
A \$2.3 billion ball, and the face selling everything

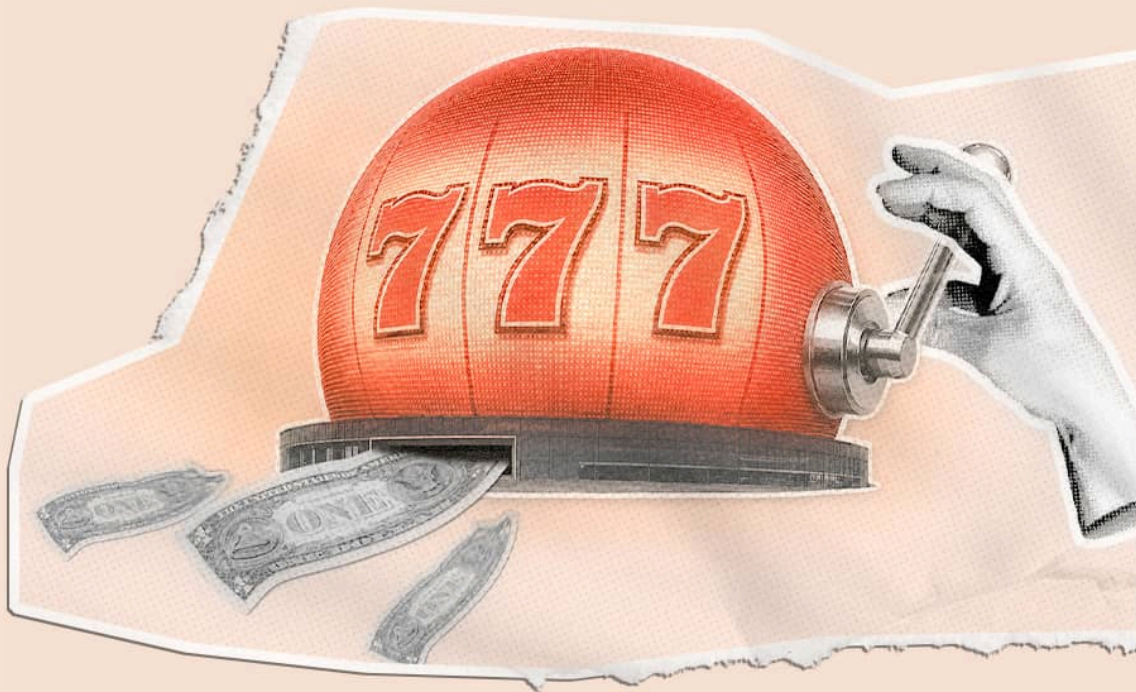
From Roots by fern <roots@watchfern.com>

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To Jamie <fullerton_jamie@hotmail.com>

The Sphere had a lot of haters. They were wrong.

+ The \$125 million marketing man (who plays baseball too)



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Big swings

There's something tremendously satisfying about watching people be confidently wrong.

When the Las Vegas Sphere opened, many were convinced it would become a \$2.3 billion monument to bad ideas. For better or worse, it didn't.

Shohei Ohtani took a different kind of big swing. Well, actually, he takes those all the time - but why is his face on like every second billboard in Japan?

This week's issue is about two very expensive balls. Sorry. I heard it, too. But what the hell, we'll leave it in for your enjoyment. It's just us here, after all.

Enjoy number 3.

-Jonas

**The Sphere had a lot of haters.
They were wrong.**



James Dolan is the New York Knicks chairman and often viewed as a bully. He opened the Sphere in 2023. Many predicted it would fail. And many wanted it to.

The 20,000-capacity Sphere was called an ugly “glorified billboard” and “money pit”, having gone \$1 billion over budget before opening. Beyoncé reportedly refused to play the venue. In a tour video she was depicted as a giant, holding the Sphere in her hand. Dolan sent her a cease and desist letter.

But as the Sphere approaches its third birthday, the lights are still on. There were no Beyoncé shows there, but the venue found success booking huge acts with older fans, able to afford super-expensive tickets.

