

## Technology

# Virtual beaus are capturing Chinese hearts as female gaming blooms

## A huge potential market for the gaming industry in China

**SHANGHAI:** With his dashing looks, it's little wonder that 28-year-old tycoon Li Zeyan has wooed hundreds of thousands of women across China—not bad for an avatar in a mobile game. Li is the most popular character in "Love and Producer", a Chinese simulation game that has been downloaded more than 10 million times since debuting in December, mostly by women seeking steamy fantasy affairs with its four virtual suitors.

Its viral popularity has highlighted a huge potential market for the gaming industry in China, where one in four mobile phone gamers is a woman—numbers that are expected to grow. The game, and a separate one also aimed at women in which users can "mother" an intrepid frog character, have leapt into the top ranks of China's most-downloaded mobile games.

The frenzy over the game has focused attention on China's "she economy"—the expanding consumer power of its hundreds of millions of smartphone-wielding women—just as game developers face slowing growth in the gigantic market for battle-and-strategy games aimed largely at Chinese men.

In "Love and Producer", players choose from four Prince Charmings—business CEO Li, a scientist, a special agent and a famous singer—attractive "catches" that tap into the rising relationship expectations of Chinese millennial women.

China's huge population of mobile users already increasingly live through their smartphones, communicating via messaging apps like WeChat, sharing on social media, and paying digitally for a range of goods and services with a tap on their phone screen. "Love and Producer" now also offers the chance to have a virtual

fling while sitting on the bus, said Liu Yixuan, a 19-year-old university student. "A third of my friends play the game and many insist on calling themselves Li's 'wife,'" Liu said. "I'm intrigued by the characters' good looks and the graphics, but other 'wives' are obsessed with talking to their 'husband', who will reply with sweet words in a deep and attractive voice."

### Game on

Created by Nikki Games, a developer in eastern China, it was patterned on Japanese "otome", or "maiden" games, simulated-romance worlds generally aimed at women. China already is a mobile-gaming leader, with internet giant Tencent in particular raking in profits from games like the hit "Honour of Kings" in which players spend on things like outfits for their characters. In "Love and Producer", the player runs a fictional TV production company that they must save from bankruptcy, all while dating one or more of the male love interests.

Players complete tasks which allow them to collect cards that are in turn needed to realise a successful TV show—or an eventful "date" with one's lover. Cards can also be purchased. Steamy embraces occur, though the action stops there. In the "real" world, one unidentified fan wished Li Zeyan a happy birthday in a giant illuminated message projected on a skyscraper in the southern city of Shenzhen on January 13, a pricey stunt likely to have cost tens of thousands of yuan (several thousand dollars).

Various estimates put the percentages of US women



BEIJING: This file picture taken on August 30, 2016 shows a woman looking at her mobile phone at the entrance of a cinema. —AFP

who regularly play mobile games at 50 percent or higher, boosted by popular apps like the puzzle game Candy Crush. Chinese consultancy iResearch said women accounted for 24.1 percent of gamers in China in 2016, but that figure is projected to climb. "The overall mobile game industry faces a bottleneck in user growth, but female players have been unleashed in terms of playing time and their willingness and ability to pay," said Wang Guanying, an independent industry analyst.

"Female players are more inclined to share on social media, including their inner thoughts, and are more loyal. They will be the breakthrough point for game companies the next two years." "Love and Producer" was recently leapfrogged by a Japanese-developed game called "Travelling Frog", in which players prepare an amphibian avatar for a journey. For a week earlier this month, it was the top-downloaded app in China in the iOS Store. —AFP



## Tap into rising relationship expectations

## In Waymo trial, what fired Uber exec may not say could be key

**SAN FRANCISCO:** One of the most dramatic moments in an upcoming trade secrets trial between Alphabet Inc's Waymo and Uber will likely come when the former chief of Uber's self-driving car unit takes the witness stand, as he is expected to repeatedly refuse to answer questions. Waymo sued Uber Technologies Inc last year, claiming that former Waymo engineer Anthony Levandowski downloaded more than 14,000 confidential files before leaving to set up a self-driving truck company, called Otto, which Uber acquired soon after.

