

COMPUTERS



Playing to Win: Nintendo and the Video Game Industry's Greatest Comeback
by Daniel Sloan
Wiley, HK\$200
★★★★☆
Ben Sin

To casual observers, Nintendo has long been a juggernaut in the video game industry – its flagship character, Mario the plumber, has been synonymous with video games ever since the revolutionary game *Super Mario Bros.*, and Nintendo's home video game console Wii, with 85 million units sold worldwide, is leading the digital entertainment industry.

But the Japanese video game giant, the undisputed leader in the video game industry during the 80s with its Famicom (Nintendo Entertainment System in North America) gaming hardware, was actually in dire straits for several years, from the late 90s to the mid-2000s after several hardware blunders and increasing competition from Microsoft and Sony pushed it to a distant third in the industry.

At one point, things were so bleak for Nintendo, industry insiders predicted that much like what Sega had done in 2001, the company would withdraw from the hardware market and focus on distributing its games for rival consoles.

But now, Nintendo is back on top, and Daniel Sloan's *Playing to Win: Nintendo and the Video Game Industry's Greatest Comeback* provides an insider's look at the rise, fall, and redemption of Nintendo.

Despite utilising mostly second-hand accounts (Nintendo did not cooperate with the project), Sloan – an experienced American financial

journalist based in Japan – paints a vivid tale that includes a detailed origin of the firm, which started as a playing-card company in 1889, and the company politics that involved the family-owned operation.

Sloan's sharp writing allows the book to jump back and forth in time and perspective with ease, and passages on Sony's and Microsoft's strategies are sharp and direct, ensuring the story of Nintendo doesn't lose traction.

The meticulously researched book also focuses on then-Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi's quest for a successor and several of Nintendo's side projects, such as the disastrous Virtual Boy hardware. Later chapters give an insider's look at the ongoing console battles between Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft, and what Nintendo has up its sleeves, including a soon-to-be-released portable 3-D device.

But as the title suggests, Nintendo's comeback with the Wii (released in 2006) after the failure of previous hardware GameCube, makes up the bulk of this 238-pager. And therein lies, perhaps, the book's biggest flaw – Nintendo went from a dominating No. 1 spot in the 80s and 90s to a distant third in five years, yet the epic collapse is skimmed over in the first few pages without much build-up.

The book also suffers from an identity crisis. On a macro level, it reads more like a piece of business journalism examining the Japanese corporate world and the gaming industry than a book for gamers. Yet, Sloan fails to introduce a key industry figure, or explain gaming terms that non-gamers are probably unaware of.

Still, *Playing to Win* offers an insightful look into the inner workings of a multibillion-dollar industry and also the mind of Nintendo president Satoru Iwata. And of course, everyone loves a comeback story.

known, and had the opportunity to know, just how rotten their company was."

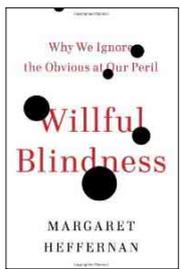
Heffernan has deeply researched her topic and uses numerous examples to illustrate her point.

Willful blindness can stem from familiarity, a "skein of decisions that slowly but surely restrict our view. We don't sense our perspective closing in. But our blindness grows out of the small, daily decisions that we make, which embed us more snugly inside our affirming thoughts and values".

In the chapter entitled *Cassandra*, Heffernan writes of those who have gone against the blindness, confronted the problems and initiated change. For their deeds, they can be punished in the court of human opinion. Joe Darby, who gave the Abu Ghraib photos to his superiors, says: "I'm not the kind of guy to rat somebody out. I've kept a lot of secrets for soldiers ... But this crossed the line to me. I had to make the choice between what I knew was morally right and my loyalties to other soldiers. I couldn't have it both ways." He's been relocated under a new identity because some in his hometown consider him "a traitor".

