

Why the industry should heed China's crackdown on video game players

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While the west is unlikely to follow the three-hour gaming limit for children, developers would be unwise to dismiss it too quickly

Many video games are designed to keep young players online for longer. Photograph: Milan_Jovic/Getty Images

Being a parent can feel, at times, like leading an authoritarian nation of one. You control what your subject can read, who they can speak to and what they can do; you deal with periodic revolts against your rule and occasionally engage in a simulacrum of democratic decision-making while knowing that you control the outcome.

But for all that authoritarian leaders like to present themselves as a parental figure for the country at large, it's rare that they actually get

involved with the day-to-day work of, well, parenting. Which is why the news that China is **taking on the job of limiting gaming time** caught the attention of so many parents I know.

According to state news outlets, online gaming companies will be required to limit under-18s to just three hours of playtime a week, between the hours of eight and nine in the evening on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The regulation has teeth: companies will be required to ensure they put in place real-name verification systems or go further and take their cue from companies such as Tencent, which recently implemented a facial recognition system that asks users to play on camera to prove they're over 18.

The Chinese state has been exhibiting growing opposition towards video games over the past few years. Tencent's age verification system wasn't implemented out of the goodness of the company's heart and last month a state media editorial attacked the gaming industry for peddling "spiritual opium". But even against that background, the limits seem excessive. Shares in leading gaming companies such as NetEase plummeted, while commentators around the world predicted the effects would do as much to trigger a new generation of teen hackers, adept at circumventing technical blocks, as they would to encourage kids to get out the house and take on more productive hobbies.

At the same time, I know some western parents found themselves looking at the new rules wistfully. Imposing limits on surly children is hard and being able to – truthfully – tell a kid to stop playing video games on a weekday night because it’s against the law can sometimes feel like it would be a parenting superpower versus simply cajoling, pleading or threatening.

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Ultimately, the Chinese state and British parents are tackling the same beast: a gaming industry that has, over the past 40 years, honed its product to such fine ends that it is sometimes plausible to talk about the output using the language of addiction and compulsion. I’m a huge gaming fan, but even I get uncomfortable when I look at the business models – and revenue – of some of the industry’s largest players.

From collectible card game *Hearthstone* to *Zelda*-esque hit *Genshin Impact*, a Chinese-made blockbuster on both sides of the Great Firewall, it’s all too common for games to be free to play, attracting huge audiences, and then funded by what is effectively a casino. Even games without that fundamentally exploitative underpinning can be all too manipulative. Daily and weekly use-it-or-lose-it quests, login rewards for continuous streaks of play, season passes that ask a player to grind out enough playtime over a couple of months to unlock everything: all are habit-forming practices that are explicitly designed

to override a player's sense of what a normal amount of play actually is.

The video game world's understanding of regulation was shaped by bruising conflicts in the 90s and 00s over whether violent games begat violent children. As clear a moral panic as one would ever see, the experience has taught too many in the industry that all concerns over its effects on children are overblown and all approaches to regulation are to be fought tooth and nail.

Western nations won't follow China's lead too closely and as much as some western parents might wish they could, such a tight restriction would be a tough sell in a youth culture where games have a much stronger hold on the attention than anything so pedestrian as broadcast TV or music radio. But the fact that so many are looking with green eyes at the prospect should give developers around the world pause for thought.