

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Immersive and addictive technologies, HC 1846

Tuesday 5 March 2019

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Members present: Damian Collins (Chair); Clive Efford; Paul Farrelly; Simon Hart; Julian Knight; Brendan O'Hara; Rebecca Pow; Jo Stevens; Giles Watling.

Questions 129 - 251

Witnesses

I: Jack Edwards, vlogger, lifestyle blogger and BBC presenter, James Good, Game Quitters, and Matúš Mikuš, Game Quitters.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jack Edwards, James Good and Matúš Mikuš.

Q129 **Chair:** Good morning. Welcome to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. Our hearing today is part of our inquiry on addictive and immersive technologies.

I wondered if I could start the questioning with the first question for James and Matúš. Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about your experience with Game Quitters and how you became involved with it?

Matúš Mikuš: I became involved in Game Quitters in my second year of university. I came here to university five years ago. I started to experience loneliness and feelings of isolation a little bit, I would say. I turned to games as a way to cope with those feelings. It got to the point where it was affecting my life too much and I decided to do something about it. I discovered Game Quitters on the website Reddit and became involved. In year 3 I found the support group, which was about three years ago. I was a member of Game Quitters for about two years, actively.



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James Good: Similarly, I found it in university as well in my second year because I was starting to fall behind in my work and my grades were slipping. Eventually I ended up dropping out of university as a result of playing too many games. Through that I thought, "I need to stop somehow" so I looked up online how to stop gaming. Game Quitters came up and I instantly joined up.

Q130 **Chair:** What sort of games were you playing?

James Good: I preferred to play games that focus on one character in a fantasy world where you go on adventures. You become immersed in this world, get lost and I think it is a way of escaping.

Chair: For Matúš as well, were there any particular games that you played?

Matúš Mikuš: For me it was "League of Legends", which was a big one. I played "Hearthstone", which is a card game. Mostly recently it was "Overwatch", which is a shooter game. They are all multiplayer, so you play other people.

Q131 **Chair:** Was the fact they were multiplayer a big part of the attraction to the game?

Matúš Mikuš: I think so yes, because it was a sense of community. I could talk to other people and I would play with my friends a lot. I think that was a big factor for me.

Q132 **Chair:** Would you play with strangers as well?

Matúš Mikuš: Yes.

Q133 **Chair:** Is it similar for you, James?

James Good: Yes, a bit of a mix. I like the multiplayer community aspect of playing online games with people but eventually I became distant from a lot of my friends and focused on games like "Dark Souls" and "Skyrim", these massively open RPG games.

Q134 **Chair:** At the greatest extent of your game playing how many hours in a session would you play?

James Good: For me it could range from four hours. The most I ever played was 32 hours straight in university, first year. I did not eat, sleep or anything. I did not leave my room, just 32 hours on "Dark Souls".

Matúš Mikuš: For me it would be anywhere from four to maybe 12 hours, I think 12 hours was the biggest streak I played.

Q135 **Chair:** What was the trigger for you both in recognising that this was becoming harmful and something you wanted to do something about?

James Good: For me it was dropping out of university, I was studying physics. I suffered from quite bad depression as well as a result of that.



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Everything started cascading down and down as a result of escaping my problems through gaming. It got to a point where I thought—

Matúš Mikuš: For me it was a breakup with a girlfriend. We had bad relations because of me playing games and spending all my time on my computer. That was the wake-up call, when she said I was not spending much time with her and broke up with me.

Q136 **Chair:** Where did you first turn for help?

James Good: The first place was the Game Quitters forum. There is a challenge to quit gaming for 90 days. You make a journal every single day on this forum, interact with other people in the community and chat all the time. It is a great place to keep yourself accountable and to get to know other people on the journey with you.

Matúš Mikuš: I started by reading books about habits, addiction and all these things. Eventually I got to Game Quitters, which was the best solution and the best help I could get.

Q137 **Chair:** What advice would you give to other people who may currently be going through the sort of experience you went through and do not know how they can break that cycle of behaviour?

Matúš Mikuš: The community was a big part, people who are in the same boat as you, who know what you are going through and who can talk to you and support you when you have a difficult period in your life. To find a support group and join Game Quitters, I think that is the biggest support group there is for now. Do not be afraid of talking about the addiction or the problems that you face.

Q138 **Chair:** The final couple of questions from me. From the people you have engaged with through Game Quitters, do you feel the experience you went through is not unique and that there are other people who have gone through something very similar?

James Good: Definitely. I know a lot of people who have completely changed their lives, myself included, through Game Quitters. People have started businesses, travelled the world and really made something of themselves rather than just playing games for eight hours a day.

Q139 **Chair:** Jack, with your experience of the people you interact with online, do you feel what James and Matúš talked about is a real problem that we need to talk more about?

Jack Edwards: My side of the internet is not really gaming and stuff, it is more about accessibility to higher education and that side of things. I have had a really positive experience with social media.

In terms of addiction, although I would not necessarily recognise it as an addiction in the traditional sense, when I wake up I do check it straight away, it is the first thing I do. When I am at university, I come out of a lecture and the first thing I do is open my phone and check social media.



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I suppose those are essentially addictive tendencies. Maybe the vocabulary we have to talk about social media does not think of it in that particular way because it is so accessible, it is in your pocket all the time.

Chair: Some members of the Committee can relate to that.

Q140 **Julian Knight:** James and Matúš, thank you very much for coming in by the way and talking so honestly about things. How did you start out in terms of gaming? You were very young, weren't you? What sort of ages were you?

