

Online gaming booms as virus lockdowns keep millions at home

25 March 2020, by Sean Gleeson



In this file photo a gaming fan plays during E3 2019 at the Los Angeles Convention Center on June 12, 2019 in Los Angeles, California, the Electronic Entertainment Expo is billed as the largest gaming industry expo of the year. The world's premier video game trade show, due to be held in June in Los Angeles, was cancelled on March 11, 2020 over the spread of deadly novel coronavirus. The Entertainment Software Association said that the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) event would not take place, becoming the latest in growing list of cancelled conferences.

When two Spanish footballers took to the controls of "FIFA 20" after the coronavirus pandemic saw their La Liga match cancelled, a stadium-sized virtual audience watched online.

The huge digital crowd last week is part of a spectacular boom for the digital gaming industry, as record numbers flock to online servers for distraction, entertainment and friendship with the "[real world](#)" seemingly falling apart.

Real Betis striker Borja Iglesias kicked the winning goal using his own digital likeness in the 6-5 battle against Sevilla, which was broadcast on popular video game streaming platform Twitch.

It took place at the same time the original derby had been scheduled, before Spain's premier tournament was postponed as part of containment measures that have also seen the country's 46 million people largely confined to their homes.

"We do all of this to entertain all of you, so that you can be at home enjoying it, insofar as it is possible with this epidemic," the host of the broadcast told his audience of 60,000.

Nearly every country around the globe has reported cases of COVID-19 infection, with frantic efforts to contain the disease prompting the near total shutdown of some of the world's biggest cities.



Record numbers have been flocking to online servers for distraction, entertainment and friendship

Online gaming has proved a welcome diversion for many people chafing at movement restrictions, the cancellation of countless public events and a relentless onslaught of news about the pandemic.

"It made me feel less depressed about being in a small space for a long time," said Yang An, who was made to quarantine for two weeks in China

after returning to Shanghai from her hometown last month.

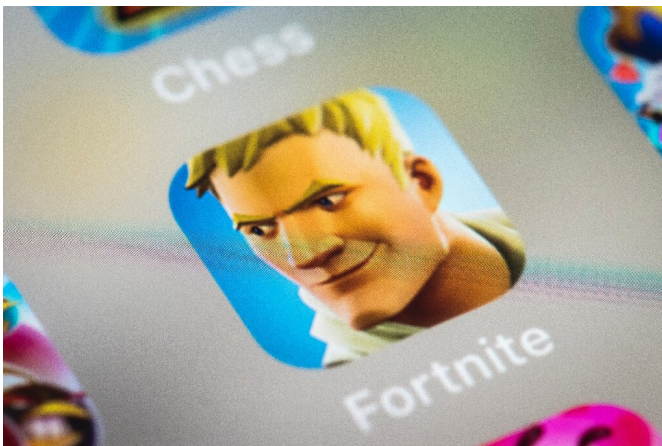
She told AFP that she passed the time by playing for up to eight hours a day on her Nintendo Switch handheld console.

Surging demand

Internet providers have scrambled to shore up their networks in the face of surging demand.

Gaming traffic on Verizon's network shot up an "unprecedented" 75 percent in the space of a week, the US telco said recently.

Software companies have also rushed to accommodate a record number of users.



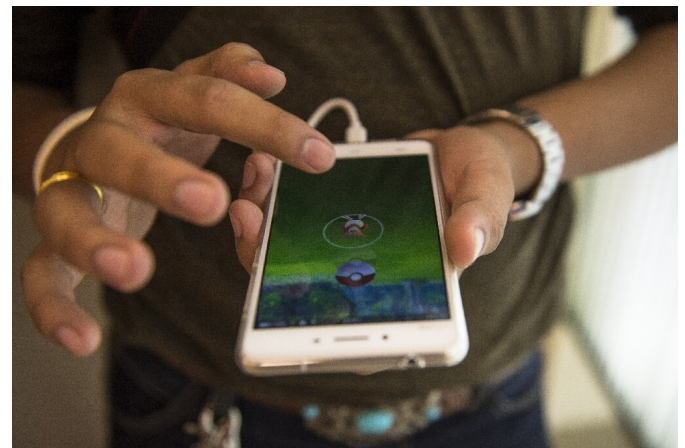
Internet providers have scrambled to shore up their networks in the face of surging demand from online gamers

Rockstar Games, publisher of the Wild West-themed adventure title "Red Dead Redemption", promised players it would keep its online servers running smoothly after it told its global workforce to work from home.

The company also teased a roll-out of extra in-game activities to keep housebound player glued to their controllers.

Online gaming communities could "go some of the way to create the public space that's been lost" in the wake of the pandemic, said Christian McCrea, a media studies lecturer specialising in games at Australia's RMIT University.

He pointed to Pokemon Go—a smartphone game that became a worldwide phenomenon in 2016 when it lured millions of people onto the streets for a virtual monster hunt—which was this month tweaked by its developer to make it easier for users to play at home.



Pokemon Go has been tweaked to make it easier for users to go on a virtual monster hunt at home

'Big impact'

McCrea said gaming habits were likely to see a massive transformation in the months ahead, with the prospect of further economic ructions and long stretches of social isolation looming on the horizon.

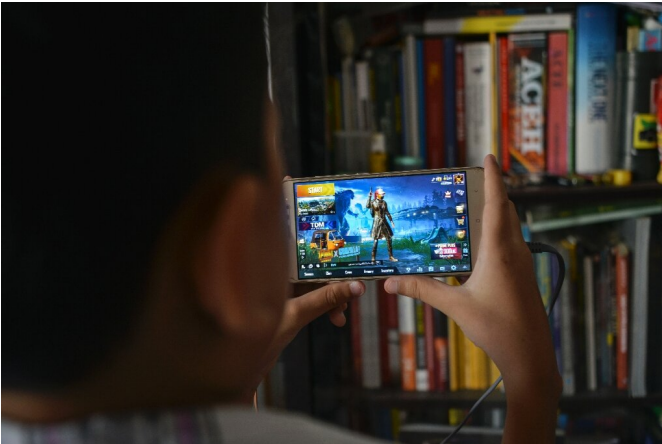
"Overall the big impact will be younger kids at home for months on end with parents out of work," he told AFP. "Games will be at the centre of a lot of their spare time."

Video games have long been blamed for a causing a suite of health issues, from repetitive strain injuries to eyesight problems.

The World Health Organization classified gaming

addiction as an illness in 2018, the same year China launched a crackdown on the industry on concerns that youngsters were spending too much time online.

But veteran gamers now ironically appear among those best-placed to navigate the pandemic and its impact on [everyday life](#).



Online gaming has proved a welcome diversion for many people chafing at movement restrictions

Twitch streamer "Loeya" told her million-plus fans in a broadcast last week that travel restrictions and school closures in her native Sweden and elsewhere were unlikely to alter her own mostly indoors, game-heavy schedule.

"Technically I self-quarantined myself, like, three years ago," the 22-year-old joked.

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APA citation: Online gaming booms as virus lockdowns keep millions at home (2020, March 25) retrieved 9 April 2020 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-03-online-gaming-booms-virus-lockdowns.html>

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