

Analysis

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E-sport popularity mushrooms but money lags behind

It is a paradox pitting popularity against relative pittance - e-sports have exploded into the global consciousness but the big money has not yet appeared pitchside, or screenside. Participation has soared as virtual games gain traction, with a worldwide fan audience now estimated at 280 million, approaching that for the NFL. Such a leap in growth has helped fuel talk that competitive electronic sports, or professional gaming, could even soon become an Olympic "discipline". But even if the League of Legends final drew a huge audience to the "Bird's Nest" National Stadium in Beijing earlier this month the sector has yet to mature economically and needs to secure more funding in order to secure a longer term foothold in the sporting world, analysts say.

And the question of how to open the revenue stream sluice gate is complex. "This year, e-sport should earn a little over 850 million euros (\$990 million) and studies show that come 2021 we'll reach turnover of some three billion euros," says Laurent Michaud, director of studies at Idate, a leading European think tank on the digital economy. "But that's set against a global video games market worth more than 65 billion euros."

How to ramp up low monetization is exercising minds given that an e-sport fan brings only three euros to the table annually on average, according to a recent study by Nielsen Sports. Soccer generates typically some ten times more.

'Complicated audience'

One reason for the disparity between the virtual and the non-virtual sporting universes is the difficulty of engaging with e-fans via traditional broadcasting outlets. "Our football stadiums are still sold out - but clubs shouldn't feel too safe because the crowds are not so young. Traditional sports don't have to be afraid of e-sports, TV's should," says Tim Reichert, chief gaming officer at German top-flight football club Schalke 04. "We're still at the point we have to educate broadcasters and outside sponsors on how to interact with this complicated audience, because they don't watch TV and they all have ad blockers," Reichert told AFP at the Web Summit in Lisbon, a kind of "Davos for geeks" where virtual gaming featured high on the agenda.

Many e-sport fans are used to receiving their visual fare for free via platforms such as YouTube, rather than switching on the TV set. Traditional media are still taking baby e-steps after coming late to the genre. "We've had a partnership with BBC 3 which is a really good space to explore it, and with some success," says Barbara Slater, who heads the BBC's sports coverage. "We've covered an e-gaming event live. I just think we'll step forward cautiously but there is no question the interest and the amount time and engagement that e-sports is achieving with our audience."

