

Online gaming at all-time high as virus confines people indoors

When two Spanish footballers took to the controls of FIFA 20 after the coronavirus pandemic saw their La Liga match cancelled, a stadium-sized virtual audience watched online.

The huge digital crowd last week is part of a spectacular boom for the digital gaming industry, as record numbers flock to online servers for distraction, entertainment and friendship with the "real world" seemingly falling apart.

Real Betis striker Borja Iglesias kicked the winning goal using his own digital likeness in the 6-5 battle against Sevilla, which was broadcast on popular video game streaming platform Twitch. It took place at the same time the original derby had been scheduled, before Spain's premier tournament was postponed as part of containment measures that have also seen the country's 46 million people largely confined to their homes.

"We do all of this to entertain all of you, so that you can be at home enjoying it, insofar as it is possible with this epidemic," the host of the broadcast told his audience of 60,000. Nearly every country around the globe has reported cases of COVID-19 infection, with frantic efforts to contain the disease prompting the near total shutdown of some of the world's biggest cities. Online gaming has proved a welcome diversion for many people chafing at movement restrictions, the cancellation of countless public events and a relentless onslaught of news about the pandemic.

"It made me feel less depressed about being in a small space for a long time," said Yang An, who was made to quarantine for two weeks in



China after returning to Shanghai from her hometown last month. She told AFP that she passed the time by playing for up to eight hours a day on her Nintendo Switch handheld console. Surging demand Internet providers have scrambled to shore up their networks in the face of surging demand. Gaming traffic on Ver-

izon's network shot up an "unprecedented" 75 percent in the space of a week, the US telco said recently. Software companies have also rushed to accommodate a record number of users. Rockstar Games, publisher of the Wild West-themed adventure title Red Dead Redemption, promised players it would keep its

online servers running smoothly after it told its global workforce to work from home. The company also teased a roll-out of extra in-game activities to keep housebound player glued to their controllers.

Online gaming communities could "go some of the way to create the public space that's been

lost" in the wake of the pandemic, said Christian McCrea, a media studies lecturer specialising in games at Australia's RMIT University. He pointed to Pokemon Go -- a smartphone game that became a worldwide phenomenon in 2016 when it lured millions of people onto the streets for a virtual monster hunt -- which was this month tweaked by its developer to make it easier for users to play at home.

"Big impact" McCrea said gaming habits were likely to see a massive transformation in the months ahead, with the prospect of further economic ructions and long stretches of social isolation looming on the horizon.

"Overall the big impact will be younger kids at home for months on end with parents out of work," he told AFP. "Games will be at the centre of a lot of their spare time." Video games have long been blamed for a causing a suite of health issues, from repetitive strain injuries to eyesight problems.

The World Health Organization classified gaming addiction as an illness in 2018, the same year China launched a crackdown on the industry on concerns that youngsters were spending too much time online. But veteran gamers now ironically appear among those best-placed to navigate the pandemic and its impact on everyday life. Twitch streamer "Loeya" told her million-plus fans in a broadcast last week that travel restrictions and school closures in her native Sweden and elsewhere were unlikely to alter her own mostly indoors, game-heavy schedule. "Technically I self-quarantined myself, like, three years ago," the 22-year-old joked. —AFP

Instagram ramps up effort to restraint COVID-19 disinformation



LONDON: Instagram said it was stepping up its efforts to promote credible content about coronavirus and curb the spread of misinformation on the image-centric social network. The move by the Facebook-owned service with more than one billion users worldwide comes amid a scramble by social networks to deliver verified information and stamp out hoaxes. "People who search for information related to the coronavirus or COVID-19 on Instagram will start to see an educational message connecting them to resources from the World Health Organisation and local health ministries," Instagram said in a blog post. "We are working quickly to make this available globally over the coming weeks." Instagram said it would also add "stickers" that signify verified coronavirus information and would remove content about health claims "unless posted by a credible health organisation." The social network also said it would offer links to donations for non-profit organizations and offer tips for social distancing. The initiative follows similar efforts by Facebook on its core social platform as well as on its Messenger and WhatsApp services and by other platforms such as YouTube and Twitter. More than two billion people use at least one of Facebook's "family" of applications daily. —AFP