James Good: For me it was three or four with old consoles that my dad had, so they were really old.

Julian Knight: Mega Drives, SNES and that sort of thing.

James Good: Mega Drives, yes.

Matúš Mikuš: I would have been five or six. Also my dad's computer, I used to play on the computer.

Q141 **Julian Knight:** Those first experiences are quite isolated, are they not, because a Mega Drive and a SNES does not have anything to do with the internet, you are just playing a game. At what time did you start branching out into the online gaming world, how old were you then?

Matúš Mikuš: For me it was very early, we had computers in school, had a class where you would use computers and we played a game maybe once a week. I was maybe six or seven and I would play with my friends every week. Yes, we would play online and play together. It was a way to spend time. It was very early, I think.

James Good: It was probably during school when "Call of Duty" became popular. I can remember the exact day that we bought our first wireless router as well that gave the internet setup in the house. From there it just took off. Everyone I knew in school played "Call of Duty" or some other Xbox or PlayStation game. It was the Xbox 360 that—

Julian Knight: The generation before this one?

James Good: —yes, that accelerated everything.

Giles Watling: That is the playground chat then, you were all talking about that.

Q142 **Julian Knight:** You were presumably very young then. This is about nine or 10, that sort of age?

James Good: No, after that, probably about 14 is when it started I think.

Q143 **Julian Knight:** You have this interaction online. What did being part of this community do for you, do you think? "Call of Duty" is very much an interactive game. That is the whole point of it really, isn't it? What did it actually do for you, James and Matúš?



James Good: Probably degraded my social skills quite a lot.

Q144 **Julian Knight:** You were having social interaction with people though, weren't you?

James Good: Yes, but it was a different kind of social interaction and it was still just the same people you would talk to at school. You would spend seven hours at school with someone and then go home and spend another five hours playing videogames with them every single day.

Q145 **Julian Knight:** The same people, your school friends?

James Good: Yes.

Q146 **Julian Knight:** Is that true for you, Matúš, as well?

Matúš Mikuš: Yes, it was a way to belong because with the guys in my class we all played the same games usually. We just talked about them for hours when we were in school. In our breaks we would just talk about the game was played last night or the day before. We all played them so we all could talk about it.

Q147 **Julian Knight:** This could be seen almost as a replacement for sport to a certain extent, where you would play football or whatever after school. These seem to me like they were quite closed groups, would that be fair enough, or from your experience would people come in from outside?

James Good: In the school console community on Xboxes and what not it is quite closed. I know a lot of people then branched out into PC gaming. That is a lot more playing with random people online, meeting other people and talking to them. In school it was very much a closed community.

Q148 **Julian Knight:** When you do that—which presumably you have done, you branched out effectively later on—does your experience change and how does it change in terms of your mental experience? People come at you a little bit differently because the people you are playing with before are friends, school friends and that sort of thing, and suddenly you are into a different world out there. Give me an idea of that sort of experience?

James Good: I am sure most people can relate to how you have loads of friends at school, then at university you have less friends and they narrow down. There are less people you talk to and meet at university, which is when I got into PC gaming. I started spending time online only with a couple of people and then those people went as well so I was forced to go on my own.

Q149 **Julian Knight:** To different groups?

James Good: Yes, to meet other people through these groups online.

Q150 **Julian Knight:** How did that feel?



Matúš Mikuš: For me personally finding people online, random people, was always very stressful. When I played with my friends we would play "League of Legends", which is for five players. We would joke around. When someone would do something stupid we would just laugh at it. If you play with random people and do something poorly they will abuse you verbally, it is a lot of abuse. I had to stop playing "League of Legends" because of this. I was very competitive in the game and could not take the stress. After every game my heartbeat would be elevated, and I would be shaking because of the things people say to you. Let us say you die in the game, people would tell you to kill yourself because you are so terrible at the game. This was a very common occurrence, it was almost every game. With your friends, if my friend got angry I can deal with that. It is a friend and we would laugh at it. If it is a stranger and it is every game you play it gets very stressful.

Q151 **Julian Knight:** That is absolutely fascinating. That is what I was getting at, the slightly different world that you exist within when you do branch out beyond where your friends are. You have a context with friends; you know them, you know the face and the turn of phrase, if you like. Someone in that world is totally different.

In terms of the people who are in that world who are interacting with you, were there a lot of people you felt were adult? Was it the same age group or were there people maybe posing as other people and that sort of thing? What was your experience?

James Good: It depends on the game you play. I played "League of Legends" a lot and it was mostly young adult, late teen to maybe mid-20s. If you go to a game like "Counter-Strike" it is probably an older audience. It is still exactly the same toxic behaviour, telling you that you need to kill yourself every game. I think it depends on which game you are playing on which console.

Matúš Mikuš: It is hard to tell as well because you only get some kind of typed response and it is hard to tell how old the person behind that is. It could be 15 to 30 usually, but I think it is hard to tell.

Q152 **Julian Knight:** Does not being able to know precisely how old these people are unsettle you?

Matúš Mikuš: No, not really.

James Good: You are only with them for about 20 to 30 minutes at the most. Then you move on, do not really think about them and get someone else to replace them.

Q153 **Julian Knight:** How do you think the fact you were interacting in this open-world environment effectively online with all these people outside led to you shutting down in terms of the immediate circle of people around you at university or your family? Where do you think that led? Obviously you are being very open in terms of this online gaming stuff and then slink away from everything else, how does that work?