In 2025, residencies by Backstreet Boys, Chase & Status and the Eagles helped make it the world’s highest-grossing arena. That year the Sphere clocked up almost \$400 million in ticket sales.



The sphere in Las Vegas - ByDroneVideos / Shutterstock.com

People still criticised the Sphere's gaudy, curved billboard-like exterior. But the visuals inside won people over.

"Visually it was incredible, from the sheer scale of the screen to the dizzying visuals actually on it", music journalist Damian Jones told Roots. He wrote a [five-star review](#) of the Sphere's opening gig: U2 on September 29, 2023.

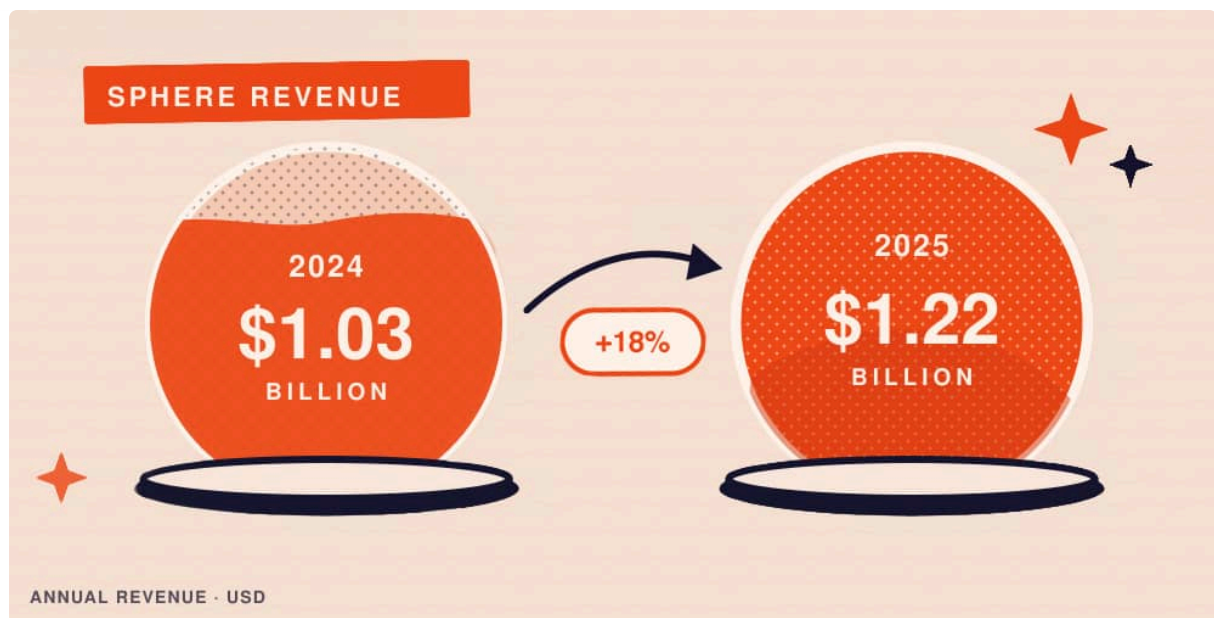
Jones added: *"It did almost feel like I was watching an outdoor concert under the blinding lights of Vegas, or in the Mojave Desert."*

That 14,800 square metre indoor screen is the biggest wraparound screen in the world, and covers the venue's ceiling.

The Sphere still has haters, of course. London mayor Sadiq Khan [rejected](#) plans for a London Sphere, citing light pollution and a huge electricity bill.

But that hasn't put Dolan off taking the Sphere global, now that the original Sphere makes profit. More Spheres are set to open in the US and [Middle East](#).

What could have been a planet-sized (and -shaped) folly seems to have set a futuristically lucrative new concert template.



Written & researched by Jamie Fullerton, edited by Jonas. Illustrations by Nikki.

Behind the Scenes of Our Latest Video

In our latest video, we investigated Grünenthal, the German pharmaceutical company whose history stretches from the Contergan scandal to opioids such as tramadol and tapentadol.

