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Introduction

Gamers and Gaming in the Strangest of Times

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The COVID-19 pandemic was a historical moment with significant and lasting social, cultural, and economic repercussions. This significance grows further when we take into consideration the unprecedented response from governments around the world. As is to be expected, most of the post-pandemic discussions have revolved around the most profound ways in which it affected societies worldwide: the direct and indirect loss of lives, persistent health issues, economic disruptions, and the *post hoc* debate about the wisdom of mandated lockdowns (Chambers 2023).

We are under no illusion: games, gamers, and the game industry are a long way down on the list of the pandemic's most significant effects. Yet, despite this caveat, we strongly believe that documenting the impact of both the pandemic and pandemic-related government policies on games and gamers is valuable and important. The years 2020-2022 were a watershed moment for games, their enormously expanded body of players, and the game industry. It will take time, perhaps several years, before it becomes possible to fully assess the long-term effects of the pandemic, both in its global impact and more narrowly, for the gaming community. Even so, it can already be noted the impact is not only widespread but also runs deep.

For video games, such developments are because the role played by modern video games is especially notable for several reasons. Digital media in general harbor affordances that exist in no other media format: the encyclopedic capacity of digital storage, the

participatory nature of interactivity, the capacity for procedural response to the user, and the spatial, navigable format of the user's interactions (Murray 1997). Digital games tend to maximize digital media affordances; their interactivity delivers agency into the hands of the users (Muriel and Crawford 2020), while their personalized paths of exploration allow them to build individualized experiences on top of universal gameplay rules. In turn, the developed player communities and their capacity to influence or even force changes in existing and newly-created products make games one of the media most responsive to changes in social needs, including the ones brought about by the pandemic. Perhaps the most characteristic example of this was the evolution of *Pokémon GO* (Niantic 2016)—an augmented reality mobile game with gameplay designed to require outdoor exploration—which in March 2020 successfully faced the remarkable challenge of having to adapt outdoor-oriented gameplay into a stay-at-home scenario (see Laato, Kordyaka and Hamari in this book).

No other media has presented such growth and significant changes in consumer behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic as the video games industry (Barr and Copeland-Stewart 2022). In the initial months, many industry reports noted the unexpected positive impact on online digital game sales. Games were not just lockdown-proof—rather, their sales were boosted by lockdowns (Humphreys 2022; Romano 2020). Stay-at-home orders triggered a rush toward games as an alternative form of entertainment, and the ubiquity of mobile phones allowed wider-than-ever participation (Barr and Copeland-Stewart 2022; Haug et al. 2022). Especially throughout the so-called developed world, games became ingrained into dramatically revised home routines and lifestyles, with the World Health Organization going so far as to recommend games, after years of focusing on the potential harms of the medium (Snider 2020). Additionally, in work environments, we saw a significant increase in acceptance of using reward and recognition systems originating from games—especially, but not limited to, gamification (Grensing-Pophal 2022).

Beyond home and work, the esports in some ways temporarily replaced the greatly diminished world of traditional sports, forcing immediate brand innovation and far-reaching changes in marketing strategies. However, the growth in esports online viewership came with a price; before the pandemic, esports relied extensively on local arena events for revenue, and many of these events had to be canceled (see Siuda, Jasny and Mańkowski in this book). Sports was not the only form of live entertainment that turned virtual, as the impossibility of live concerts also forced the music industry to explore alternatives. While in this case, the vast majority of virtual concerts appear to have been conducted through streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube (Swarbrick et al. 2021), games also became popular venues. In the distant pre-pandemic past, *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) had experimented with virtual concerts but the concept never became popular, being considered inferior to real concerts (Dammann 2007). During the pandemic, however, virtual concerts in *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017) sometimes garnered as many as 28 million views, and were hailed as the “future of gaming” (Kim 2020). In 2023, given the resurgent popularity of live events after the pandemic, it is easy to dismiss the hyperbole surrounding virtual sports and concerts as either baseless or, best case, as grounded only in an excessive emotional response to lockdown measures providing much-needed relief to the privations of the lockdowns. However, the difficulties faced both by audiences and by the entertainment industries, even if temporary, were very real.