Matúš Mikuš: I was very comfortable online, I was very good at the games I would play. Then I would go outside for a lecture and would not know how to interact with my friends or people around me. It is a feedback world. You go online, you are doing well and feel good. You then go outside, it is stressful and you do not know how to relate to people. You go back and play a bit more and feel happy. It is self-perpetuating in that way but I think it made me much less open to people in the real world. It made it more difficult to talk to people outside of games because there was not this whole context of games that I was really good at, I knew how to talk about and knew how to navigate this world. I did not know how to navigate small talk or real-life discussions.

James Good: For me, again, university was the big catalyst for it because you no longer have parents telling you to go to bed, do work and what not. There was all this free time for me to just sit in my room in the dark and play games until 3 in the morning. I do not think in my first year I completed a piece of coursework before 2 in the morning the day before it was due because I was playing videogames all evening. Eventually it starts having an effect on your physical and mental health. Things do not give you as much joy as videogames that fire up all the response systems in your brain, things do not feel as good or make you as happy. You start falling into this pattern of, "Why would I go and spend time with friends when I can just go and play games?" You start to become quite isolated and lonely as a result of that.

Q154 **Julian Knight:** You have both mentioned happiness a couple of times in terms of your relationship with videogames. However, you have also mentioned the fact you have been online and been told to kill yourself if you have done badly online, how you come off shaking and nervous almost like you have too much caffeine in your system. How is that happiness?

James Good: It is not. There have not been many times when I have actually been truly happy playing videogames but I kept playing them because it felt good to complete these objectives, get these trophies and these points and to beat people. I have always been quite competitive so it fuelled that as well. I have never really been happy playing games.

Matúš Mikuš: I think you get some sort of reward. A lot of those games are based on trying to get lots of rewards. Let us say you get a new character, you get a better rating, you get this new piece of armour and those things feel good at some sort of primal level, like giving you shiny things and it felt good. At the actual experience level, I would come out of the game and everything outside would feel bland in comparison. I would sit in a lecture and not be shaking but would feel that I am missing something. I would go back home, play a game and it would come back. I would not feel happy but normal in a way, like that was the normal level. The real world was kind of below that level. I would not feel as happy in the real world, I would feel happy or more normal in the virtual



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world even though I was not very happy. It is a weird feeling. It was not happiness but it was what I knew and it was kind of normal.

- Q155 **Julian Knight:** One final question, Chair. James, you mentioned having a depressive episode at university. Lots of young people experience that at university, any time you go away from your family and your home and that sort of thing. Do you think it is possible you may have suffered that even if you had not been a gamer? Potentially do you think gaming was the absolute root cause of it or was it a symptom of a deeper malaise?

James Good: This is something I have asked myself a lot, looking back on it. It is almost impossible to tell what effect it had. What it did allow me to do was to escape from my problems that were self-caused, for example not doing my coursework, essays, exams and what not. It gave me an escape to feel that things were okay and that I would not have to solve these problems in the moment, I could put them off to another day. Gaming allowed me to do that.

Whether it was the cause of it, I am not sure. Through Game Quitters you are encouraged to quit gaming. At the times I did quit gaming I was productive, happy, going out and doing things, having these great experiences and meeting friends. As soon as I went back to gaming I would become this bitter, depressed, lonely and sad individual. I do not know if there is a direct correlation or whether it is a case of me letting my discipline slacken and there being a domino effect that leads to me playing videogames.

Julian Knight: Self-perpetuating, that sort of that of thing.

James Good: Yes.

Julian Knight: Matúš, does that ring true for you?

Matúš Mikuš: It is 100% true. The exact same thing happened to me. I will say that at first gaming is not a problem. It becomes a problem because you are not taking care of things and those things become problems later on. It is part of the problem, not the root of it but a big part of the problem because it creates new stressful situations in real life.

Julian Knight: Thank you, Chair.

- Q156 **Rebecca Pow:** Thank you so much for coming in. Can I ask, are you finding it difficult to talk about these things and to reveal to us these quite shocking revelations, James?

James Good: Not really, not anymore. I have not played a game in about six months now. I want this to become more mainstream. I want people to know about the problems that affect so many people. The more I can talk about that and the more we can talk about that and discuss these issues the more comfortable I feel talking about it.

- Q157 **Rebecca Pow:** Good, thank you. Do you ever look back and think you have missed out on your childhood? As a mum with three children I am



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listening to this and I am very sad. I battled with one child who could have had those tendencies but we managed to hold fire. What do you think you might have missed?

James Good: I had a great childhood. I was always active being part of Scouts and all these different things. I was always playing sports. Where I missed out was towards college, 15 to 16 onwards, when I started really getting into it. It affected so many of my relationships, splitting up with girlfriends at the time. I started losing contact with my friends and I am no longer in contact with them just because I cut myself away from them. It is probably friendships and social experiences that I have missed out on. I did not develop them in the way I should have done in those years that are so critical to finding yourself as a person.

Rebecca Pow: Matúš, is your experience similar?

Matúš Mikuš: I always managed to keep my social life alive. I was always playing with my friends and I would always keep in touch with my friends. I would play sports, read books and would do my coursework so it was never that bad for me. I do wonder what could have been if I did not play games. It took a lot of hours on something that is not giving you anything in the end except good feelings for half an hour. I wonder what would have been if I did not play games but I always kept my life at an okay level. It was never terrible. It was never that I had no friends or anything like that.

Q158 **Rebecca Pow:** I am just wondering, did your parents try to step in to reduce the hours you were spending gaming or even your teachers at school? Do you think it could have been different? How could it be controlled?

James Good: The issues are so normal to be playing—

Rebecca Pow: Thirty-two hours?