Following people affected in Germany, Australia, and West Africa, the film examines how addictive painkillers spread, how their risks are communicated, and what happens when pharmaceutical influence and independent regulation become difficult to separate.

It asks a troubling question: could another opioid crisis be emerging, this time made in Germany?

Watch the full video here:

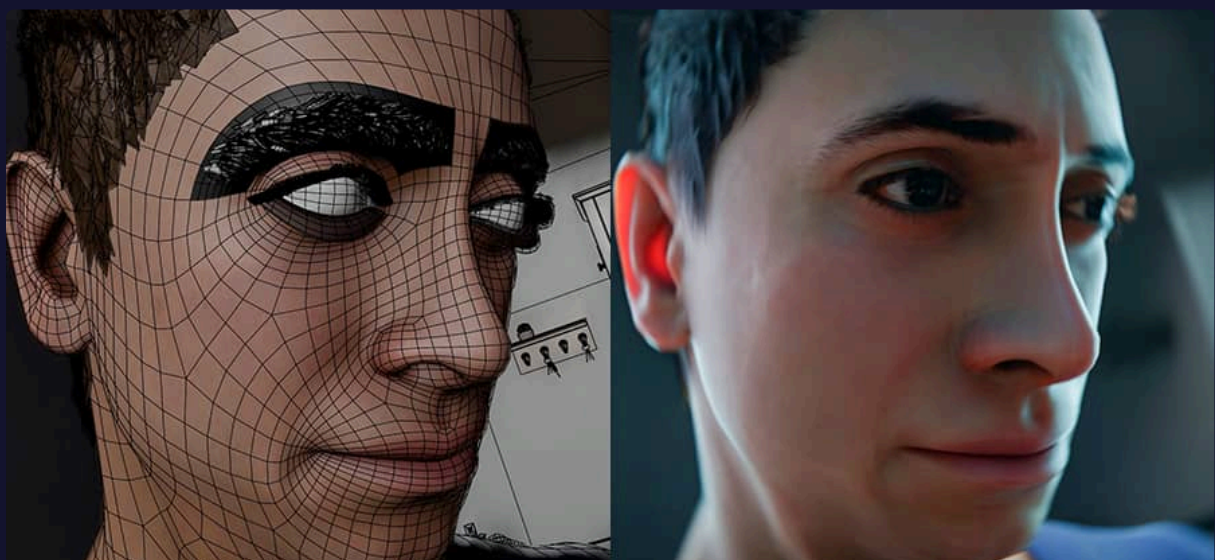


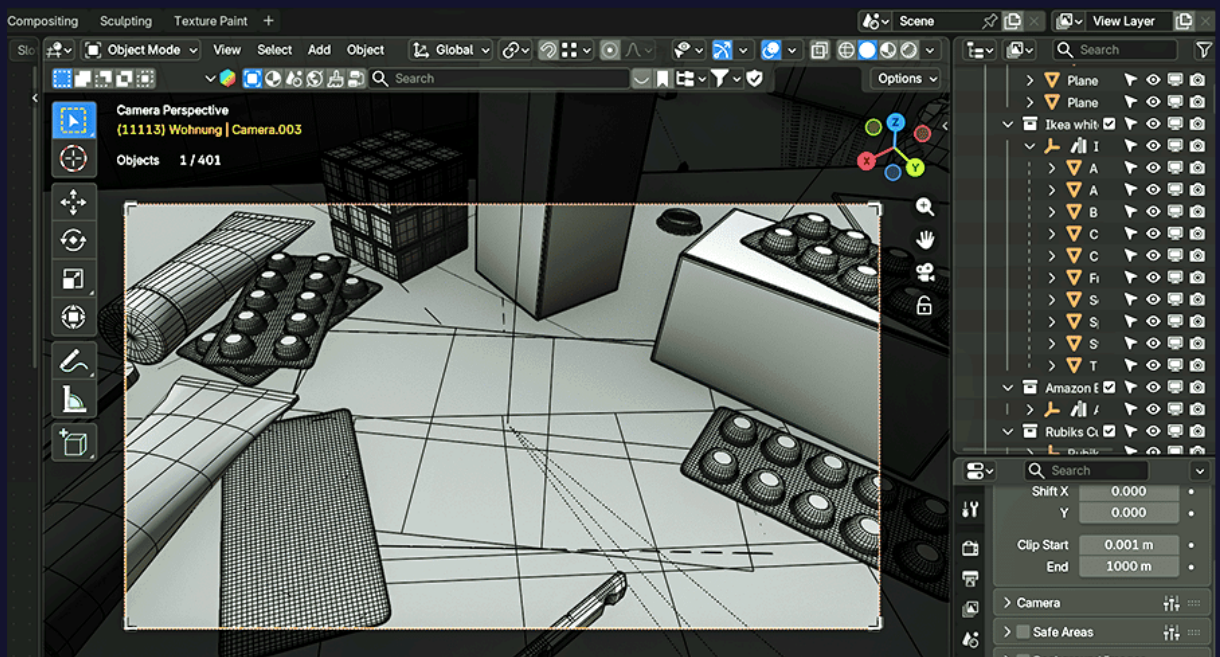
Stories like this do not come with ready-made visuals. Much of the investigation happens inside companies, laboratories, and regulatory systems that we cannot simply point a camera at.

