw an opening. Japan’s *anime* cartoons had a niche following, but gaming was the cultural export “that would really monetise and become an influential cultural phenomenon,” says Nakamura Akinori of Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. The university’s Centre for Game Studies, stacked with 10,000 video games and 150 pieces of hardware, shows how Japan led the gaming market by the 1990s, with Nintendo, Sega and later Sony dominant. More American children recognised Mario than Mickey Mouse. Unlike Japanese consumer-electronic successes, notes Matt Alt, author of “Pure Invention”, a book on Japanese culture, games represented not just efficient manufacturing but “a triumph of ideas”.

Some ideas are stylistic: the two-dimensional artwork in games such as the “Pokémon” series follows a Japanese tradition which Hirabayashi Hisakazu, a writer on gaming, traces to the artwork of the Heian period. Others concern gameplay mechanics. The “loot box”, a now-ubiquitous monetisation feature allowing players to buy a package of random power-ups, is derived from the Japanese market for *gacha*, vending machines that sell surprise toys. Japanese games have a greater emphasis than Western ones on co-operative play, and less on firearms, says Mr Hirabayashi, who talks of a culture of “the *katana*, not the gun”.

But Japan’s grip is now weaker. Microsoft’s Xbox gave America a share of the console market. Western developers found it easier to write games for the Xbox’s Windows-based system. Sony and Nintendo still have a lead in consoles. But gaming has shifted to mobile, and the two main operating systems, Google’s Android and Apple’s iOS, are American-owned. The production of games is also more varied. Whereas the global movie business is still dominated by America (which produced 17 of last year’s 20 highest-grossing films, with China making the other three), the games business is

international: last year's 20 highest-grossing mobile games came from nine different countries.



Japan is also held back by a large domestic market with a culture that others can find baffling. In “Uma Musume” (“Horse Girl”), the world’s ninth-highest-earning mobile game of 2022, the player trains young women to compete in races. The game made \$800m in Japan last year, but has yet to be released elsewhere. South Korea has become the emerging new power, encouraged by a government that declared games part of the *Hallyu*, or Korean cultural wave, that includes K-pop music and such movies as the Oscar-winning “Parasite”. Many of its games mimic Japanese style, but that is changing. Krafton, a big Korean developer, is working on a game adaptation of “The Bird That Drinks Tears”, a series of novels based on Korean mythology.

If any country is now winning the race, it is China, which produced six of last year’s top 20 mobile games, including two of the top three: Tencent’s “Honor of Kings” and miHoYo’s “Genshin Impact”. China’s success contrasts with failed efforts in old media. Chinese movies compete with Hollywood in quality, but they are geared firmly to the home audience (“Water Gate Bridge”, last year’s biggest hit, is mainly about killing Americans). Yet though Chinese film-makers can focus on a domestic

market, Chinese game developers cannot. China's government has dubbed games "spiritual opium" and slapped restrictions on them, limiting children's gaming time to three hours a week and rationing new releases. Developers have had to look to international markets instead. "Honor of Kings" has a medieval European look. "Genshin Impact" looks so like "Zelda: Breath of the Wild" that Nintendo fans publicly smashed up rival consoles in protest. Chinese developers have earned a reputation as "copycats", says Suh Bo-kyung of Bernstein, a broker. But their games are worldwide hits.

This Chinese success has sparked concerns, and not only among developers in other countries who feel ripped off. One worry is security. As with TikTok, a Chinese-owned social-media app that has spread like wildfire in the West, Chinese games are seen as tools gathering data for China's government. Games often seek personal information—name, date of birth, payment details—or record voice clips. The move to online play makes for better spying tools, since "people's boxes will be connected directly to China", says James Lewis of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank in Washington, DC. Some players accused "Genshin Impact" of installing spyware on their PC after finding its anti-piracy software running even after the game was removed (the developer said this was a mistake and issued a fix).

Chinese whispers

Even American firms with Chinese investment are under scrutiny. In 2020 America's Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), the Treasury-chaired security committee that is looking into TikTok, reportedly wrote to Riot Games and Epic Games (respectively wholly and partly owned by Tencent) to ask how they handle personal data. In December Epic was fined \$275m by American regulators for illegally collecting children's data. CFIUS is not yet alarmed, Mr Lewis believes. But as gaming technology is adapted to purposes beyond mere play, security concerns become more sensitive. Game engines, 3D-modelling tools for developing games, are used for everything from airport management to war-gaming simulations for the armed forces.