James Good: That was in university when I just crumbled basically. During school, everyone was going home and playing games for a few hours with your friends. All my friends were doing it. I do not think my parents saw a problem with it. I have spoken to them since and I think they do regret not putting a hard limit on the games. Nothing from teachers because we did not see it as a problem and I think we did not talk to people about it.

Q159 **Rebecca Pow:** Did you think you had a secret life then that people did not know about, or do you just think it was accepted and was okay?

James Good: Yes, because with all my best friends at school we would just go and talk again. We were all quite popular at school. We all played sports together and engaged in social activities a lot. I would not say it was a secret life but it was probably secret to our parents and teachers who did not realise how much we played these games.

Rebecca Pow: Matúš, the same?



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Matúš Mikuš: Yes, normally my parents never forced me to turn off the computer or anything. They knew I was spending a lot of time on it but they never tried putting me off it in any way. I think they knew I played a lot but as long as it was not affecting my grades or anything, which it was not, I think they were okay with it.

Q160 **Rebecca Pow:** Do you think in retrospect, looking back now, there should be some kind of limits set that parents should be aware of?

Matúš Mikuš: Yes, 100%, yes.

Q161 **Rebecca Pow:** How do you think you could do it?

Matúš Mikuš: I think it is individual. It is good to talk to the children to see how they see it. I would say at most three hours, which I think is the scientific limit as well. If you play more than three hours I think that is when it starts affecting you. Three hours is a good time per day, which may be a bit too high actually.

Rebecca Pow: Three hours a day would be 21 hours a week, which would be almost a solid day and night of gaming.

Matúš Mikuš: It might be even too much, yes.

Q162 **Rebecca Pow:** We had in front of this Committee at the beginning someone who was chairman of BAFTA Games Committee and CEO of Ukie, which is the trade body for the UK games and interactive entertainment industry. She was suggesting that gaming is not addictive, what would you say to that?

Matúš Mikuš: It is not true.

Rebecca Pow: Expand a bit.

Matúš Mikuš: Gaming, by its nature, has these elements that are addictive by default. Different games have different systems but I think all the games give you a lot of different rewards, a lot of other goals you can progress towards and lots of rewards for achieving those goals. At some level in your brain it is very rewarding. It is too rewarding, I think it is addictive by default. Again, some games are better at this and some games do not try to do this on a larger scale. However, all games, by their nature, try to make you feel good about yourself, your character or your accomplishments. I think it is addictive by default.

Some games, modern games specifically, tend to create additional layers of rewards and progression on top of the actual game. That is where the trouble really begins because you have rewards just for logging in that day and rewards for completing a game. It gets the ball rolling and gets people spending time when they do not want to. I am guilty of this myself. The game "League of Legends" has a system where if you win a game that day you get some extra points to buy a new character. There were days when I would come home from my practice, it would be 11 at night and I did not want to play a game, I wanted to go to bed but I was



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like, "There is this reward. If I play just one game and win it I get these extra points." I would lose that game but, "I need those points now, I will play another game". Sometimes you would be three or four games into that final one, it would be 2 in the morning and I am sitting there, "I didn't want to do this".

Q163 **Rebecca Pow:** You were addicted?

Matúš Mikuš: I would say so, yes.

Q164 **Rebecca Pow:** James, were you addicted? Do you think the games are addictive?

James Good: Yes, definitely. When I decided to quit gaming after a few weeks, maybe 30 or 40 days—I do not know if you experienced this as well—I had all these withdrawal symptoms from being away from gaming.

Q165 **Rebecca Pow:** Like what?

James Good: Headaches, moods. I physically had to shut myself out of the house, put my computer in the wardrobe and lock it away. I deleted all my games and gave my friends passwords because I could not keep myself away from playing this game. I had urges every single day.

Matúš Mikuš: Yes.

James Good: I think it was about 70 days into the 90-day initial challenge when it really became bad for me. I could not stay in my house all day for the fear I would go back on my computer and play. Eventually after 90 days I thought, "Hang on, I don't need to play these games. Why was I so addicted to them?"

Q166 **Rebecca Pow:** Final question, Chair. Some of the people in the industry—this is a booming creative industry in this country—are trying to attract more and more people to go and work in it, it obviously generates a lot for our economy. Do you think that industry is taking advantage of your childhood?

James Good: To a point, yes, as someone who used to want to get into the game industry. I think it can be beneficial to have videogames because obviously addiction affects people differently. Every single game now seems to follow what is called a free-to-play model. In the past you would buy a game for £20 and get everything. Now you do not pay anything, you just download it and the only way you can progress is by buying loot boxes and downloadable content or DLC to buy new characters and maps. It does not seem like much but eventually you start paying dozens and dozens more pounds than you would have done if you just bought the game. Every single game now seems to be preying on this model that is really quite addictive.

For example, "Fortnite" battle pass—I do not know if you know about it—you pay a certain amount every month and get extra bonuses, rewards



and quests in the game. I think last year I decided to play "Fortnite" on a one-off with some friends. They started shaming me for not having a battle pass, for not paying this £8 a month. My character did not look as good as theirs, it was just the default skin thing. Theirs had all this special equipment and props. It was literally just cosmetic and played absolutely no part in being better at the game. One of them did not want me on his team, it got that bad, because my character did not look the right way. You see it with kids all the time. I read about a young kid, probably young teens, who stole their parent's credit card so they could buy this limited edition character for hundreds or thousands of pounds. I do not know how you can look at that and think they are not trying to take advantage of this system that is in place, which has become quite normalised now. It is ridiculous to me.

