A sign of the times: after last year’s Big Tech playground featuring Google’s Fun House, Big Tech laid low at South by Southwest this year, with only Amazon promoting its upcoming Prime series Good Omens with a dedicated space and ongoing immersive events.

Instead, the focus this year was on the good and the very bad realities of Big Tech’s current power, as politicians and Silicon Valley experts took to the stage to discuss future policies for a safer, fairer and more transparent tech-infused tomorrow.

Politics v. Big Tech

Elizabeth Warren undoubtedly stole the SXSW Interactive when she dropped her plan titled “Here’s how we can break up Big Tech” on the opening Friday. It became the talk of the town over the following week as talk after talk addressed the plan’s viability and implications.
The call to ramp-up strict regulations was a key message to the tech giants this year, a message which even extended beyond the conference. Throughout SXSW, European Commissioner of Competition Margrethe Vestager was in the midst of a Google battle cracking down on anti-trust rules. The case has since led to a $1.69B fine for Google for abusing its dominance and restricting third-party online search advertisers.

**Humanizing tech**

![Blooming by Lisa Park](image)

With technology and Big Tech increasingly seeping into our everyday lives, discussions on if and how we should “humanize” tech took to the stage. The Innovation Group led a panel called “Inside Big Tech’s new ‘human’ aesthetic,” about how Big Tech is changing its design language to resonate with consumers. The talk explored consumer values when it comes to technology, how Big Tech is leaning on design to blend in and disappear in our home and surroundings, and how startups have led with design to empathize with consumers.

Creating meaningful human connections with technology was further explored in smaller off-shoot art projects. In the SXSW exhibition hall, a mixed reality collaboration between Icelandic band Sigur Rós and Magic Leap created tangible music with project Tónandi. In a room inside JW Marriott hotel, visitors were asked to remove their shoes before entering a dark space where a digital tree would bloom with each step, fully blossoming when visitors joined hands.

**Deep green futures**
Sustainability was an unavoidable subject, addressed by everyone from fashion to food industries in various talks. However, it was Dell’s space, called The Experience, that took the cake. Dell showcased their Pollution Ink with screenprinting and graffiti artists using the ink, and visitors received metal straws in a bid to reduce single-use plastic. A panel called “Meet the Mad Scientists” further explored Dell’s green initiative as they examined the demographic, environmental and economic pressures that affect our planet and ecosystem. The panel focused on positive solutions to keep up with the growing population and ways to create value without creating more waste.

Oliver Campbell, director worldwide of procurement and packaging engineering at Dell Technologies
noted they have explored new materials developed from bamboo, mushroom and ocean plastic waste to add value to consumers. “We want to make it easier for our customers to be green and cost less,” says Campbell. “That makes deep green which is my favorite color. That is how we approach design.”

Rage rooms

When it came to wellbeing, SXSW offered all the perks, from daily mediation and yoga classes with Lululemon to talks on digital detoxing. However, the adrenaline-pumping and endorphin-releasing Breaking Rooms by ADP and Wired offered the ultimate release for mind and body. The event included a series of rooms with props made to be broken – attendees enter in protective gear with a tool to start smashing.

Breaking Rooms was created to encourage the metaphorical smashing of workplace barriers, but it served a double function as attendees took out their frustrations from the Big Tech gloom that hung over the week.

Beauty tech

Beauty brands injecting tech innovation first saw opportunities to launch new products at CES, but this year SXSW also proved a platform for new launches in beauty tech. L’Oréal announced a partnership
with microbial genomics company uBiome as part of its tech incubator arm to deepen research into the skin bacterial ecosystem.

“The microbiome has major implications for the skin’s overall appearance and health,” says Guive Balooch, VP of L’Oréal’s technology incubator. “With the global reach of uBiome’s community of citizen scientists, our two companies will be able to extend our respective research in this space, and better understand the interplay between bacterial diversity and skin health.”