Levandowski, regarded as a visionary in autonomous technology, is not a defendant in the case but is on Waymo's witness list. Waymo has accused Uber of benefiting from Waymo technology that it says Uber acquired through Levandowski. Uber has denied Waymo's allegations and has argued that the data in the files were not trade secrets.

The case hinges on whether Uber used the alleged trade secrets to further its autonomous vehicle program. It may help determine who emerges in the forefront of the fast-growing field of self-driving cars. It is the highest-stakes legal challenge on a list of litigation that Uber's chief executive, Dara Khosrowshahi, inherited when he joined the company in August.

### Biggest case in Uber's history

"This is a case that is the biggest in the history of Uber," Uber attorney Bill Carmody told the court during a pretrial hearing on Tuesday. Jury selection in the civil case is set for Wednesday in San Francisco federal court, with testimony expected to begin next week. During a pretrial deposition in April, Waymo lawyers questioned Levandowski for hours about allegations that he took Waymo's trade secrets. He declined to answer any questions about his time at both companies, citing constitutional protections against self-incrimination over 300 times, according to a deposition transcript. Levandowski has never publicly addressed the allegations of taking the documents and law enforcement has not charged anyone with their theft. The US Department of Justice is conducting a criminal investigation into what transpired, according to court filings.

Given the ongoing probe, lawyers for both companies said at a hearing in September that they do not expect Levandowski to answer questions if called to the witness stand at trial. Uber, Waymo and Miles Ehrlich, an attorney for Levandowski, declined to comment. US District Judge William Alsup issued a ruling this month saying he would likely instruct jurors that they are allowed to draw negative conclusions against Uber should Levandowski take the stand and refuse to answer questions.

Elizabeth Rowe, a trade secret expert at the University of Florida Levin College of Law, said Levandowski refusing to answer questions on the stand, and the judge's instructions around it, would hurt Uber's case because it would reinforce Waymo's arguments that he was deceptive and took their information. To counter Levandowski's expected refusal to answer questions, Rowe said Uber should tell jurors in opening statements that the company's actions and those of Levandowski are separate, stressing that Uber fired the engineer last May. "They definitely might want to say, 'Whatever he did, it was for himself, by himself, on his own, and we didn't benefit from it,'" Rowe said. Alsup granted Waymo's request for a pretrial injunction in May, prohibiting Levandowski from working on Lidar, a sensor technology for self-driving cars that is the crux of the current litigation. If Waymo persuades a jury that Uber stole its trade secrets, it said it would seek a permanent injunction to prohibit Uber from using them in the future. —Reuters

## Nintendo raises profit forecast on strong Switch sales

**TOKYO:** Nintendo raised its annual net profit forecast by more than 40 percent yesterday after its popular Switch console flew off the shelves during the holiday season, fuelled by a cheaper yen. The Kyoto-based video game giant said it now expects annual net profit of 120 billion yen (\$1.1 billion), a 41.2-percent rise from a forecast last October when it nearly doubled its previous net profit projection. Nintendo now expects to sell 15 million Switch units by March, an increase of one million from the previous forecast—which was already an upgrade from an earlier projection of as many as 10 million units. "For the nine months ended December 31, 2017, the Nintendo Switch hardware sold well following the launch and sales volume rose substantially during the holiday season," the company said in a brief statement.

The company now expects annual sales of 1.02 trillion yen and an operating profit of 160 billion yen, again marking sizable increases from earlier estimates. Analysts were quick to praise the firm, which gave the world Super Mario and Pokemon. "Switch is in excellent shape. Its demand remained strong during the Christmas season," said Hideki Yasuda, an analyst at Acc Research Institute in Tokyo, before the latest figures were announced. "Nintendo has been back in full force," he told AFP.