Chair: I thank you for the honesty with which you are addressing these things.

Jack, we do have some questions for you as well. We will probably stay with gaming for a bit longer and then we do have some questions on social media.

Jack Edwards: No, I am enjoying it.

Q167 **Simon Hart:** Following on from Rebecca's reference to the gaming people we had in a few weeks ago, they were quite dismissive about addictive tendencies in what they were saying. If they made any concession at all it was to say, "Don't worry because there's a whole load of parental guidance stuff that is tucked away somewhere in the game. There is no need to worry because parents will always be able to restrict and influence the kids get educated." I do not know what other Committee members think about that, but is it a convincing argument in your view?

James Good: I guarantee that most young people playing videogames know more about their computers than their parents do. They can probably get around all the controls in place quite easily unless it is password encoded or something and even then their parents probably have a notebook with their passwords in it in a drawer or on their phone. It is really easy just to go into their parent's phone and it might be a date of birth passcode, their pin number or whatever. It is really easy to get around these things. There is not enough in place.

Matúš Mikuš: For a lot of us, I think for James and for myself as well, the trouble began when we left home. We went to university and all these parental controls were off for the first time. The systems in those games are still there. I had a credit card and could pay for them. I was not prepared for that and was spending a lot of time and money on these games. My parents were not there. Maybe it is my fault, maybe it is just me who fell into this trap. However, I think when the parental guidance is there it is not enough and when it is not there then you can pay a lot of money for what are cosmetic items and 'sparkly' characters.



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Q168 **Brendan O'Hara:** Thank you again for your honesty here, it is really quite enlightening. I want to stay on the addictive part of this. Was there a moment when you first considered yourself an addict?

Matúš Mikuš: For me personally I always knew that this was something I have a problem with, since I was maybe 15. I knew I was spending a lot of time on games but I never felt it was terrible because I had all this free time, I had no way to fill up time so I just would play games with my friends. When I really saw myself as addicted was when I went to university and there was no control. My friends were all back home and I had all this free time when I would not do anything else, just play games. I think it was 18 to 19, around that age.

James Good: I do not think there was any time that I really thought I was addicted. I had quite a normal life at university with good friends, a girlfriend and what not. It was not until I found out about the symptoms of addiction through Game Quitters and started thinking, "Hang on, this is all me, I do every single one of these" and realised what addiction was.

Q169 **Brendan O'Hara:** You went to Game Quitters to find out that you were addicted. What took you to Game Quitters if you did not think you were addicted?

James Good: I just thought I played too much, I did not think I was addicted. There is a big difference between playing games quite a lot and being reliant on these games for release, escapism and happiness. The point when you make that connection is when you start to seek out the right help that you need, until then it is just a hobby really.

Q170 **Brendan O'Hara:** There was not a specific moment or a specific event in your life that led you to think, "I need to pick up the phone to Game Quitters" or whoever?

Matúš Mikuš: I was trying to get help but the real kick for me was when my girlfriend broke up with me. In that moment I knew that was the first event when my compulsive gaming led to something that made my life a lot worse. That realisation led me to seek help with much more force. Before then I knew it was a problem but it was never causing any lasting harm, this was the first event that was harming me in some way.

Q171 **Brendan O'Hara:** Matúš, did you think you were addicted before you went to Game Quitters?

Matúš Mikuš: I think so. I did not think about it in those terms but once I saw the symptoms I knew I was. A big part of it is maybe denial, you know you have a problem, but you are not willing to admit to yourself you have a problem. Once you use the term "addiction" it is a very definitive statement, "I am an addict. I am addicted." I was avoiding labelling myself in that way so I could escape from solving the problem in a way. I knew I was addicted but I would not use the term because it was a very strong term.



Q172 **Brendan O'Hara:** How did you both find out about Game Quitters?

James Good: I just googled how to stop gaming. Basically one day I thought, "I need to stop". I looked at how to stop gaming, came across Game Quitters and the forum. That is pretty much it for me.

Brendan O'Hara: It is exactly the same for yourself?

Matúš Mikuš: Pretty much, yes.

Q173 **Brendan O'Hara:** You do not have to answer this but did you have or do you think you have a particular personality trait that made you susceptible to becoming addicted to gaming, or do you think that what happened to you could happen to anyone else? You do not have to answer that, it is quite a personal question.

James Good: For me it has always been a lack of discipline. I have always procrastinated with schoolwork, coursework and university. It always worked, I got really good grades so why wouldn't I leave it to the end. I never really got over that. I am trying to think of the best way to word it, once you start slipping in one aspect—for example, I would be going to the gym every day or something—and stop doing that it becomes harder and harder to get back on track. I think for me the discipline aspect was why I kept coming back to gaming, because it was easy, and I was good at it.

I had a friend who played a lot of games at university, one of my best friends now, but he was hardworking and got everything done. He only played games after he had finished his work. That goes back to what Rebecca was saying about what can be put place; I think videogames should be a reward system after you have done these things. Throughout school I would come home from school, play games, have dinner, play games and go to bed. I did not have to do my work basically. Whether that is my fault, or my parents or whatever is in the past. It is from that lack of discipline that everything else arises. At its core gaming has all these addictive tendencies, which is really what preys on my personality I think.

Brendan O'Hara: Thank you for your honesty.

