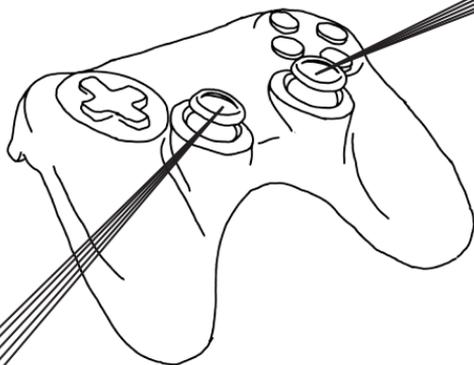


PLAYING WITH REALITY

GAMING IN A PANDEMIC

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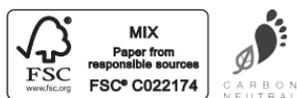
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GAMING IN A PANDEMIC



PLAYER 1
Alex Humphreys

INTRODUCTION

HOW I GOT HERE AND WHERE WE'RE GOING

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I sat motionless on the floor. Despair was quietly overwhelming me. I had been wandering aimlessly around the house, looking for something to do, but in reality, too restless to do anything. This time, I'd been attempting to start a jigsaw on the living room floor as I followed the fast-moving story on the news – now, the only news. When 'Viewers' Questions' to an expert was repeated, it was clear they had no new information about this new 'coronavirus'. I switched off the News Channel and reached for my Nintendo Wii U. I hadn't picked it up for a while, but I'd been waiting for a rainy day to play a game I'd bought a while ago.

Sat in the stillness of my house, the glorious colours and sounds of Zelda: Breath of the Wild enveloped me, and the bubbling chaos of the outside world subsided. Soon enough I was lost in a different world, and everything was OK... if only for a short while.

That was a memory from April 2020. I don't think many – if any – of us came out of 2020 unscathed. This is my personal account, of course, but by the time Boris Johnson made the announcement that all schools were to close from Monday the 23rd of March, and the first lockdown began, the world had changed. At the time, I was the lead presenter/producer of a news programme for kids in Wales. I also used to present another news programme up at MediaCityUK in Salford. I was there presenting over the weekend of the 14th of March, and at that point we knew it was coming – coronavirus – and there was an uneasiness in the air. I'll always

remember that weekend as being the turning point for me – the time when the world stopped being the way it was, and things got serious. In the canteen, I bumped into my old flatmate who I hadn't seen for years, and he hugged me as we said hello. A colleague said to me afterwards, 'You're not supposed to hug.' I knew that, and I slightly hesitated as he approached, but I couldn't stop him in time. The place was eerily quiet. We knew these were strange times. I could feel it was going to be the last time I was up in Salford for a while, and that breakfast with the crew felt like a goodbye. Restrictions were about to get tighter and, as I live in Cardiff, I wouldn't be allowed to travel, so my sole focus after that weekend became my work in the newsroom in Cardiff.

We'd been preparing for the moment coronavirus hit the UK for a few weeks. When Italy started locking down and we saw people singing from balconies, banging pots and pans to thank hospital staff from their windows, we knew it would reach our shores soon. I remember seeing a colleague in the toilets, the two of us washing our hands for what seemed like ages as we followed the new rules on posters. 'Weird, isn't it?!' was the only thing we could think to say. After Boris' announcement, I'm not sure if any of us really knew what was happening, it was all changing so fast. As critical workers, we couldn't always work from home, and apart from planning days, I was in the office most days, with new rules and different ways of working.

With the world in chaos, I had the slow realisation that everything I had planned and was working towards was slipping further away. Cancelled until further notice. Not to mention the awful dawning on me that I wouldn't see my family for who knew how long, as they all live the other side of the country. It felt like a massive void had opened between us, and I was alone. I wanted to hibernate – to go to sleep and wake up in six months' time (how naïve of me to think it would be over by then). I imagine a lot of people felt the same.

At work, of course, there was only one story in the news, and reporting on it for children was hard. I had to be that calm and reassuring voice. I'm under no illusions: I had it easy compared to the doctors, nurses, cleaners, supermarket employees and other key workers who had to keep working and being close to people. I absolutely loved my job, even in those challenging times. But working solely on one negative news story for months on end, when none of us knew how it would end, did take its toll.

Small things like making a cuppa became a huge source of comfort. But without realising, I soon adapted. I got used to not seeing people in the corridors, faces hidden behind masks, and I settled into the monotony of work then home, work then home. There was nothing else. And that's where gaming came in.