That is where Lenz comes in.

As a senior 3D artist, Lenz turns complex and often abstract parts of a story into scenes that feel clear, cinematic, and real. What begins as simple geometry gradually comes to life through lighting, materials, textures, and compositing.

For this issue, Lenz is giving us a look inside his process. Below, he shared some of his raw Blender files alongside the finished renders they became.





The \$125 million marketing man (who plays baseball too)



The face is handsome but approachable. Swooping black hair that looks a little BTS-ish, when not under a baseball cap. Pearly white teeth, warm smile.

You'd probably trust this face, and maybe ask its owner which moisturiser he uses.

This is one of the most famous faces in Japan and the US. It's on TV selling t-shirts and super-cars, and on cardboard cut-outs promoting [green tea](#). It's in digital form on [Fortnite](#), and in stores selling rice balls.



This face belongs to Major League Baseball player Shohei Ohtani, known as "Shotime". He's on track for the biggest single-year endorsement earnings total in sports history: \$125 million just from sponsorships and [memorabilia](#).

Ohtani plays for the Los Angeles [Dodgers](#). He's known as a humble and clean-cut family man, and has a great dog named [Decoy](#). All factors brands and fans love.

By being a Japanese professional athlete playing in the US, he's a star in two of the world's biggest economies. He has endorsed Porsche, [New Balance](#), Japan Airlines, MUFJ Bank, Ito En tea and [many more](#) companies.

Japanese convenience store chain FamilyMart hired him as "rice ball ambassador". The result: three million Ohtani-themed rice balls sold in [one](#) week.

It's been noted [online](#) that in Japan, you might see Ohtani's face more than you see your family members.

Beyond pretty-boy popularity, Ohtani's cross-continent appeal mainly comes from him being very, very good at baseball, and a rare elite pitcher and batter. In 2024 he became the first player to hit over 50 home runs and steal over 50 bases in a season.

Ohtani partly puts his success down to aiming for [ten](#) hours of sleep each night. Naturally, he's endorsed [mattresses](#).

Recently Ohtani turned [32](#): an age when some baseball players consider retirement. Luckily, he's secured his financial future. Ohtani's \$700 million contract keeps him at the Dodgers until he's 39, and most of the fees will be paid after he [leaves](#) the team.

Ohtani accepting deferred payments meant that the Dodgers weren't suddenly drained of cash, and could continue investing in other players.

It was yet another public image masterstroke. Rather than spawning backlash about obscene wages, the contract structure just bolstered Ohtani's 'nice guy' reputation further.

Written & researched by Jamie Fullerton, edited by Jonas. Illustrations by Nikki.