Sales growth and marketing aside, the impact on the game industry overall was more complex and often pernicious, and in this collection, we uncover these not-always-obvious changes. Like many other white-collar workers, game developers experienced a rapid and often challenging shift to remote work (see chapters by Jerrett and Majewski in this book). This shift towards virtual communication also affected universities, where students could no longer be hosted in campus laboratories, requiring new forms of student engagement. These

new meeting spaces were found—or rediscovered—in games and virtual worlds. For almost two decades, virtual online worlds like *Second Life* and game platforms like Roblox (Roblox Corporation 2006) and games like *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios 2011) have been encouraging their players/users—visitors/inhabitants—to extend their experience with these platforms beyond mere play, and into academic or work-related usage. Perhaps the most prominent example of this are the so-called Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), e.g. virtual conferences (Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education 2023) or virtual university campuses (see e.g., Brand et al. 2014 for a pre-pandemic example of Bond University in Australia adoption of the virtual university campus when the physical university site was cut off from students as a result of flooding). However, the history of VLEs, as well as commercial usage of online platforms was, before the pandemic, largely tangential; for example, neither the usage of *Second Life* as a VLE (Kirriemuir 2007) or site of business activity, nor the controversies and conflicts around such usage (e.g., Foster and Carnevale 2007) reached mainstream awareness. The subject returned with far greater prominence during the pandemic. *Minecraft* found itself re-embraced by the education sector as a consequence of lockdowns (Anderson 2020; Khan 2021), and its publishers increased support for the educational modes the game provides (Webster 2020). In turn, *Second Life* developers Linden Lab quickly moved to present their platform as a pandemic-safe solution for business meetings, with greater immersiveness and customization than more conventional tools like Zoom or Skype (Parsons 2020). As we will see throughout this volume, this was just one of many cases of virtual worlds, platforms, or games adapting their offer—often with great success—to the pandemic situation. Conversely, some digital games encountered unexpected challenges: how indeed to adapt a location-based augmented reality game like *Pokémon GO* (Niantic 2016) to a locked-down world (Laato, Laine and Islam 2020)?

Equally complex was the impact on non-digital games. Typically designed for direct face-to-face contact, board games, pen & paper role-playing games, and even live-action role-playing games and their players were forced to move online, or to employ complex safety protocols to minimize transmission risk and conform to legal requirements. With the manufacturing and shipping chain of board game components being drastically distorted, the market for board games has undergone a dramatic change (Williams 2022). Also, the virtual market management concept overtook a fair share of the market, with the leading role of crowdfunding specialists (Hewer 2020). Large-scale events were canceled, postponed, downsized, or virtualized. The same, indeed, was the case not only for game-playing events but also for industry and academic gaming conferences (College 2020).

Both digital and non-digital multiplayer games—played at home during enforced isolation—contributed to fulfilling a need that the American Psychology Association found particularly crucial regarding the challenges presented by the pandemic: fostering a sense of normality by introducing safe spaces to maintain social networks (“Five Ways to View Coverage of the Coronavirus” 2020; in this volume see e.g., Brückner; Meriläinen and Ruotsalainen; Trépanier-Jobin, Leitão and Pelletier-Gagnon). However, the increased usage of games occurred not only among existing players but also among entirely new audiences, resulting in profound cultural change. It was this area that attracted the most interest from our contributors. The pandemic shifted play patterns, sometimes unexpectedly lifting previously-released games from obscurity as a particular title somehow found itself able to fill a pandemic-related need, for example with the explosion of the party game *Among Us* (Innersloth 2018), a title described as replicating “the only part of office life that most of us secretly miss: gossip and in-fighting” (Stuart 2020).

Beyond individual titles, the pandemic altered the popular perception of the broader concept of play, and among the players themselves, further complicated the understanding of

already fraught concepts such as hardcore and casual play (see Brett and Soraine in this book). Many contributors to this volume particularly stressed the alteration of gaming patterns, with increased play time and a far expanded dependence on games as a tool for socialization (e.g., Davies and Hjorth; Boldi, Tirassa and Rapp). Notably, the widespread adoption of games also raised questions about those left behind due to access difficulties, whether caused by financial barriers or disabilities. The issue of accessibility is broached in this volume (most notably by Hassan) but undoubtedly requires much further thought and research, which will be challenging indeed.