A second worry is over broader Chinese influence. Western studios may change games in China to tone down sex or violence, or replace skeletons

with zombies to skirt laws against “superstition”. But the reach of Chinese censors extends far beyond China. The chat function in “Genshin Impact”, for instance, blots out such sensitive words as “Taiwan” and “Falun Gong” (alongside “Hitler” and “Putin”). And some Western developers bend the knee to the Chinese government. In 2019 Ng Wai-chung, a Hong Kong-based e-sports player, used a post-match interview to declare: “Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our time!” The American game company that ran the league, Activision Blizzard, which counts Tencent as an investor, cancelled his \$10,000 prize money and suspended him from competing. A message on the game’s Chinese social media account--run by a Chinese business partner, Blizzard says--promised to “resolutely safeguard [China’s] national dignity”. (After an outcry in America the firm partly backtracked.) Riot Games, which is wholly owned by Tencent, later announced that it would ban political speech from its “League of Legends” tournaments.

Game studios are “increasingly savvy and increasingly paranoid” in their dealings with China, says James Tager of PEN International, a free-speech pressure group. Like old-media companies worried that an offensive film might jeopardise not just a single title but their other interests in China, game developers that are part of big companies are likely to practise self-censorship to preserve market access, he says.

So far the trade-offs have attracted less controversy at home than the equivalent moves by Hollywood studios, which have been accused by American politicians of “kowtowing” to China. As Mr Tager puts it, one reason may be that “the average representative in Congress is not playing video games, but they are watching movies.” As gaming’s popularity grows, Chinese-made games find their way into more living rooms and more gamers enter Congress, Western politicians’ complaints may grow louder. ■

User-generated content

The rise of user-created video games

Do-it-yourself games are taking off just as DIY video did

Mar 20th 2023



“STOP THAT or someone could get injured!” shouts the teacher, as a pupil stands on her desk, dancing the Macarena. “You are a student, not a baby!” A class of avatars snigger. This is “The Presentation Experience”, a game on Roblox, an app popular with schoolchildren. As one player gives a presentation, others do their best to interrupt and make a nuisance of themselves. By pressing different buttons they can heckle, burp or go to sleep. If they pay they can be even more disruptive: for 99 robux, Roblox’s in-game currency (about \$1.25), they can “make everyone mega fart”.

The gameplay is basic and the graphics rudimentary. But “The Presentation Experience” has had 190m plays since it was launched less than 18 months ago. It is one of 32m “experiences” on Roblox, which lets users design and publish homemade games. Never mind that the gameplay looks fairly low-fi; some 60m people play Roblox a day, generating revenue in 2022 of over \$2bn in purchases of in-game items—mega farts and all.

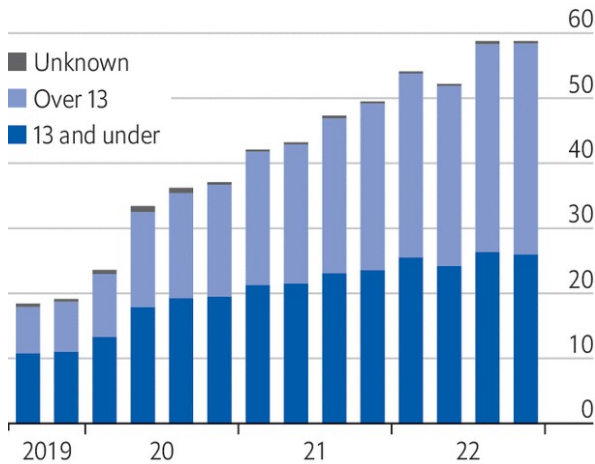
The TV business has gone through a revolution in what media types call user-generated content. Smartphones give everyone a way to record and publish home videos in seconds. The result is that even as professional content has become more plentiful and lavishly financed, viewers spend more time on amateur content. Americans under 18 spend almost twice as much time on TikTok and YouTube as on Netflix and Disney+, says Qustodio, which makes parental-control software.