At the end of the last chapter, *See Better*, Heffernan concludes, "We make ourselves powerless when we choose not to know ... As all wisdom does, seeing starts with simple questions: what could I know, should I know that I don't know? Just what am I missing here?" *McClatchy-Tribune*

PSYCHOLOGY



Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril
by Margaret Heffernan
Simon & Schuster
HK\$169
★★★★☆
Tish Wells

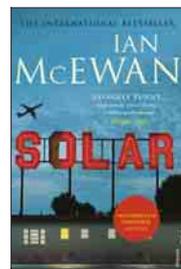
In *Willful Blindness* journalist and businesswoman Margaret Heffernan asks, "Why, as individuals, companies and countries, do we so regularly look at the mirror and ask how, 'How could we have been so blind?'"

When she asked people about the concept of "willful blindness", they gave examples on their own – abuse, divorce, Ponzi schemes, subprime mortgages. "Almost everyone mentioned the Iraq war and global warming: big public blunders caused or exacerbated by a reluctance to confront uncomfortable facts."

Heffernan was first introduced to the term when writing a play for the BBC on the failed energy company, Enron. The legal description for the term "willful blindness", as described by the judge, was: "You are responsible if you could have known, and should have known, something that instead you strove not to see." In the case of Enron, "[chief executive Jeffrey] Skilling and [chairman Kenneth] Lay could have

Paperbacks

FICTION James Kidd



Solar
by Ian McEwan
Vintage, HK\$104
★★★★☆

The environment is the new vampire – in literary circles, at least. Arguably the two most anticipated novels of 2010 used climate change as a plot device: Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* and *Solar* by Ian McEwan. While the Franzen went for epic and tear-jerking, Macca shot for comedy. The initial reaction to *Solar* combined the usual standing ovation with shoulder shrugging. Oddly, I felt similar indifference about *On Chesil Beach*, only to cry myself stupid at the paperback. *Solar* too has aged well. Its hero, Michael Beard, is a splendid, if unsubtle anti-hero. His effortless success in his professional life (he's a Nobel Prize-winning physicist with strong media presence) is matched only by the humiliations of his private existence: having ruined four marriages with constant philandering, he has the tables turned on him by his fifth wife, who is having an affair. Beard's response is to become the poster boy for renewable energy, although he has to steal from a graduate student to get pinned to the wall. McEwan is good on the science, almost boringly so. But the lighter, satirical novelist is welcome, even if he eventually gives way to someone more like Cormac McCarthy.



Little Hands Clapping
by Dan Rhodes
Canongate
HK\$104
★★★★☆

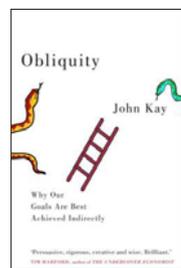
If you haven't tried Dan Rhodes yet, then *Little Hands Clapping* is a fine place to start. All of Rhodes' Rhodesiest qualities are present: a sideways, if gruesome take on life; a black sense of humour; caricatured characters you can care about; and a witty way with words. Our first point of contact is the elderly caretaker of a museum dedicated to suicide. Rhodes describes a spider crawling into the sleeping man's gaping mouth. The joke seems to be on the caretaker until: "but there is no escape from the thin, grey tongue that pushes it first into his cheek and then between his teeth." Told you it was gruesome. The museum, which lies in a dark corner of a small German town, is meant to soothe the depressed: according to its Pavarotti-obsessed owner, its aim is to demonstrate that life is worth living. But suicidal folk are drawn to its displays of celebrity deaths and fatal artefacts like "moths to a flame". As the caretaker swallows his spider, a young woman hangs herself with one of the museum's exhibits. It is grisly, but also funny and moving – the main plot is driven by two stunningly beautiful lovers who take shelter in the museum's dark halls. Odd and enchanting.