Meanwhile, PerfectCorp showcased its latest YouCam technology at the Innovation Mansion. “At PerfectCorp, we continue to push the boundaries of AR and AI to best cater to the beauty lover,” says Alice Chang, founder and CEO. “We are excited to reveal the newest ‘Beauty 3.0’ personalized experience at SXSW.” Attendees experimented with makeup and decorative tattoos under various lightings and visual styles gathering the best insight for the individual. Go wild or go subdued, every option is viable.

Experiential marketing

Bleed for the Throne activation at SXSW by HBO and Giant Spoon

Big names in entertainment brought on-screen drama to life for attendees. HBO kicked off a day before SXSW with their “Bleed for the Throne” event, where a make-shift Westeros set was transplanted in the
middle of Austin and over 80 actors and musicians were employed to immerse visitors in the world of Game of Thrones.

Netflix promoted their upcoming film, The Highwaymen, in a basement speakeasy on the popular Rainey Street. The space was transformed into a prohibition-era bar, fueled with gambling tables, shifty-looking actors and a “hunt” for attendees: participants were told someone was planning to rob the place, and their task was to figure out who. With every clue cracked, attendees won points in a gamified experience, which could be traded in for anything from a pin to a hip-flask to a Wrangler denim shirt.

Amazon recreated heaven and hell for Good Omens, but lacked the engagement HBO and Netflix provided. The chattering nuns they hired roaming around Austin and gatecrashing author, Neil Gaiman’s conference was a highlight.
AI-enhanced storytelling

From journalism and science to defense and ethics, the pros and cons of artificial intelligence (AI) were assessed in every segment this year. As panels grappled with the potential “Black Mirror” side of AI, Yves Berguist, co-founder and CEO of a new AI startup, Corto unveiled a refreshingly positive and useful application of the technology in storytelling for media and entertainment.

“All the tools in the [entertainment] industry right now when it comes to insight are about 10 years old,” Berguist tells JWT Intelligence, “and we want to leverage AI and machine learning to solve big problems in the industry.” Mapping out the virality of a piece of content and separating the hardcore fans from tentative fans are just some of the “problems” he would like to solve at Corto.

During his session at SXSW, he explained how his team are able to parse any script for 60 different dimensions of emotional tonality, including type A, self-conscious, dutiful, energetic and artistic. The team even explained why the psychological American drama Mr Robot’s viewings went down dramatically in the second season: it was in response to the protagonist, Elliott, becoming “more extraverted and less dark.”

Berguist argued that the role AI plays in storytelling will heighten creativity and take it to another level. “The world seems random, but stories are extremely logical and in fact,” says Berguist. “There’s an opportunity to make them a little less logical and create more innovation in the storytelling process.”
Advanced VR immersion

Ten years ago, Virtual Cinemas were proposed in small theaters like Biro in Los Angeles to showcase pre-formed content that could be consumed directly from cinema screens. But the line between world-building in VR and film worlds was blurred at SXSW 2019, as VR moved from a much-disputed “empathy machine” to a novel storytelling format at the Virtual Cinema.

Wieding

In Gloomy Eyes, a dark tale was told of a castaway zombie boy who falls in love with a young girl. Narrated by actor Collin Farrell, the VR story is co-directed by Jorge Tereso and Fernando Maldonado, and is the first of three parts. Farrell has expressed the magic and immersion of VR adding in an interview
with Variety, “it’s a completely transportive and beautiful experience, unlike anything I’ve ever seen before, and really connected with my passion of storytelling.”

Other projects look to different storytelling formats with -22.7°C opting for a non-linear narrative, and Eleven Eleven offers viewers to select from the perspective of eleven characters to piece the story together.

For more SXSW coverage, read our Breaking up Big Tech, Virtual Cinema and Bleed for the Throne articles.

Main image of Weaving by Cocolab. Image courtesy of Cocolab.

SXSW 2019: Key trends

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