Matúš Mikuš: Since I was five or six years-old I would play a lot of hours every day. Over time it became tangled up in my self-identity. I thought of myself as someone who plays games and was good at them. When I was 17 or 18 I thought I wanted to be a professional gamer because I was very good at the games. I was putting in a lot of time but did not think of it as a problem because it was something I saw meaning in and was good at. I thought it was a legitimate path for me. It was a big part of my identity. That is why it is hard to stop, I did not want to lose all this effort I had put into gaming over the years. I would spend a lot of hours and did not want to throw all of that away so I kept going past the time where it was good for me. I knew it was not good for me



but I kept going because I did not want to lose all the stuff I had built over the years.

Q174 Brendan O'Hara: Has the void that has been left by the kicking of your addiction to gaming been replaced and you are an obsessive stamp collector now? What have you replaced that with, if anything?

James Good: I borrowed the idea of 'levelling up' in videogames so why not take that and 'level up' in life instead. I have gone through a self-development process over the last few years and replaced videogaming with all sorts of things; going to a gym, I have been a musician for ages and videogaming took that away, I am a photographer, web designer and a writer. I do loads of things now. I filled it with as much productive stuff as possible that fills the same drive. I am seeing myself develop into this person who can do all these amazing things, see all these amazing places and explore the world outside the screen.

Brendan O'Hara: You have not replaced it with one thing, you have replaced it with a whole range of different activities?

James Good: Pretty much, yes.

Matúš Mikuš: The biggest replacement for me is programming and software development because I think you use similar skills. Initially I wanted to make my own games because I thought if I can be good at playing them I can try making them. Eventually I became a software developer, which is something I do as a replacement for games. I also have different systems. I spoke about my girlfriend because she knows this was a problem for me in the past and keeps me accountable. If I say, "Maybe I'll play a game today" she will put me back on the right track. I also go to the gym. I read a lot of books. I do my coursework. I hang out with my friends.

The primary reason I played games was the goals and achieving those goals. I replaced those with programming and any other activity that has some kind of goals I can progress towards and get better at.

Brendan O'Hara: Again, thank you so much for being so honest and being so open, which must be quite a challenge. It has been great, thank you.

Q175 Giles Watling: I am very interested in your evidence, thank you again. I reiterate what others have said, it is amazing you can be so honest about such an extraordinary thing. I understand to a certain extent. It is a kind of displacement activity you get involved in when you are playing a game inasmuch as the rest of life piles up, you have essays you have not done and stuff like that, you then go into the game and you now have control of that environment. The rest of life is chaos but that is an environment you can control. Is that kind of the mental space you go into?

James Good: There are absolutely no consequences in a videogame. You can lose all your progress—which has happened to me and there were



tears in the past because I was so into it—but at the end of the day you do not lose anything at all if you fail. You can just do whatever you want and you have complete control to turn your character into this incredible powerful thing, whatever it might be. It does not affect anything outside in the world where everything piles up.

Q176 **Giles Watling:** The more you stay in that world the less the rest of it matters, is that it?

James Good: Yes.

Giles Watling: Matúš, a similar experience?

Matúš Mikuš: Exactly that.

Q177 **Giles Watling:** I have spent the last 18 months or so quite involved with various aspects of military training and stuff with the guys who are on our frontlines all over the world. A lot of their training does involve using this kind of technology.

Clearly there are positive sides to this. What would you say is the positive? We have heard a lot about the downside, a lot about addiction and a lot abrogating responsibility for other things and playing the game. What about the positive side, where is the upside here?

James Good: A lot of people do genuinely find a lot of happiness, a great sense of community, social skills and what not through playing videogames. They are also being applied to things around disabilities, restricted movement and what not. There are so many good things you can do with the technology and I think it is only a small subset of people who do suffer these addictive tendencies.

There are not too many positives from playing eight hours of videogames a day but there might be some positives from playing one or two hours every other day or every few days.

Q178 **Giles Watling:** Would you then say the development of these games is on the whole a good thing that is helping society or otherwise?

James Good: I do not know. It helps certain people and hinders others. As a society I think they are great in terms of pure technological advancements, pushing the boundaries of what is possible with computing, graphical design, hardware and software. However, the way these games are going, purely with this addictive nature in mind, I do not think is the right way to be necessarily going about making these videogames. It does not bother me if people play games or create them so long as they are done with proper restrictions, support and ideologies in place.

Q179 **Giles Watling:** Do you think when you were growing up perhaps not enough emphasis was put on getting outside, going sailing, walking in the woods and stuff like that?

James Good: Not for me, I spent loads of time outdoors.



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Giles Watling: You did?

James Good: Yes, loads.

Giles Watling: That was there and available for you, you just preferred to go into this gaming world as you got older?

James Good: Yes, exactly.

Matúš Mikuš: For me it was not available. I played games because all my friends lived far away from me so it was not possible to meet up with my friends outside of school. We would all go home to these different places so we would hang out by playing games. I do not think I had many outdoor activities available because my parents and friends were not much into that kind of activity, maybe once a year for a vacation or something. I think this was the best alternative.

I also used to read a lot of books as a kid. I was always a very introverted kid, I always spent time by myself and doing activities by myself.

Q180 **Giles Watling:** What I am trying to get to is whether you think gaming addiction can be a result of not having other stimulus?

Matúš Mikuš: I think it can, yes.

Q181 **Giles Watling:** I want to move on to something else that is kind of serious and very topical at the moment. Do you think this virtual reality immersive world that you go into anaesthetises you from real life in a certain sense? On the streets of Britain we are looking at the moment at an epidemic in knife crimes, stabbings and so on. Do you think there could be any possible link between that and people getting involved in this virtual reality world? You have said there are no consequences in there so people are now bringing that out onto the streets, do you think that is a possibility?