Google cancels its April Fools' joke this year



LONDON: With coronavirus pandemic getting serious, April Fools' Day, one of the most rejoiced days by Google is being put on a hold this year. The search engine giant is famous for its elaborate pranks, however, due to the spread of coronavirus and its impact on the world; the company has decided to not participate. These apps will help you educate, entertain kids under coronavirus lockdown

Google will "take the year off from that tradition out of respect for all those fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. Our highest goal right now is to be helpful to people, so let's save the jokes for next April, which will undoubtedly be a whole lot brighter than this one," reports Business Insider. "We've already stopped any centralized April fool's efforts but realise there may be smaller projects within teams that we don't know about," Lorraine Twohill, Google's head of marketing said in an email to Business Insider. Singapore scientists study genes to fast-track coronavirus vaccine "Please suss out those efforts and make sure your teams pause on any jokes they may have planned — internally or externally." The company has been taking a proactive role in combating the virus. It recently introduced an alert feature on Google Maps which pops up when users search for "doctor" and notifies the user that they should call the hospital in advance if they feel their symptoms match that of COVID-19, which is fever, flu, nausea and body ache. —AFP

Vodafone to offer unlimited data to the vulnerable for free

LONDON: Mobile operator Vodafone said on Friday it would introduce 30-days free access to unlimited mobile data for half a million of its Pay Monthly customers and upgrade the contracts for those who are flagged as vulnerable. Google Maps warns to call your doctor before visiting. Vulnerable customers eligible for the upgrade will receive a text message informing them. Those wishing to access the free offer can use the rewards scheme on the Vodafone app. It will be made available to the first 500,000 customers. Tech billionaires including Tim Cook, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg promise 18 million masks to fight COVID-19. While residents in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf states are urging telecom firms to further ease restrictions on free internet calls as coronavirus separates families and forces people to work and study from home. Applications that use Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services — free Internet-to-Internet voice and video calls — are restricted to varying degrees in the UAE, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, but not in Bahrain or Kuwait. —

Carmakers churn out machines, masks to help fight coronavirus

Auto companies and suppliers around the world are ramping up production of critical healthcare products and machines — everything from cloth face masks to sophisticated ventilator systems — to meet a critical shortage of those items at hospitals and care facilities in North America, Europe and Asia.

GENERAL MOTORS: General Motors Co said it will partner with Washington-based Ventec Life Systems to make ventilators at GM's Kokomo, Indiana, electrical components plant as soon as April, at the rate of 10,000 a month, up to 200,000 units. GM also will make surgical masks at its Warren, Michigan, facility, starting in early April and ramping up to 50,000 masks a day, with the ability to double that.

FORD MOTOR: Ford Motor Co said it would partner with GE Healthcare to expand production of GE's ventilators, while developing a simplified design that Ford could build at one of its plants. Ford also said it will work with 3M Co to increase production of 3M's respirators, while also developing a simpler model to be built in a Ford plant. The automaker said it may make face shields for first responders to use with N95 respirator masks at an undisclosed Michigan plant, at a rate of up to 100,000 a week.

TOYOTA MOTOR: Toyota Motor Corp said it is finalising deals with at least two companies to help increase production of ventilators and respirators. It expects to begin mass-producing 3D-printed face shields next week, and is seeking partners to make filters for face masks.

FIAT CHRYSLER AUTOMOBILES: Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV said it will begin making more than 1 million face masks a month, to be distributed initially to first responders and healthcare workers in North America.

TESLA: Tesla Inc said it would reopen its Buffalo, New York, solar panel plant to produce Medtronic ventilators. The company also said it bought 1,255 ventilators in China and is distributing them in North America.

BYD: China's BYD Co said it had opened the world's



largest face mask plant in China, making 5 million masks a day, plus 300,000 bottles of disinfectant.

SAIC MOTOR: The joint venture between SAIC Motor Corp Ltd, GM and Wuling is converting one of its China plants to make face masks and is building additional machines to increase mask production.

GAC MOTOR: GAC is converting one of its China

plants to make face masks.

VOLKSWAGEN GROUP: Volkswagen AG said it is testing 3D printers to make parts for ventilators.

MAHINDRA: Mahindra CIE Automotive Ltd said it is working with a ventilator manufacturer in India to help simplify the design and scale up production, including at some Mahindra plants. —AFP

Apple's factories are running, but suppliers wary about iPhone demand

As China reopens its economy after months of lockdown, Apple's iPhone factories are largely up and running. But with the coronavirus pandemic spreading across the world, the urgent question for the company is how many buyers there will be both for current models and the new slate of phones expected in the fall.