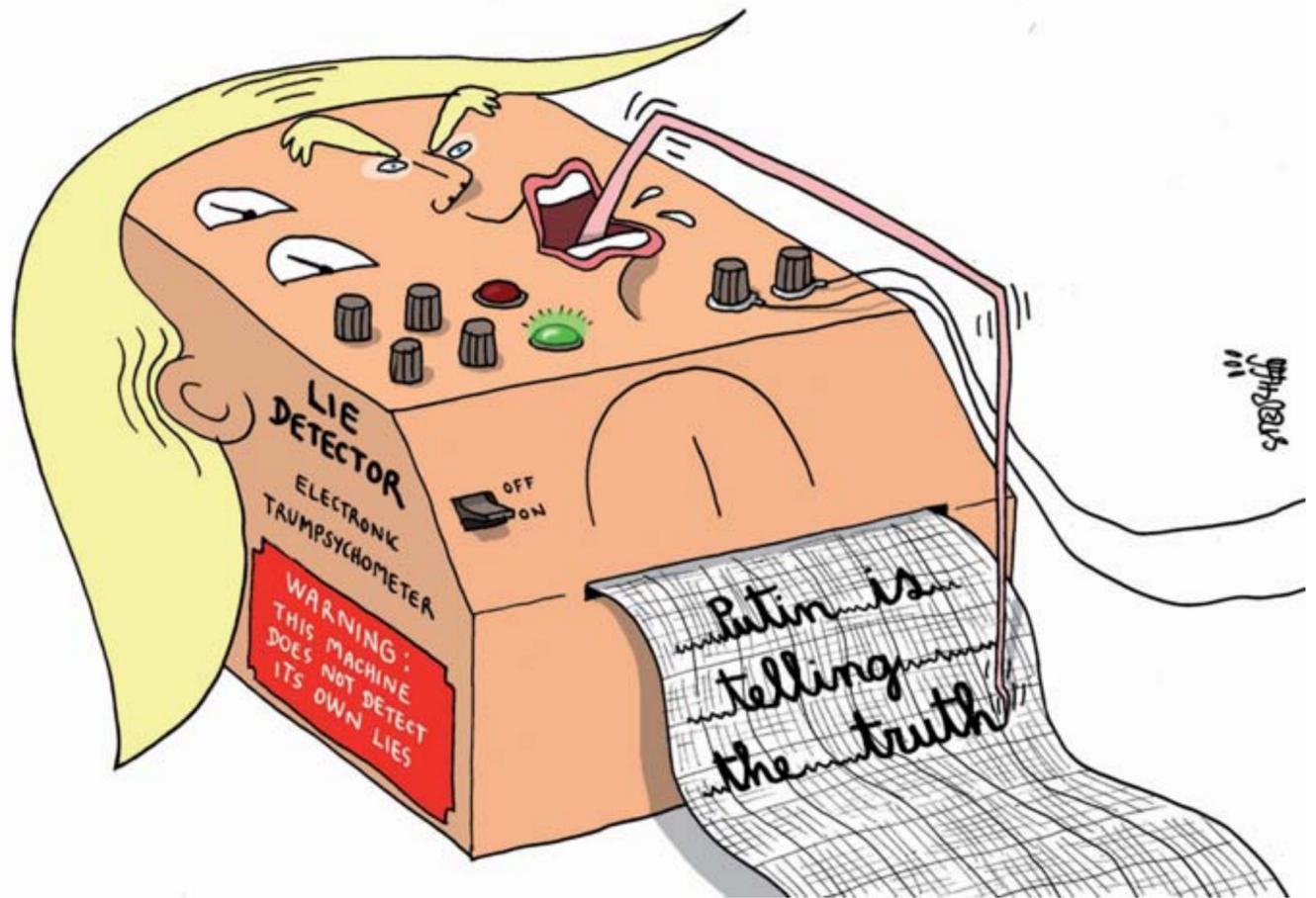
An additional obstacle is dubious image a substantial swathe of society has of video gaming and e-sport in particular. "People are afraid of what they don't understand. There is still a generation that doesn't know anything about video games. Twenty years ago that was a majority, now it's 50-50 and in the future there will be less people that don't understand it," says Ralf Reichert, founder of Electronic Sports League (ESL), the oldest and largest-scale organizer of e-sport competitions. "The simple changing of generation will remove the fear" of making the e-leap, says Reichert.

Web wonder

The generational shift is moving in e-sport's favor, says Andy Dinh, a former star gamer now heading his own team. In his view, "today's fans take their children to watch an e-sport competition e-sport as some take theirs to watch the baseball. These are the upcoming generations of fans." That will increasingly bend the ear of sponsors and broadcasters when it comes to showing and investing in competitions which are set increasingly to become unmissable attractions on the e-circuit.

"Our sponsoring costs are rising and will continue to do so, but so will our earnings," insists Bracken Darrell, president and chief executive officer of IT device developer Logitech. Idate's Michaud weighs in that "the future of e-sport is not on television, everything is on the web". He added: "Broadcasting rights will concern platforms, there will be (rights) for the organisation of events, everything connected to sports betting could comprise important revenue."

Facebook or YouTube, cited as potential broadcast rights buyers for sports events, could be tempted by e-sport instead of more traditional sports that they might judge a less profitable return in investment terms. "Football is much bigger and it's going to be there for a long time but it's totally fine," insists RESL's Ralf Reichert. "If e-sport becomes the second largest sport in the future, everyone in the industry will be very happy with that!" —AFP



Alarm over moves to make French less macho

Moves to make French more female-friendly have sparked impassioned debate in France, with an appalled Academie Francaise warning of a "mortal danger" to the language of Moliere. At the center of the debate is the growing use of formulations such as "lecteur.rice.s" for the word "readers" to embrace both genders. Several government ministries, universities and labour unions use so-called "inclusive writing", but it had largely escaped public notice - until this autumn when it turned up in an elementary school history textbook.

The Academie Francaise, the arbiter of the French language which has inducted just eight women since its foundation in 1635, did not mince words. "In the face of this 'inclusive' aberration, the French language finds itself in mortal danger," the body intoned. The widespread adoption of inclusive writing would add a layer of complexity that would make French less attractive on the world stage to the benefit of other major languages, it argued.

French Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer also weighed in to decry "repeated attacks on the French language". French "should not be exploited for fighting battles no matter how legitimate they are," he said. But "defenseur.e.s" (defenders) of inclusive writing say the French language must keep up with changing times.