At home, it was easy to sit staring at the news channel, hoping for some better news, but I soon felt I needed to stop. Nintendo's 2017 title, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* helped immensely – the freedom I felt galloping on a horse across the plains felt real and therapeutic. An almost childlike happiness came over me as I got excited about discovering new shrines. Even the little musical motif that plays when you cook over the fire was a comfort. It was the first of many games that would offer me an escape over the pandemic.

Looking back on 2020, the scariest thing was not knowing the outcome. Not knowing if we would ever get a vaccine, and realising that things were changing and would not be returning to how they were. All sense of time became totally warped. But there were moments that were enjoyable. Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) sticks in my mind, and I remember feeling like I wasn't alone as I played at the same time as everyone else. Playing *Grounded* (Xbox Game Studios, 2020/2022) on the Game Pass with my uncle was a fun distraction – the two of us were at opposite ends of the country, but with a headset, our screams of being terrified by giant creatures pulled us into the same room, and we experienced the fear together. And racing through the British countryside in my Lamborghini Huracán in *Forza Horizon 4* (Playground Games, 2018) was unexpectedly relaxing, Handel's 'Zadok the Priest' blaring on my in-car radio.

Video games helped me so much. They opened up a 'something else'. Another world. A place where coronavirus wasn't spreading and I didn't have to think about the news and the evolving turmoil in the real world. Across the UK and around the rest of the world, millions of people were doing the same. And that's how I got here.

I've wanted to write a book on gaming for a long time. I've been fascinated with video games since... I can't remember when. I have a photo of me playing *Manic Miner* on my uncle's ZX Spectrum (you can see this photo on the inside of the back cover) when I was two, so that gives you some idea. Growing up, I spent a lot of time at my grandparents'

house, and I was lucky that their kids – my uncles and mum – had pretty much every computer and console going since the ZX81 back in the 80s (my favourite was the Amiga Commodore). So, I've played a lot of games, witnessed developments in gaming technology – from pixels and graphics to soundtracks and storytelling – and experienced the evolution of social gaming. I've since been fortunate enough to weave my passion into my work, and have presented documentaries and reports on gaming for BBC Radio 4, the BBC World Service, *Click*, CBBC's *Newsround* and more.

This book will take a look at the role gaming has played during the Covid-19 pandemic, through the eyes of game developers, heads of studios and players; it will consider how realities changed and intertwined with the digital world as we looked for an escape via screens; and how the industry has evolved through this strange, life-changing time. It also looks at how educators used gaming to help students. As the biggest entertainment industry in the world, the gaming industry has grown year on year for some time, but it saw an unprecedented boom over the pandemic, so I also want to find out if this has sparked a new Golden Age of Gaming – or were we in one already? To do that I'll be interviewing gamers, developers, industry experts, psychologists – and even a philosopher.

The pages of this book not only look at instances when gaming made the headlines across 2020–22, but are filled with anecdotes and thoughts – from those who found they needed games as we plunged into lockdown, those who used gaming to spread hope and joy, and those who make the games: gaming pioneer Tim Schafer, founder of Double Fine Productions; lead producer on *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, Julien Laferrière; head of studio at Sports Interactive, Miles Jacobson; and other studios and publishers, including Codemasters, Zynga, Rare, Electronic Arts and more.

Over lockdown, the lines of reality blurred as virtual spaces took hold, and we relied upon screens to see family and friends, to work, to shop and for entertainment. I'll be asking where this shift in the way we communicate takes us going forward – are we heading towards Ernest Cline's world in *Ready Player One*? I'll hear from those preparing for an even bigger shift into the metaverse, such as Jeremy Dela Rosa, previously of Blizzard, who believes we could be headed towards a world where everyone is so fully immersed in virtual spaces that we stop looking after our own planet – if we don't act now. Will some people prefer to live their lives in

different worlds, on screens, after the pandemic? I'll be interviewing those who already do: people who have benefitted from a life lived on screen – some who turned to virtual worlds for the first time over lockdown, and some who don't see a distinction between the physical and digital worlds at all. Reality is a thin line, after all...

The chapters of this book are dotted with interludes – extra content in the form of shorter anecdotes or conversations had over lockdown. Video games helped countless people with their mental health in 2020, and delving into why games are so best placed to help us is an interesting puzzle in itself. But this is not an academic book – I'm no university professor or psychologist – so I'll bring in those experts as and when required. I'm simply a gamer, presenter and journalist who has reported on gaming and loves it. I'm fascinated by gaming's role in society and how it gives us an escape.

