

Business

Microsoft targets video game developers, in challenge to Amazon cloud dominance

Microsoft to roll out 'Microsoft Game Stack'

CALIFORNIA: Microsoft Corp yesterday said it is combining elements of its video gaming and Azure cloud computing businesses to court game developers, an action designed to use the strength of its Xbox gaming franchise to gain ground on cloud services leader Amazon.com.

Microsoft said it will start rolling out "Microsoft Game Stack," a group of services that lets game developers do things like host multiplayer games and match players of similar skill levels. The services are designed to work for titles played on any device - including those with operating systems from Microsoft's onetime rivals like Apple and Google.

Microsoft competes against Amazon Web Services division to sell those cloud services. But it has been in the console

gaming business with its Xbox device since 2001 and had 64 million users for its Xbox Live online gaming service. Microsoft also owns titles such as the "Halo," the sci-fi action franchise for the Xbox and Windows, as well as "Minecraft," a game that is popular on mobile devices with operating systems from Apple Inc and Google Inc.

On "any device you're going to pick up

today, consumer gaming is almost surely one of the top engagement and monetization businesses on that device," Phil Spencer, Microsoft's executive vice president for gaming, told Reuters. "As we were looking at our place in the gaming business and our place and things like Azure and the other services that Microsoft offers, we were seeing more and more synergy."

Microsoft faces competition in the game space from Amazon, which acquired gaming video service Twitch to let gamers watch

each other battle online and GameSparks to provide back-end services to game makers. Piers Harding-Rolls, head of games research at IHSMarkit, said Amazon has a lead right now over Microsoft in cloud services for game makers. But Microsoft's moves

yesterday, many based on its acquisition last year of a company called PlayFab, could help it gain ground.

"Microsoft intends to be as agnostic as possible - even supporting other cloud service providers and all platforms - but you have to think that these tools will end with more companies using Azure as a result," Harding-Rolls said. An example of

where Microsoft hopes its own gaming ex-

perience will pay off is in matching players of equal skill online, said Mark Russinovich, chief technical officer of Azure. The

chinese learning, which Microsoft has refined through its Xbox Live service over the years, he said. —Reuters



WASHINGTON: Phil Spencer, Microsoft Corp's Executive Vice President of Gaming, speaks at one of the company's Xbox events in this undated photo released from Microsoft Corporation in Redmond, Washington.—Reuters

Microsoft Game Stack

Investors could pump \$1bn into Uber self-driving cars

SAN FRANCISCO: A group of investors including SoftBank Group is in talks to invest \$1 billion or more into Uber's self-driving car unit, The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday. Word of a potential infusion of cash valuing the Uber autonomous vehicle division at from \$5 billion to \$10 billion comes as the ride-hailing startup steers toward a hotly-anticipated stock market debut. Under terms being discussed, SoftBank's Vision Fund and other investors, including a car maker, would take a minority stake in Uber's self-driving vehicle unit, according to the Journal.

Led by Japan's Masayoshi Son, the Vision Fund is heavily invested by Saudi Arabia. The Journal described the "late-stage" talks as fluid, with the possibility a deal might not be reached. Uber has been in a race with Google-owned Waymo and a host of other companies, including major automakers, to develop self-driving vehicles. Waymo said this month that it would sell a key innovation to companies that don't compete with its autonomous cars.

The California-based unit of Google parent Alphabet will offer its lidar sensors, which measure distance with pulses of laser light, to companies in robotics, security, agricultural technology and other sectors. The move could offer a new revenue stream for Waymo as it invests in bringing "robo taxis" to market, broadening the availability of the 3D lidar sensors it has



SAN FRANCISCO: In this file photo an Uber self-driving car drives down San Francisco's 5th Street.—AFP

been developing since 2011. Uber is aiming beyond car rides to becoming the "Amazon of transportation" in a future where people share, instead of own, vehicles.

If all goes to plan, commuters could ride an e-scooter to a transit station, take a train, then grab an e-bike, share a ride or take an e-scooter at the arriving station to complete a journey—all using an Uber app on a smartphone. Uber's platform moves cargo as well as people, with a "Freight" service that connects truckers with shippers in a way similar to how drivers connect with people seeking rides. Uber is also seeing growing success with an "Eats" service that lets drivers make money delivering meals ordered from restaurants.—AFP

Entrepreneurs brave Baltic ice in bid for cash

OULU, Finland: How far would you go to win 10,000 euros (\$11,300)? On a blisteringly cold night in northern Finland, hopeful entrepreneurs plunge into a hole in the Baltic sea ice in a bid to win over a panel of investors. The annual 'Polar Bear Pitching' competition in the remote town of Oulu, just over an hour's drive from the Arctic Circle, is a chance for 12 start-up businesses to try and snare funding for their ventures from a group of potential backers. The catch—competitors may only speak for as long as they can stand chest deep in glacial water. Long, rambling presentations are well and truly off the agenda. "It feels terrible. It feels like you get punched in the face by ten really strong guys," said Lasse Brurok, who took home this year's prize money along with his business partner Arne-Morten Willumsen. The pair's energy and humor impressed the judges—who sat huddled on reindeer skins on dry land—as well as the business potential of their website which allows users to buy and sell new and used books in their native Norway. "We came here with the mindset that we're gonna win, and it worked out. Even though we had that mindset, it's still a shock. It's really fun," Willumsen told AFP. This year's contenders came from countries including the US, Kenya, Estonia and Finland.

While most managed between one and two minutes in the ice hole, the longest presentation ran to almost five skin-numbing minutes—a record in the competition's seven year history. A hot tub was on hand to bring the speakers back up to room temperature. Among the other innovations vying for the 2019 prize were a design for a super-lightweight electric cable, a lower-cost system of sensors to track tennis games, and a tool for analysing video CVs of job applicants.—AFP