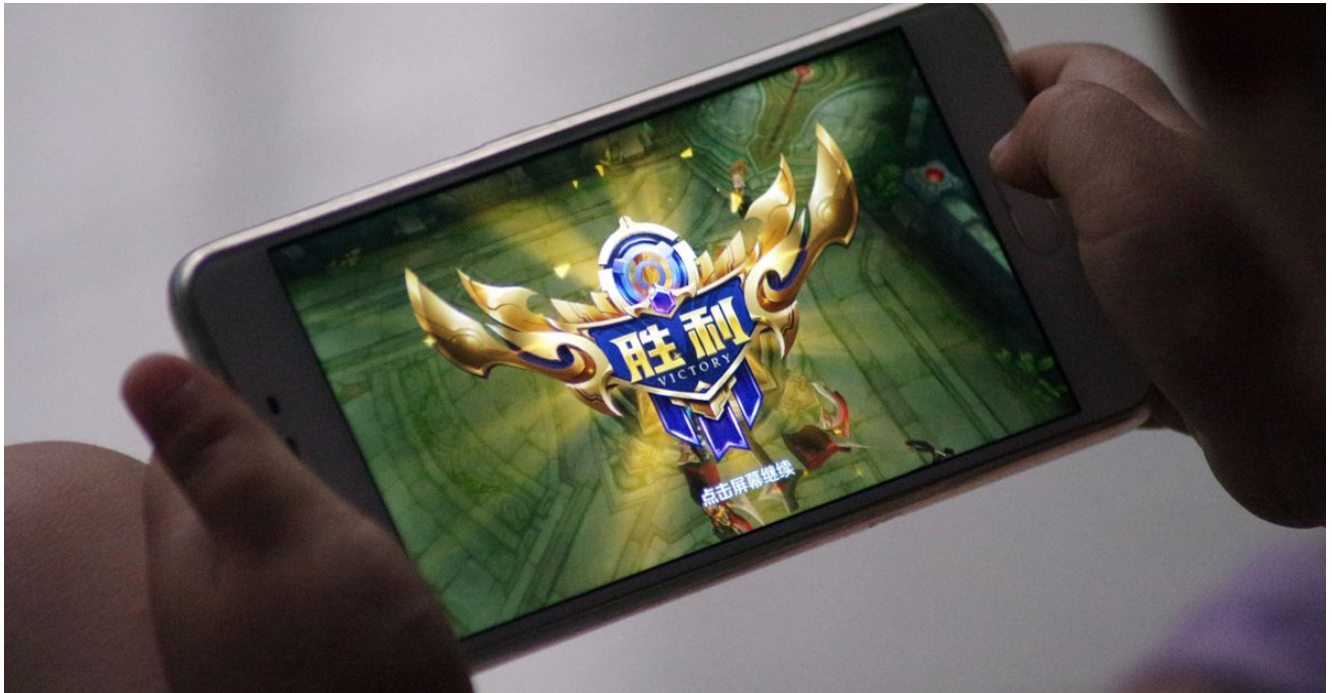


How Tencent's sweeping new facial scans will catch Chinese kids playing past curfew



Tencent, the biggest game company in the world, is rolling out facial recognition technology that will likely scan many gamers' faces every single evening, aiming to catch minors breaking a gaming curfew and help prevent video game addiction (via *Gizmodo*). That's a lot of controversial concepts in one sentence, no?

Here's what's going on, according to the company and China games industry analyst Daniel Ahmad.

In China, video game addiction prevention is literally the law of the land, one that's been evolving for many years but recently hit some important milestones. In 2019, China introduced a law that banned minors from playing video games between 10PM and 8AM or from playing more than 90 minutes on a weekday. And as of June 1st, 2021, every game in the country

is required to add a new authentication system that checks a player's Chinese national identity (including their age) to help block underage players from going past those limits, all in the name of preventing video game addiction.

Video game addiction prevention is already the law of the land Tencent had actually already been using Chinese IDs for a couple years now, among other attempts to curb addiction, but the company tells us that underage players kept finding ways to get around them – like using their parents' accounts.

The so-called “Midnight Patrol” facial recognition system is an attempt to check that an “adult” is actually an adult. It launched July 5th in over 60 mobile games, including the hits *Honor of Kings* and *Game for Peace* – aka China's more patriotic version of *PUBG*. The facial recognition system is only for China and only for mobile games, the company confirms, so PC games like *League of Legends* are currently exempt. It's all part of the company's ongoing “Balanced Online Entertainment System” initiative, Tencent tells *The Verge*, which also encompasses its “Parental Guardian Platform” and “Healthy Gameplay System” designed to let parents know what their kids are up to and remind users when they've played for too long, respectively.

According to Ahmad, whose firm Niko Partners sometimes works with Tencent, here's how the facial recognition part of the system operates: “It will essentially detect if the person playing the game after midnight is doing so for a long time or spending a certain amount of money in the game, and it will tick a box in Tencent's backend and prompt the user to verify their identity through facial recognition, either through that database or through a database they've already used,” says Ahmad.

Tencent says it doesn't store any of the new scans itself; instead, it sounds like it's building on China's already-established state facial recognition surveillance system, and

any scans Chinese users will have already given Tencent. Ahmad says all of Tencent's games in China use WeChat IDs for login, and the "Midnight Patrol" can use China's national citizen database of face photos to check against as well. China's surveillance engine has also been used for more troubling things, of course, like the country's human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims.

It uses cameras akin to Face ID, we're told, so not something you'd fool with a photo

Tencent does make it sound like it won't necessarily be scanning the faces of minors, though. When a user playing games after hours is prompted for a facial scan, they can simply refuse, at which point they'll be treated as a minor and booted out of the game, according to a machine translation of Tencent's press release.

Tencent actually started trialing this facial recognition system in 2018, and Ahmad says it hasn't changed much since then. He says the company also started running this kind of check last year when Tencent realized a lot of kids were likely stealing their grandparents' accounts. "A lot of kids are living with their grandparents, because their parents are working in the city, so they're likely to use their grandparents' account without their knowledge," says Ahmad.

Ahmad thinks the move isn't likely to be that controversial within China because, while intrusive, the facial checks primarily impact adults, and that online sentiment so far seems fairly predictable. "If you look online and read the comments, a lot of elderly parents say this is great, because gaming is terrible," he says. "It's always the older generations that say games are ruining it for our kids, so there's a bit of acceptance among the older generation in that this is how it should be."

<https://www.theverge.com/2021/7/9/22567029/tencent-china-facial-recognition-honor-of-kings-game-for-peace>