The pandemic has been a traumatic event that has claimed millions lives. While I hope I'm sensitive to this in the book, *Playing with Reality* is intended as a celebration, at times tongue-in-cheek, of a time when gaming stepped up to help humanity. But as you might expect, there will be occasions when themes of death, loss and grief are discussed, as well as mental health. If I talk about any game spoilers, I'll let you know at the start of the chapter.

Oh, and just to avoid any confusion... when I refer to 'video games' or 'games', I mean all forms – console, mobile and PC. Some people dislike the word 'gamer', and I do try to use 'player' mostly, but in some cases, calling people 'players' just doesn't quite work...

So whether you're a gamer, interested to hear gaming stories from the pandemic and have an interest in the development of the genre throughout the pandemic years, or you simply want to take a glimpse at human behaviour at a time of great change, I hope you'll find some enjoyment in this book.

INTERLUDE – GAMER SURVIVAL GUIDE: GAMING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

- Wash hands.
- Buy a mask.
- Stock up on food and toilet roll.
- Buy more toilet roll.
- Go directly home.
Do not collect more toilet roll.
- Wash hands.
- Buy a games console.
- Buy *Animal Crossing*.
- Turn on the news.
- Cry.
- Eat comfort snacks.
- Play video games.
- Daily hour of exercise.
- Check news for updates.
- Eat comfort snacks.
- Switch off the news.
- Cry.
- Play video games.
- Wine/beer.
- Wash hands.
- Repeat.

MEET THE PLAYERS



PLAYER 2
*Jo Twist OBE,
UKIE*



PLAYER 3
*Kenny Johnston,
Zynga*



PLAYER 4
*Jayson Hilchie,
ESAC*



PLAYER 5
*Tom Wijman,
Newzoo*



PLAYER 6
*Ross Gowing,
Codemasters*



PLAYER 7
*Miles Jacobson,
Sports Interactive*



PLAYER 8
*Tjodolf Sommestad,
King*



PLAYER 9
*Jeremy Lee,
Riot Games*



PLAYER 10
*John Hight,
Blizzard*



PLAYER 11
*Craig Duncan,
Rare*



PLAYER 12
*Rosie Taylor,
Safe in Our World*



PLAYER 13
Revd Simon Archer



PLAYER 14
CDawgVA



PLAYER 15
Morgan Roberts



PLAYER 16
Steffan Powell



PLAYER 17
Rage Darling

MEET THE PLAYERS (CONTD.)



PLAYER 18
Laila Shabir,
Girls Make Games



PLAYER 19
Itzel Lopez,
CAVC



PLAYER 20
Ze 'Gaiou' Kouyate,
CAVC



PLAYER 21
David Banner MBE,
Wales Interactive



PLAYER 22
Nick Parrott



PLAYER 23
Bari Gwilliam



PLAYER 24
Julien Laferrière,
Ubisoft



PLAYER 25
Tim Schafer, Double
Fine Productions



PLAYER 26
Aaryn Flynn,
Inflexion Games



PLAYER 27
Leo Zuniga,
Blizzard



PLAYER 28
Miglè
Tamašauskaitė



PLAYER 29
Eric Lofgren



PLAYER 30
Sharon Su



PLAYER 31
Philip Rosedale,
Linden Lab



PLAYER 32
Bernhard 'Draxtor'
Drax



PLAYER 33
Jeremy Dela Rosa,
Leyline

CHAPTER 1

STAY HOME, PLAY GAMES



It was Monday the 23rd of March 2020, and this message was suddenly emblazoned across every aspect of our lives: on the streets, on our TV screens, on the radio and in newspapers. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, had given us an extraordinary message: ‘From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction – you must stay at home.’¹ School, social gatherings, events and sports matches were cancelled. Everything stopped, and the world as we knew it was gone. But as physical games were cancelled, another form of gaming was flourishing: the video kind. Experts were quick to realise this, and initiatives that were set up during this chaotic time will leave a mark on the industry that will be remembered for years to come. This chapter looks at the various ways in which gaming companies got involved in the fight against Covid-19, and has exclusive insight from studio managers and developers about what was going on behind closed doors.

But first, before the various initiatives began, industries were having to pivot. Dr Jo Twist OBE is CEO of the trade body representing the UK’s games and interactive entertainment industry, UKIE. Their mission is to make the UK the best place in the world to make, sell and play games. Much of Jo’s job is being part of working groups with the various creative

1 ‘Prime Minister’s Statement on Coronavirus (Covid-19): 23 March 2020’. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020>