A senior official at one of Apple's major contract assemblers said Apple's orders for the quarter ending in March are likely to drop 18% compared with the previous year. The production ramp-up for new phones that work with next-generation 5G networks has been postponed, this person said, though it is still possible the 5G phones could launch as scheduled in the fall.

"No one is talking about manpower or material shortage (in China) anymore. Now everyone is looking at whether demand from US and Europe could keep up," said the person, who has direct knowledge of the matter. "The focus now is the demand from consumers in the US and Europe."

One of Apple's key display suppliers is preparing for a similar level of contraction, according to a person familiar with the matter. The company had anticipated shipping 70 million iPhone displays this year, but is now considering lowering that target by more than 17% to 58 million units.

These apps will help you educate, entertain kids under coronavirus lockdown. The company is also planning to reduce the workforce at its Apple-designated production lines in its Vietnam factory, where displays are assembled before heading to China to be put into phones, this person said.

Apple declined to comment for this story.

Earlier this month, the company closed retail stores around the world even as it began to reopen outlets in China. With much of Europe and the United States on lockdown and unemployment soaring globally, there is



little clarity on when demand might return. The company could also yet face further supply chain problems as countries including Malaysia and Vietnam impose new restrictions to combat the coronavirus.

"Things are changing on a day by day basis due to supply chain disruptions, so it is difficult to craft any meaningful comment at the moment about both supply and demand," said an official at one supplier in Malaysia.

FOGGY DEMAND OUTLOOK: In February, Apple retracted its sales forecast for the quarter ended in March without giving a new one. Shares have dropped more than 15% since the start of the year. "Our base case scenario assumes a shock to June quarter demand with steadily improving results" in the second half of the year rather than a "V-shaped" recovery, Canaccord Genuity analyst Michael Walkley wrote in a note to investors on March 18.

Taipei-based technology analyst Arthur Liao of Fubon Research cut iPhone shipment forecasts for this year's first quarter to 35 million units, down 17% from 41 million units a year ago. The firm lowered total

iPhone shipment forecasts for 2020 to 198 million, down from an earlier forecast of 204 million. Singapore scientists study genes to fast-track coronavirus vaccine. In the United States, at least, consumers themselves seem uncertain whether they will resume spending. In a survey of more than 2,600 US adults by Civis Analytics conducted March 18-20, more than half of respondents said they planned to spend about the same on consumer electronics as before the virus outbreak if the situation is contained in the coming weeks.

But if the situation worsens, the respondents were evenly split, with roughly one-third each saying they would spend less, the same or more on consumer electronics when conditions returned to normal. Such ambiguity has made it hard for Apple suppliers to gauge how 2020 will play out. One maker of a sensor for the iPhone said the company continues to produce and ship parts for Apple devices and that this year's first quarter ending in March was better than last year, with the second quarter also likely to be higher volume than the year before. —Reuters

Musk's SpaceX wins NASA award to supply planned lunar space station

SINGAPORE: NASA picked a new space capsule from Elon Musk's SpaceX to ferry cargo and supplies to the agency's planned lunar space station, a crucial building block to its plans to build a permanent post on the moon and mount future missions to Mars.

These apps will help you educate, entertain kids under coronavirus lockdown SpaceX will get a portion of a \$7 billion NASA contract to use its biggest rocket, Falcon Heavy, to send a new "Dragon XL" spacecraft to the Lunar Gateway, an outpost NASA plans to build that will orbit the moon sometime within the next decade.

The Dragon XL spacecraft, the latest variant in Musk's lineup of so-called Dragon cargo and astronaut capsules, will carry research supplies that will help future astronauts on the surface of the moon collect lunar samples, a NASA announcement said. Singapore scientists study genes to fast-track coronavirus vaccine The Dragon variant, which would be docked at the orbital station for six to 12 months per mission, is "optimised to carry more than 5 metric tons of cargo to Gateway in lunar orbit," said SpaceX in a tweet. The financial value of the award was not given. But it signals a key development in the US space agency's Artemis program to return to the moon — unveiled by Vice President Mike Pence a year ago this week — and deals a win for Musk's space company as it works to launch its debut manned mission to space this summer. —AFP