### 'Big hit'

Switch, which can be played both at home and on the move, blends Nintendo's console and handheld device business with its fledgling mobile gaming strategy, which scored a big brand win with Pokemon Go's success in the summer of 2016. Since its launch in March last year, Switch has become a pillar of the company, also known for its Nintendo 3DS handheld console as well as the household Wii console franchise. Among Switch game titles, Super Mario Odyssey "has been a big hit with global sales reaching 9.07 million units" since its debut in October, the com-

## Facebook bans ads for cryptocurrencies

**WASHINGTON:** Facebook says it is banning all ads related to cryptocurrencies in an effort to fight scams. The social media giant said it is barring ads for "financial products and services that are frequently associated with misleading or deceptive promotional practices, such as binary options, initial coin offerings and cryptocurrencies." Initial coin offerings or ICOs are a way for companies to raise funds by selling investors cryptographic assets.

Fraud is common in the world of red hot digital currencies such as bitcoin. This week, for instance, the US Securities and Exchange Commission shut down an initial

## Google yanks gay dating app from Indonesia online store

**JAKARTA:** Google has pulled one of the world's largest gay dating apps from the Indonesian version of its online store in response to government demands. Jakarta said yesterday, amid a crackdown on the LGBT community. Officials had called for the



TOKYO: This file photo taken on January 14, 2017 shows visitors gathering to play Nintendo's new Switch game console during a game experience session. —AFP

pany said. Mario Kart 8 Deluxe sold 7.33 million units and Splatoon 2 sold 4.91 million, Nintendo said. During the April-December period, Switch's unit sales marked 12.13 million, while software sales totalled 47.10 million units. Nintendo also managed to maintain solid sales of other key products. "Nintendo 3DS hardware sales did not weaken after the launch of Nintendo

Switch," the company said, adding that 3DS sales even rose in the US during the holiday season. While applauding Switch's successes, analysts said Nintendo should also delve further into smartphone operations to broaden its

customer base. "We want to focus on how Nintendo will develop apps for smartphones, which can make up for a slump when it transfers to new consoles," Yasuo Imanaka, an analyst at Rakuten Securities in Tokyo, told AFP before the latest earnings announcement.

For the April-December period, Nintendo said net profit reached 135 billion yen, up 31.3 percent from the same period in the previous financial year. During the nine months, the firm's operating profit soared to 156 billion yen from 26 billion yen in the previous year. Sales during the period also more than doubled to 857 billion yen. —AFP

coin offering by a Texas company called AriseBank. AriseBank was accused of relying on celebrity endorsers such as boxer Evander Holyfield and social media to cheat investors out of \$600 million of its goal of \$1 billion for a currency it called "AriseCoin." In a blog post announcing the news, Facebook product management director Rob Leathern hinted that Facebook may modify the new policy at some point to allow bona fide crypto-related businesses to advertise again.

"We want people to continue to discover and learn about new products and services through Facebook ads without fear of scams or deception," Leathern wrote. "That said, there are many companies who are advertising binary options, ICOs and cryptocurrencies that are not currently operating in good faith." "This policy is intentionally broad while we work to better detect deceptive and misleading advertising practices, and enforcement will begin to ramp up across our platforms including Facebook, Audience Network and Instagram. We will revisit this policy and how we enforce it as our signals improve," he added. —AFP



PARIS: A person holds a cryptocurrency hardware wallet at La Maison du Bitcoin. —AFP

tech giant to remove 73 LGBT-related applications, including dating services, from its Play Store, and urged people to shun apps that broke with cultural norms in the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation.

Communications ministry spokesman Noor Iza confirmed yesterday that gay dating application Blued—which boasts more than 27 million users globally—no longer appeared in the Google Play Store available to Indonesian users. "There was some negative content related to pornography inside the application," Iza told AFP. "Probably one or some members of the application put the pornographic content inside." As of yesterday, Apple's

online store still had Blued available. Google declined to say whether it would comply with the government demand to remove dozens of LGBT-related apps.

Homosexuality and gay sex are legal in Indonesia—except in conservative Aceh province, which is ruled by Islamic law—but same-sex relationships are widely frowned upon and public displays of affection between gay couples almost unheard of. In Aceh at the weekend, police forcibly cut the hair of a group of transgender women and made them wear male clothing, sparking protests from rights groups. —AFP