Raphael Haddad, whose public relations firm published an inclusive writing manual last year, welcomed the debate, saying it would foster acceptance of the feminization of the names of professions. "Ten years ago, people criticized words like ambassadeur.e.s... The revolution is under way," he told AFP. The debate comes as the issue of sexual harassment, abuse and violence is capturing headlines worldwide

in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal.

But it is nothing new, and follows feminist linguistic campaigns dating to the French Revolution. Efforts in the 1980s by Socialist president Francois Mitterrand to introduce feminine versions of the names of professions met with stiff resistance from the Academie Francaise. Then in 2015, France's High Council for Equality Between Women and Men issued a guide urging public bodies to use gender-

Ferry asked in a tweet: "Who is the cretin or cretine who invented (this) unpronounceable inclusive writing?" "Rationalist" feminist Peggy Sastry, writing in the weekly *Le Point*, called it "intellectual terrorism".

'Masculine is nobler'

It was the Academie Francaise that reversed earlier more egalitarian rules derived from Latin. Last week, 314 schoolteachers signed an op-ed on the French edition of the Slate news website pledging to scrap a rule governing the gender of adjectives. They cited an 18th-century grammar book that stipulated a preference for masculine forms, saying "the masculine is seen as nobler than the feminine because of the superiority of the male over the female". Teaching this in schools, which "symbolize emancipation through knowledge... lead women and men to accept the domination of one sex over another," the teachers wrote.

Viviane Youx, president of a French language teaching association, told AFP she encouraged a debate that would help "change mentalities". But critics such as philosopher Raphael Enthoven object to what they see as a prescriptive, authoritarian approach to the language spoken by some 275 million people worldwide. They say language usage should be allowed to evolve naturally over time. Others question complicating the language at a time when official figures show a steep drop in pupils' verbal skills, notably in spelling.

But if inclusive writing prevails, the French Standardisation Association will be ready: early next year it will authorize two new French keyboard layouts that will include the "middle dot" needed to write "informaticien.ne.s" (computer techs) correctly. —AFP



French education minister decries 'repeated attacks' on language

neutral language that avoids sexual stereotypes. It suggested that feminine forms of the words for "firefighter" and "author" would make women "more visible".

But the school textbook referring to farmers as "agriculteur.rice.s" and shop owners as "commercant.e.s" - complete with a new punctuation mark called the "middle dot" at the level of a hyphen - sparked particular rage among French language purists. Former education minister Luc

Ghana maritime boundary win to spark oil bounty

Ghana's "long and arduous journey" to boost offshore oil exploration and extraction will be fuelled by billions of extra dollars after a key court victory over Ivory Coast. Thanks to efforts by successive governments and conquering lawyers at the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) over a disputed maritime boundary with Ivory Coast which resulted in a ruling in Ghana's favour, the money will soon be pouring in.

Ghana has produced oil commercially since 2010, leading to a burst of growth that transformed it into an emerging economy, piquing the interest of global investors. But new exploration and production was halted in 2014 when Ivory Coast said drilling off Ghana's western coast had strayed into its territory. Fruitless talks saw the issue taken to the ITLOS, which in September said Ghana had not, in fact, breached its neighbor's sovereignty.

In October, President Nana Akufo-Addo said the tribunal ruling opened up "possibilities of development, progress and prosperity". Expected oil revenue will likely mean more funding towards roads, schools and hospitals, he said. Operator Tullow Oil said output from its Twenboa, Enyenra and Ntomme (TEN) fields was currently about 50,000 barrels per day (bpd) and will be maintained until the end of the year. Exploratory drilling will then resume, eventually allowing production to increase towards the 80,000 bpd capacity on its floating production storage facility.

TEN field reserves are estimated at 306 million barrels of oil while the wider Tano Basin, which was the subject of the boundary dispute, holds the equivalent of 3-4 billion barrels. At current prices of around \$55 per barrel, the TEN field has the potential to generate \$16.7 billion in revenue and the Tano Basin \$165 billion,

said petroleum economist Theo Acheampong. "That is really what was at stake in this ruling," said Acheampong, from analysts IHS Markit. And with the area already known for being rich in oil and gas resources, he said there was likely even more to be discovered.

Economic development

Compared with other oil-producing nations in Africa such as Nigeria and Angola, whose output is upwards of 1.5 million bpd, Ghana's production is still low. Acheampong said as a result, the extra billions expected after the tribunal ruling would still not necessary lead to a turnaround in the country's economic fortunes. Ghana's economy in 2011 soared with rates of growth topping 14 percent but then slowed, inflation soared and public sector debts spiralled.

