

Online games in China

A hundred million happy geeks

But please, no sex or subversion

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SEX must not be used to sell online games, decreed the Chinese government in July. But most online gamers are men, so the rule is not always scrupulously obeyed. The ChinaJoy digital entertainment show in Shanghai, which ended on August 1st, was packed with showgirls, many with logos somehow squeezed onto what little clothing they wore. The sweaty conference-goers seemed to like it.

Nearly 100m Chinese people play digital games. But since offline games are usually pirated, only online ones make legitimate money: \$4.5 billion this year, estimates Niko Partners, a research firm. Online games are popular in China because they are cheap. Many are free: you pay only for extras such as magic swords. Others charge a fee that depends on how long you stay connected.

“Massively multiplayer role-playing games”, which thousands of people can play at once, are the most popular, though their growth is slowing. The next big thing could be social games, says Guo Cheng Gang of Pacific Epoch, a research firm. These are distributed via online social networks, including Renren, Kaixin001 and QZone, which helps them reach non-traditional customers, such as women.

Censorship is a worry. Games are treated as media content and heavily regulated. Smut is out, as is blood (though wounds may ooze green goo). Anything that threatens the “harmonious society” is banned. But enforcement is split between two agencies and often inconsistent. For wholesome fun, try “Happy Farm”, a game about rearing virtual crops. Some 23m Chinese already play it.

Business



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