While indicating how the games, gamers, and the game industry were affected by the pandemic, we must stress the fact that all of the contributions to this volume came from the so-called Global North, i.e. Europe, North America, and Australia, not because this is what we, as editors, solicited, but simply as a reflection of the submissions we ultimately received. This absence, we believe, speaks volumes about the difference in engagement in games between the North and the South. While the broader, pre-pandemic issue of how the Global South encounters games has seen some exploration in recent years (e.g., Mukherjee 2023; Penix-Tadsen 2019), the pandemic-related differences remain unexamined. What is clear, is that while the severity of the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns varied from state to state, these variations did not overlap with economic or cultural divides: states imposing heavy lockdowns could be found as easily in Europe as in Africa or Asia, and conversely, states refusing to impose lockdowns could also be found all around the world. In all cases, we have encouraged our own contributors to consider the specifics of the pandemic situation in their particular state as a critical component of the context of their research.

We have divided the present volume into three sections, telling three different stories. The first section groups together those chapters that relay stories of games, and gaming. Subsequently, the second section explores that which endures: the instances where (and how)

the initial impact of the pandemic has resulted in possibly permanent changes, or at least changes whose effects are liable to be felt for years to come. Finally, the third section brings together explorations of the lessons drawn from the pandemic. This third section is “softer” than the earlier parts in terms of the pandemic effects as such. It is more about taking note of some possible changes, but also highlighting events and changes that did not occur. This latter category includes both cases that were announced and even anticipated in the media during the early days of the pandemic and cases that were not necessarily anticipated but might still reasonably have been expected to arise during the pandemic. These changes include esports vs. traditional sports, designing serious games for mental health, and using games as a tool to come to terms with traumatic life events.

The first section, then, begins with an examination of the way young people engaged with games in one of the most extreme cases of lockdowns. In *Roblox in Lockdown: Understanding Young People’s Digital Social Play in the Pandemic*, Hugh Davies and Larissa Hjorth present their research on the social role of the Roblox gaming platform during the COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne, Australia. Melbourne is a unique case—a record-breaking lockdown that ultimately lasted two-thirds of a year: 262 days. Understandably, then, games—and Roblox foremost—were a crucial surrogate of peer contact for children. The authors conducted a wide-ranging study, through interviews undertaken with twelve Roblox players between the ages of 9 and 14, the chapter explores how these players extended their social play spaces into the digital worlds during the pandemic. The chapter expands outwards from this case study to examine the broader context of contemporary media practices, especially concerning children and young people.

The second chapter compliments Davies’ and Hjorth’s study with its focus on families, this time turning to the northern hemisphere “*I’ve Played More Minecraft with the Kids*”: *Gaming and Family Dynamics in the Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic* by

Mikko Meriläinen and Maria Ruotsalainen concentrates on the role of gaming in family dynamics and how Finnish families coped with the pandemic restrictions of spring 2020. A qualitative study, the chapter demonstrates how gaming during lockdowns was perceived in a dualistic fashion, as a family-uniting activity, but simultaneously as a source of parental worry. This was mostly associated with different individual preferences and other situational factors, such as whether the family had children or not, or whether parents were working remotely. The chapter emphasizes the importance of gaming as a situated activity both specifically in the COVID-19 context and as a part of everyday family life.

The next two chapters are both autoethnographic accounts and concentrate on one of the most crucial examples of cozy video games (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020), namely *Animal Crossing: New Horizons (AC:NH)* (Nintendo 2020), and its importance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhu 2021). In the third chapter—*Uses and Appropriations of the Cozy Game Animal Crossing: New Horizons During the Lockdown*—Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin, Débora Krischke Leitão and Jérémie Pelletier-Gagnon (along with other authors from the Homo Ludens group) explain the reasons behind *AC:NH* becoming such an important game during the pandemic. The chapter, based on a collective autoethnography supported by computer-assisted text analysis performed on Twitter, presents a uses and gratifications theory perspective on key players' needs gaining significance during the pandemic and how the analyzed game addressed those needs. In general, the chapter is an important voice counterbalancing recurrent discourses about the allegedly harmful effects of video games on players' health.