Many wonder if this may happen to gaming. User-made games already have a vast reach among young people. In 2020, amid covid-19 lockdowns, Roblox estimated that three-quarters of American 9- to 12-year-olds were using the platform. “Minecraft”, a Microsoft-owned game that lets players visit each others’ constructions, has 120m monthly players. Like YouTube and TikTok, most user-made stuff is low quality. But like those sites, algorithmic sifting of a near-infinite variety serves up plenty for users.

As on YouTube, ever more content on platforms like Roblox is professionally made. Some small developers have shifted to the platform, aiming for a share of the \$600m earned by creators each year. Big brands use it as a place to reach new audiences. Sega has licensed a Sonic game to Roblox. As on YouTube, where creators like Jimmy “MrBeast” Donaldson began as amateurs before turning professional, many successful developers made games as a hobby before going full-time. Simple Games, which makes such Roblox titles as “War Simulator”, began as a hobby for its founder, Nathan Clemens, and now employs his whole family.

Getting older

Roblox daily active users, by age group, m



Source: Roblox

The Economist

The big difference between films and gaming is that game developers have proved more adept at incorporating user-made content into their productions. Whereas home-made content has emerged as a competitor to professional film-makers, game studios have made it part of their business model, monetising it themselves.

Since the earliest days of PC gaming, players with programming expertise have “modded”, or modified, games by taking the source code and altering it to change the game, sometimes trading their “mods” online, with various degrees of consent from the developer. Built-in features such as map editors let players make their own designs, and it has become standard to allow players to customise in-game avatars.

Do it yourself

The most important user-generated input comes in multiplayer games, where users generate “content” by acting as each other’s opponents. Many recent hits have been online titles like “League of Legends” or “Fortnite”, in which the thrills come from interaction with other users. “Because players are infinitely creative, you can make the sandbox, throw some people in there, and the player stories that come out of that emergent play are endless,” says Allen Adham of Blizzard Entertainment.

Enlisting players to entertain each other means games stay entertaining for longer. “If you look at the biggest games, there is demand from the players that it’s constantly refreshed...and creating game content is a long process,” says Tom Wijman of Newzoo, a game analyst. “Part of the reason why gaming companies are so eager to stimulate [user-generated content] and incorporate it into their day-to-day business is because it helps them crowdsource this content creation that has become expected by the gaming community”. Mr Adham says “player v player” games “can be very production-efficient, because the players are providing the diversity of play”. Sometimes the creation of new content is well managed. Online fans of games like “Grand Theft Auto” organise together to plan elaborate role-playing scenarios—bank heists, police chases and so on—before playing them together, often broadcasting the action on video platforms such as Twitch.

The complexity of making a game is a natural brake on how much original content users can generate. Meta’s flagship virtual-reality app, “Horizon Worlds”, has struggled to attract users, partly because it relies on user-made virtual environments that few amateurs are able to build. Yet there is an expectation that artificial intelligence (AI) will make things much easier. Roblox has shown off a forthcoming feature that will let developers use AI to program games with simple text prompts, such as “make it rain”. Microsoft has reportedly come up with a voice-activated AI assistant for “Minecraft” that builds structures on demand. Niantic, which makes augmented-reality games and apps, has developed a tool to create interactive 3D models using voice instructions. Apple, which may release a virtual-reality headset later this year, is working on similar technology.

Whether in film or in gaming, demand for user-made content is growing. “This younger generation doesn’t just want content thrown at them,” says Craig Donato, Roblox’s chief business officer. “They want to feel a sense of agency or co-ownership of the medium...[and] that they are not just consumers of content, but that they can also be participants in the creation of the content.” The video-game business has done a better job than Hollywood of turning this to its advantage. ■

The future

How digital gaming spreads far and wide

Video games are becoming platforms for more than play

Mar 20th 2023



AFTER ARRIVING by parachute, the spectators rushed to a concert in a park. Next they went to a grimy city, where they escaped a snarling, fiery monster. Then they flew to a stadium to see a show, during which they floated around the arena.

A game? A gig? A social event? The makers of this live production, staged on January 27th by The Kid Laroi, an Australian rapper, opted for “immersive sonic experience”. It took place in “Fortnite”, an online multiplayer game that is often a venue for mass virtual gatherings. It was the latest case of games being the platform of choice for digital activities that go beyond conventional play.