James Good: Personally I do not think there is much of a link between these types of videogames or experiences and real-world violence and crime. As someone who played a lot of violent videogames, I would not hurt a fly.

Giles Watling: I get that, James.

James Good: I think those kinds of things are a lot more deep rooted, maybe with home life or certain situations they might have grown up in.

I think the virtual reality world is definitely a problem, especially with games becoming so realistic and so immersive, as it is even easier now for you to become lost in these worlds. I remember growing up all I wanted was this world where I could go into it and live. It is probably going to be very real within a few years that you could spend your whole life—

Giles Watling: Yes, we had a witness who spent 48 hours living in



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virtual reality, which I cannot imagine.

James Good: No, me either.

Q182 **Giles Watling:** One last question—if I may, Chair—which is about these loot boxes. I understand they are not just rewards but are also a form of gambling. You buy a loot box and might get what you want, but if you do not get what you want you have to keep buying them until you get close to what you want. We live in a world now of the never-ending game. You said you used to pay £20, buy the CD, stick it in the computer, play a game and would eventually win or whatever. Now you play this never-ending game with these never-ending loot boxes so you play the game again and again and again. It is more than just buying the game, it is gambling. Am I right on that?

James Good: For example, in the game “Counter-Strike” they would release crates every few months. It would be quite a big thing in the community because some of the items you get from it could sell for £500 to £1,000 when they first come out, just for a knife on screen that looks nice and has nice colours on it. You buy keys for these crates, press a button and it will automatically buy a key, link to your PayPal and take your money after two clicks. You see a wheel spinning on your screen going over all the items you could get and eventually it stops on something that is not very good.

Giles Watling: That you did not really want.

James Good: Yes. There is a 0.01% chance of getting a good item.

Q183 **Giles Watling:** That could then lead to a further addiction, not just a gaming addiction but then a gambling addiction we are talking about.

James Good: Yes.

Q184 **Giles Watling:** That you could take into the world and start playing roulette or whatever.

James Good: I had an issue on the “FIFA Football” game because you buy packs of say seven players. There are a lot of football players in the world and you only get seven at a time with a very, very, very small chance of getting anyone good to make a better team.

Q185 **Giles Watling:** You try to get the perfect team and never will.

James Good: Pretty much, yes. You either have to play hundreds and hundreds of hours, which people did, or have to spend money. Every time a new “FIFA” came out, in September I think it is, on top of the £50 for the game my friends and I would probably spend another £150 of our student loan on these points to get loads of packs so we could start off with a great team.

Q186 **Giles Watling:** If you did not have the right team, you weren’t the cool guy?



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James Good: You could not win really, you needed the team to be able to win and get these trophies.

Q187 **Giles Watling:** At the time it was insidious, you did not realise it was happening and it was just part of that scene?

James Good: Yes, it is completely normal.

Q188 **Chair:** The game is set up to encourage you to behave in that way?

James Good: Yes. To get what is called a Gold Pack would take 7,500 coins, for example, or I think it was £1. Seven and a half thousand coins is roughly 25 games of 15 minutes each. I am not going to do that maths but it is a lot of time just to get one pack so it becomes easy, "It is just £1, just £10".

Q189 **Giles Watling:** You do not notice and it builds up?

James Good: Yes.

Giles Watling: Okay, it is insidious. Thank you, Chair.

Q190 **Clive Efford:** Thank you very much for coming. I hope we produce a report that does justice to the evidence you have given. Thanks for being so frank because it really is an education for me.

Jack, I know you are sitting there patiently, I am actually going to ask you some questions in a second. However, can I start with Game Quitters? It was your decision, each of you, to go to Game Quitters? There was no one behind you, no one forced you, threw your laptop out the window and said, "I've had enough, go and sort this out", it was your choice?

James Good: Yes.

Q191 **Clive Efford:** Does that set you apart from other people? Are other people just long suffering unless somebody else steps in and says, "You have a problem and you have to stop"? You had the character to do it for yourselves.

Matúš Mikuš: The founder of Game Quitters was an addict himself and he tells his story of how he overcame it and created this community. That really speaks to a lot of us because now we know there are other people who are dealing with the same problems and who have the same issues as we do. It was a place where people understood what you were going through and would support you in making the right choice and making the right decisions. It was a very easy decision to join Game Quitters and to be a part of the community because it was a very helpful community.

Q192 **Clive Efford:** Do you think it would be helpful if games had a pop-up on them that reminded people not just how long they have been playing but, "If you think you have a problem this is a place to go"?

James Good: I do not think that would make much of a difference, you would just click off it. If you are engaged in a game, I do not think you



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would care if a little pop-up comes up. They used to have it on games back when I was maybe 10 saying, "You've been playing for a while, why don't you go and take a 15-minute break?" You never did, you just carried on.

Q193 **Clive Efford:** You do not think anyone would respond or is there some percentage of people who would?

James Good: Maybe a few people might.

Q194 **Clive Efford:** The problem ones would not?

James Good: Yes, I think there would be outrage on social media and the internet.

Q195 **Clive Efford:** Thanks for that. When you went to Game Quitters what actually did they do to help you turn yourselves around and stop being a gaming addict?

James Good: They do not really do anything, they just give you the tools.

Q196 **Clive Efford:** What are they?