The Lincoln Lawyer
by Michael Connelly
Orion, HK\$104
★★★★☆

There's never a bad time to catch up with Michael Connelly's novels, whether they star his go-against-the-grain detective, Harry Bosch, or the slightly smoother, but still down-at-heel attorney Mickey Haller. If a bad time existed, however, then surely it's now because Matthew McConaughey is playing Haller in a film version of *The Lincoln Lawyer*. I know this isn't the dominion of a book review, but what is the point of McConaughey? Except for a splendidly gawky performance in *Dazed and Confused*, the only answer I can dredge up is none whatsoever. Anyway, back to Haller, who is called "The Lincoln Lawyer" because he works from the back of his Lincoln car. Haller is thrown what seems a paltry bone when a Bel Air playboy and property dealer, Louis Ross Roulet, is arrested on charges of violently attacking a woman in a bar. She cries attempted rape; Roulet's lawyers argue she is gold-digging. Haller expects the case to yield "riches and dangers" but the deeper he digs, the more Roulet's initial charm begins to tarnish. But if Roulet is the baddie, can Haller prove his guilt without compromising his ethics? Ignore McConaughey. Choose Connelly.

NON-FICTION Charmaine Chan



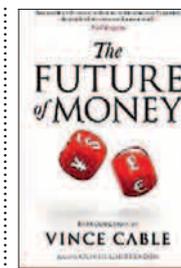
Obliquity
by John Kay
Profile Books
HK\$135
★★★★☆

Le Corbusier produced concrete hives according to his belief that "a house is a machine for living in". But, as is now obvious by the public's rejection of his grand schemes, home design cannot rely solely on practicality and must take into account its inhabitants' reactions. "The interaction between a home and its occupants," writes economist John Kay, "are complex and uncertain." Goals, he points out, are often achieved when approached indirectly. Hence *Obliquity*, his fascinating book-length essay on the subject that shows, for example, why companies tend to be more successful when profit isn't their prime motivation, how seeing things in different ways can lead to breakthroughs and how it is that "happiness is where you find it, not where you go in search of it". The teleological fallacy, Kay emphasises, which infers causes from outcomes, is a mistake. He also quotes Nassim Nicholas Taleb (of *Black Swan* fame), who says people in business and finance are often "fooled by randomness" in seeing skill in repeated success. *Obliquity* will stop you from trying to plan everything, and help you go with the flow.



Tiger, Tiger
by Margaux Fragoso
Penguin, HK\$130
★★★★☆

Margaux Fragoso goes to great lengths to convince readers her memoir is factual. About her 15-year relationship with a paedophile – from the age of seven to when her lover committed suicide, aged 66 – it is an account that will repulse many readers. Others, however, might be suspicious of the revelations, recounted, even in the early years, with the help of dialogue so tight and detailed you wonder how much is fantasised. For *Tiger, Tiger* (which refers to a game they played together), she used as memory aids 12 notebooks of dated daily letters from the man, whom she calls Peter, as well as four diaries she wrote during childhood and photographs of their time together. Fragoso, now a married mother of a daughter, tells about her alcoholic father and mentally ill mother, who allowed her to spend time with Peter, although her father referred to him as "that man" and once forbade contact between the two, after someone reported that he saw Peter kiss Fragoso on the lips. The author, who suffered post-traumatic stress disorder from the experience, says she hopes the book exposes the easy-to-miss signs of childhood sexual abuse.



The Future of Money
edited by Oliver Chittenden
Virgin Books
HK\$136
★★★★☆

So much has been written about the causes of the recent financial crisis that you could skip "Past", one of three sections of *The Future of Money*. Edited by Oliver Chittenden, this compendium of short essays about the international financial system also looks at responses to the meltdown ("Present") and prospects for the global economy ("Future"). In the last section, regional readers may be drawn to the contributions of Tony Fernandes (AirAsia's founder and CEO), Fred Hu (chairman of Greater China at Goldman Sachs until 2010) and Gerard Lyons (chief economist at Standard Chartered Bank), who outlines alternatives to the dollar and says that if India continues to open up, it could "do for South Asia, the Middle East and East Africa what China has done for East Asia, boosting regional trade flows". Jim O'Neill, chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, discusses how BRICs (his acronym for Brazil, Russia, India and China), defied suggestions after world trade slowed that the BRIC dream was over. O'Neill adds: "Perhaps the future for the US is as an Asia-style exporter and for much of Asia the opposite."