Chapter four also revolves to some extent around *AC:NH* in the pandemic, and similarly engages in autoethnography, but is even more personal than the preceding chapter. *Gaming (the Pandemic) with Vision Impairment: An Autoethnographic Account* by Lobna Hassan presents the first-hand perspective of a visually challenged person, addressing some

key factors, such as the strategies of using games, the role streamers play in finding accessible titles, and the emotional and physical labor involved in the gaming. The chapter concentrates on how pandemic experiences of games were complicated by their frequent inaccessibility for people with disabilities. By using the autoethnographic method, this chapter reflects on Hassan's interaction with games during the pandemic and highlights the impact game (in)accessibility can have on gamers in general, not only during such crises as the pandemic.

While the earlier chapters, forming the first section of our book, focused on players and their behavior during the pandemic, chapter five serves as a transition into the second section, looking both at the immediate impact of the pandemic, and its lasting effects—this time, not on game players, but on the video game industry. *When the Virtual Office Became Reality: Digital Game Developers Under Lockdown* by Jakub Majewski presents an overview of how government restrictions across Europe and the United States, making the office inaccessible, spurred game developers to pivot towards dispersed teams collaborating remotely. Though some developers had worked remotely in the past, and the availability of tools that enable remote collaboration made this transition easier, the industry nonetheless found it highly challenging, with many games being delayed in the process. Conversely, once the transition had been worked through, many studios integrated optional remote work into their permanent culture and practice. The chapter summarizes expert and media reports on this matter, both from the pandemic and the post-pandemic period.

Chapter six continues the examination of the pandemic's enduring impact, though it does so by looking back to the first year of the pandemic. *The Influence of COVID-19 on Newspaper Discourses on Video Games in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Between Safe Social Spaces and Video Game Addiction* by Stefan Brückner is an empirical account of regional differences in how video games were portrayed in the media during the first year of the pandemic. Brückner's study of video game reporting across six German, Japanese, and

American (US) newspapers argues the pandemic has indeed caused a positive shift in the portrayal of games in mass communication in Germany and the USA, albeit with some evidence this shift was a continuation of a longer, pre-pandemic tendency. Conversely, in Japan, the COVID-19 pandemic provided further opportunities to solidify critical depictions of video games.

Chapter seven, Samuli Laato's, Bastian Kordyaka's and Juho Hamari's *A Review of Studies on Location-based Live Service Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Players' Behaviour and Reluctance to Return to the Pre-pandemic State*, turns the spotlight on location-based games (LBGs). Unsurprisingly, LBGs and their players had to significantly adjust their needs and expectations during the pandemic, as the default mode of play for LBGs became inaccessible. This chapter explores this issue through a systematic literature review of studies on LBGs with most of the discovered literature focused on *Pokémon GO*. As it turns out, the restrictions and in-game changes introduced by producers during the pandemic restructured and renegotiated the role of the game in the players' daily lives. Crucially, this chapter shows how these changes—perhaps unexpectedly—continue beyond the pandemic, with a seemingly permanent shift in attitudes from LBG players. This shift is reflected in the considerable problems faced by developers when they tried to roll back some of the pandemic-era changes.

Noel Brett and Sasha Soraine in chapter eight titled *Pandemic Gaming and Wholesome Philosophy: How New Players Reimagined Gaming Practices* present a constructivist grounded theory-based reflection on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on what the gamer community considers as “hardcore” and “casual” gaming practices. The authors analyze two highly popular games, both launched during the pandemic: the previously mentioned *AC:NH* and *League of Legends: Wild Rift* (Riot Games 2021). These gaming communities are studied through their presence on Reddit before and during the height of the

pandemic. The chapter, while revealing the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in permanently disrupting gaming communities, addresses the question of what this disruption means for the future of gaming culture as a whole.