The government took a \$918-million International Monetary Fund loan in 2015 on condition of reform, tighter fiscal discipline, lower inflation and stronger public finances. Recovery is expected to continue this year and next with estimates of 7.1 percent and 8.0 percent growth, according to the African Development Bank. That depends on "new hydrocarbon wells coming on stream and the timely resolution of technical issues that led to disruptions in the Jubilee oil and gas field in 2016", it added.

Since oil production began in 2010, some \$3.5 billion in oil money has gone towards funding development projects, new roads and hospitals. Ivory Coast's President Alassane Ouattara meanwhile visited Accra in October in what was interpreted as a sign to investors that ties remained strong between the neighbors. Benjamin Boakyie, executive director for the African Centre for Energy Policy, said instead of souring relations, the tribunal case appeared to have strengthened ties. That bodes well for any possible discovery of oil that straddles both sides of the border, he added. "Given the number of discoveries on both sides of the border, it could be possible that at some point the countries will have to unite one discovery or the other," he said. "So there is need for that kind of cooperation to exist." —AFP

Tijuana drawing shoppers who once flocked to San Diego

Rahil Iqbal sugarcoats nothing: "Business is finished." The 64-year-old of Pakistani origin says sales have plummeted at his California clothing stores in San Diego's San Ysidro district, which borders Tijuana, Mexico. He blames US President Donald Trump's fierce rhetoric against immigrants, especially Mexicans. Business has plunged some 70 percent, he estimates, while the local Chamber of Commerce calculates that area shops have seen sales drop by 35 to 45 percent since Trump entered the White House. "The feeling is palpable," said Jason Wells, the chamber's president. "It's the uncertainty that affects us," he told AFP, explaining that Mexicans who used to cross the border to shop now fear to make the journey.

Jorge Trujillo, who has seen sales at his cell phone store drop 30 percent, said a government order for border agents to check the social-network contacts of foreigners entering the country has fanned fears. If Mexicans buy a phone number stateside without being residents, they worry that customs agents will think they live in the US and take their tourist papers, the shop owner said. Trump's aggressive rhetoric - including his threats to build a massive border wall and deport millions of undocumented immigrants - has stirred both anger and newfound pride among residents of the border region.

The president has moved to eliminate the DACA program, which allowed undocumented immigrants who arrived in the US as children to work - an Obama-era measure that benefited more than half a million Mexicans. "He has promoted a sense of Mexicanism, particularly on the border," said Mario Carignan, president of Tijuana's Chamber of Commerce, who said members there report sales increases of up to 10 percent.

'I buy in Tijuana'

It happened to Soraya Vasquez: "I prefer to consume in Tijuana: it's a matter of dignity," she told AFP. "I've stopped crossing to the United States," she said. "There is something holding me back from crossing." The San Ysidro entry point is the busiest land border crossing in the world, traversed daily by thousands of people. Two metal fences divide the sector, and in nearby Otay Mesa sit eight prototypes for the border wall Trump has vowed to build.

With discontent growing over the new US president, Tijuana's chamber in January launched an "I buy in Tijuana" campaign to promote local consumption and seek to reverse the habits of Mexican consumers who in the past spent an estimated \$6 billion annually in the United States. One of the most successful stores taking part in the campaign is "Tijuana I Love 664", a reference to the city's area code. "People come to buy clothes that say 'Tijuana' in large print," said Carlos Zuniga, the brand's marketing director. Many clients - both Americans and Mexicans - aim to send Trump a message.

A question of brands

"They tell us they're going to stand in one of Trump's buildings and take a photograph," he said, explaining it is a way to convey, "Look, we're Mexicans, and we came to visit you." Not everyone has given up crossing the border, however: some still prefer shopping in the US for what they consider a better cost-to-quality ratio. John Walker, who manages a large shopping center near a border crossing, said he has not felt the Trump effect as others have, which he owes to labels. It's "brand, brand, brand," he said. "The folks that come from Mexico are looking for those names."

One merchant, who identified herself only as Carmen, crosses once a week to stock up on merchandise at a US warehouse. "People on the border are used to buying American products," the 56-year-old said as she stuffed a black garbage bag with sports socks and women's underwear. "I have been coming for more than 25 years. The Mexican product is not the same; to get quality it's very expensive." But what about Trump? "That's politics," she said. "I work to survive." —AFP