There was a burst of excitement about such experiences in 2021, when they were dubbed part of the “metaverse”, a term coined in “Snow Crash”, a 1992 novel by Neal Stephenson. This virtual space would form “a new economy that is larger than our current economy”, promised Jensen Huang, chief executive of Nvidia, a chipmaker. Mark Zuckerberg changed

Facebook's name to Meta and called it a "metaverse company". The buzzword featured over 500 times on company earnings calls in the final quarter of 2021, says a tally by GlobalData, a research firm. But the metaverse has fallen out of fashion. It became linked to the boosterism for cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens before their crash in 2022. Investors' excitement turned to impatience, not least at Meta, whose share price plunged by 65% last year. Last month Mr Zuckerberg announced cuts and a "year of efficiency".

One reason for disillusionment with these virtual worlds is the slow pace of improvement of virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR), technologies that bring such environments to life. About a quarter of American adults under 40 own a VR headset, largely thanks to Meta, which sold truckloads of its Quest 2 goggles to a bored, locked-down audience. But headsets are more of a novelty than the ubiquitous platform Mr Zuckerberg predicted. Apple's first headset, due later this year, may cost several thousand dollars. "There's a very high entry-barrier for users, particularly in emerging countries," says Kim Chang-han, chief executive of Krafton, whose free games are played mostly on mobile phones.

The delayed arrival of good, cheap VR and AR technology means most immersive online experiences are still on ordinary screens, where games are the leaders. "I didn't see video games coming when I wrote 'Snow Crash'. I thought that the killer app for computer graphics would be something more akin to TV," Mr Stephenson wrote. "Thanks to games, billions of people are now comfortable navigating 3D environments on flat 2D screens."

Games like "Fortnite" have created the cheapest and most realistic 3D environments. This became clear in the pandemic, when real-world gatherings hastily went online. After South by Southwest, a festival in Austin, Texas, was cancelled in 2020, revellers decamped to "Minecraft" for a virtual festival called Block by Blockwest. Bored by Zoom, some people staged work meetings in games. "Red Dead Redemption 2", a cowboy adventure, facilitated cosy team chats around the campfire (as well as shoot-outs).

Lockdowns may have lifted, but the use of gaming environments for other purposes has continued. Roblox has staged concerts and fashion shows, as

well as educational events for organisations like the Museum of Science in Boston, which organised a virtual mission to Mars. FIRST, an educational outfit which organises robot-building contests for children, runs them on Roblox too. Epic Games, which makes “Fortnite”, is working with the LEGO Group to build what it calls a metaverse for children.

As games evolve, they swallow up experiences that once belonged to other media. Last year “The Walking Dead”, a long-running TV drama, staged an interactive experience on Facebook Gaming. Users participated in daily activities to determine how the story would unfold. GenVid Technologies, which created the hybrid game-cum-show, will launch a similar experience based on “Silent Hill”, a long-running video game. Netflix has used streaming to create interactive TV shows where viewers can choose how the plot develops. And where once people watched fitness videos, increasingly they play fitness games. In February, after a battle with regulators, Meta acquired Within, which makes VR workout experiences. In the same month Tencent invested in Quell, a British maker of fitness games.

Many believe that AR, which maps video graphics onto the user’s vision of the real world, will be the next big tech platform. Tim Cook, Apple’s boss, has called it “profound”. Yet today the most successful AR app is “Pokémon GO”, a monster-hunting game in which players use mobile phones to track down animated creatures. Technology honed in “Pokémon GO” has allowed Niantic, its American developer, to devise a system for mapping the world in AR, something that will have widespread uses if AR glasses become mainstream.

As interactions are more electronically mediated, gaming touches all corners of life

Gaming’s lead in these new platforms is down to technology overlaps. But another explanation is behavioural. “Games, even before video games, were a way for people to meet one another and spend time together socially,” says John Hanke, Niantic’s chief executive. “So when you talk about getting people together through some electronic mediation, games are already a natural fit.” As interactions are more electronically mediated, gaming touches all corners of life. “Perhaps one day, we won’t even have the term

‘gamer’,” says Jim Ryan, chief executive of Sony’s gaming division, “because everyone will play in some form or other.” ■

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