The third, and final part of the book turns to the lessons learned from the pandemic—including lessons drawn from what did *not* change. The first example of the latter is explored in chapter nine. *“It Was All Without Emotions, and This Wasn’t the Same Anymore”*: *“Replacing” Traditional Sports with Esports During the COVID-19 Pandemic* by Piotr Siuda, Michał Jasny and Dobrosław Mańkowski dissects the once-popular beliefs on how the pandemic has forever changed the relations between traditional sports and esports. The claim stemmed from the powerful role played by esports at a time when traditional sports were not possible. Esports would thus help improve the sustainability of traditional sports in a post-pandemic world, as a result of the remarkable esports growth during the pandemic and the myriad esports mixed reality solutions temporarily “replacing” traditional sports. The chapter interrogates these beliefs through 15 retrospective in-depth interviews with journalists dealing with both esports and traditional sports. The interviewees were highly skeptical of the optimistic view presented above, and there is every indication their skepticism was justified. There are some lessons learned from this study: the journalist voices tell us not only about the actual relations between esports and traditional sports during and after the pandemic but also how to understand esports in the first place.

Chapter ten turns back toward players, their pandemic stories, and the lessons for mental health. *Playing as the World Falls Apart: The Use of Video Games During the COVID-19 Crisis. The Case of Italy* by Arianna Boldi, Amon Rapp and Maurizio Tirassa examines the role games may have played in the pandemic for Italian game players. The authors base their argument on a qualitative online survey during the national lockdown of 2020. The findings are mostly positive, with video games considered as reducing gamers’

feelings of loneliness and helping to make sense of the new situation. Moreover, players utilized various distinctive features of particular games for a sort of self-treatment. The chapter thus contains lessons for the future, with regards to using commercial games for mental health improvement, and how to design serious games for health.

In the final, eleventh chapter, titled *Reflection Inception: Creating a Reflective COVID-19 Game by Reflecting on the Pandemic*, Adam Jerrett conveys a lesson for game developers and designers exploring the pandemic through their own work. He describes the creative process (design and development) of the video game *What We Take With Us* (Jerrett 2022). This is a semi-autobiographical COVID-19-themed pervasive game based on Jerrett's pandemic experience. The chapter discusses how values-conscious game design frameworks could fuel the creative process, and uses thematic analysis to identify key design insights. The themes discussed include the barriers to design in times of crisis, the usefulness of game design frameworks, the evolution of people and projects, the consequences of making personal games, and the role of playtesting.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and perhaps even more so the government-mandated lockdowns, have impacted our society in myriad ways. As we write these words—the introduction traditionally being the last chapter to be written—we are all too aware that even within our relatively narrow perspective of games and game studies, there are a great many issues left unexamined. Even an incomplete list of topics to explore would run long. For example, almost unexplored here were the non-digital games—live role-playing games (Larps), tabletop RPGs, and board games. All of these, so often played in public spaces like clubs, fan events, organizations, or through informal groups of friends, were forced to suspend their traditional formats and switch to online spaces. Another topic, though one that may perhaps be better positioned in a wider context of tertiary education studies, would be the

difficulties of teaching game design in an online setting, given that typically a practical, hands-on approach is necessary.

The topics in need of examination continue to multiply. Certainly, the discrepancies in the pandemic and lockdown experience between the Global North and South, already signaled earlier, is a large and prominent topic, which could be approached from many different perspectives. For example, the present volume has described the transition to online forms of game production in Europe and North America, but how did this transition look in countries with more limited digital infrastructure? Conversely, it should not be taken for granted that developing countries necessarily have fewer gamers: after all, the mobile phone has become ubiquitous throughout the world (e.g., FurtherAfrica 2022).

Then, there are the game players themselves. How did their patterns of gameplay change? For years, multiple quantitative audience studies have indicated, unsurprisingly, that different people play different kinds of games, and they do so for different reasons, with younger audiences tending to play to experience excitement, middle-aged players to relax, and older players to keep their minds active (e.g., Brand, Todhunter and Jervis 2017). Some of the research presented here has certainly suggested the pandemic context had pushed more players towards relaxing cozy games (Waszkiewicz and Bakun 2020), but these patterns undoubtedly need further exploration. How have, and how will gamers continue to personalize their usage of games (digital or analog) to suit their own needs?

The pandemic is over. The lockdowns are over. Yet, perversely, both the pandemic and lockdowns are still with us—in us. We have been irrevocably changed, and so has our world. Let us continue to examine these changes and learn from them in our quest for future resiliency.

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