James Good: The main thing is the online support forum. There are tens of thousands of people who journal every single day. When you do this 90-day challenge to quit gaming, which is the first thing you are introduced to, you have all these people writing every single day what they are doing, what they have replaced gaming with, their hobbies and how they are trying to cope. There are loads of sections on health, lifestyle, entrepreneurship, photography, music and all these different things you can engage in. I have met people and made friends through it. That is pretty much the main thing of Game Quitters. There is an optional programme you can buy for £15 or £20 that gives you a lot more tools. There are also YouTube videos from Game Quitters that the owner—a good friend of mine, Cam—has recorded all himself. It gives you a whole load of resources to go out and do this on your own.

Matúš Mikuš: The videos are really useful because there is an answer for each individual problem or each individual issue you might have with quitting gaming. There are ideas on how to make new friends. There are videos on how to have a good day and how to do your work. There are lots of ideas on how to replace games. There is what to do when you have cravings and what to do when you are depressed, because you quit games and then do not know what to do with yourself and everything seems very bleak. It is the forum that is useful and also you know what to do now.

Clive Efford: It is all right, it is not a fire alarm.

Matúš Mikuš: You get a goal to aim towards or you get a path towards recovery that is very useful. There is the 90-day challenge and there are



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lots of different programmes you can buy or that you can watch online. There is the support but there is also the way forward.

James Good: The first thing when you go on is a link to download for free a sheet with 100 hobby ideas or something, just to look at straightaway.

Q197 **Clive Efford:** Thanks for that. You were asked earlier on about loot boxes. Did you ever run up any debts?

James Good: Not to that extent, no, just because I had quite a bit of money in university from student loans and the fact that Swansea is so cheap to live in, it was great. I never took it that far. I know people who have and you hear stories, it might be a 40 or 50 year-old father who has racked up thousands of debt and caused ruin for his family. Personally, no, not for me.

Q198 **Clive Efford:** It was not a problem for you but you could see ways that people easily could be enticed?

James Good: Yes, if you had tendencies towards gambling or had an addiction to gambling already and went down this path I think it could very easily affect you.

Q199 **Clive Efford:** The sort of gambling that took place in gaming did not lead you to try gambling in other forums? You have never done things like, for instance, skin gambling on social media?

James Good: No. I did football betting at university. I went through little bit of a phase for about a month where I got into match betting as a way of making money at university but then I realised, "I am just gambling my time, why am I doing this?" I never really had an issue.

Q200 **Clive Efford:** Thanks very much. Jack, how did you become a blog influencer on YouTube and social media?

Jack Edwards: That is a good question. I was quite precocious when I was young and really wanted to write. I wrote to loads of local newspapers asking if I could have a column and they said, "No, you're 13, of course you can't". Then I made a blog and started documenting what I was doing and sharing my perspective on things. Eventually people started to listen, which was nice, and to respond. It became bit of a community and then that developed to where now YouTube is my main platform of speaking to a camera and uploading that to the internet.

Q201 **Clive Efford:** Are you addicted?

Jack Edwards: I would like to say no. Like I said earlier, I think there are addictive tendencies. It is more of a covert addiction because it is not so much as sitting, like you said, for eight hours or something on a game. It is more living your normal everyday life and checking your phone every now and then, it is always in your pocket and just checking that one



notification that turns into scrolling for 10 minutes four times an hour or something.

Q202 **Clive Efford:** What do you have to contribute every day as a blogger? How much of your time do you blog?

Jack Edwards: I suppose my side of the internet is about access to higher education. I was the first person in my family to go to university so there were a lot of unanswered questions I had before I went and loads of anxieties that I had. Therefore when I went to university I started filling in the gap with making content. I blogged my Freshers' Week, which was probably risky to do. There are a lot of days in my life where I share, "This is what I'm doing at university today" and, "This is how I found my house to live in for second year" on how to rent a house as a 19 year-old because no one was really there to tell me how to do that. I became that voice, I hope, to help other people. People responded really kindly to that so it becomes a supply and demand thing where people ask questions and you make the content to answer them.

For me that side of social media is a really positive one because we help each other. I get a lot of people who are going to university and are terrified about moving away from home. I think listening to a young person who has recently experienced that exact scenario—I moved 350 miles away from home so it was not just a, "I'll pop home for dinner" scenario or, "I've got a bit of washing, I'll run that home", it is a long way—and hearing, "It is going to be okay" is reassuring.

Q203 **Clive Efford:** Do you feel under pressure?

Jack Edwards: I studied an English literature degree so there is a lot of pressure on my grammar, punctuation, spelling and everything like that. With the American viewers there is a lot of, "I don't think that word has 'u' in it" and, "Actually it does". People really pick at things that you do. I suppose what I share would come under the lifestyle category so people do look at your life, pick it apart and question the things you do, "Don't you have an essay to be writing?".

The thing I always say is, "This video that you perhaps saw of my week was 20 minutes long, the whole week was so much more than those 20 minutes that you saw". That is the main thing we, as content creators, have a responsibility to do, to keep informing people that it is an edited lifestyle that you are seeing, especially if it is a highlights reel. I think that is why social media is harmful, forgetting it is not just one person's highlights reel but everyone's highlights reel all at once.

Q204 **Clive Efford:** If you were not real, people would suss you out very quickly?

Jack Edwards: Yes, I think it is hard to not be authentic and realistic in that sense because you are essentially a personality so people respond to you as a human being. It is different to the gaming side that you were



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talking about. It is more personal, you can see my face, you can see me talking and I respond to all the comments and stuff.

Q205 **Clive Efford:** As someone with such a presence on Instagram and YouTube do advertisers approach you?

Jack Edwards: Yes. I am signed with a management agency that help me with speaking events. I am at university, I do not really have time to be negotiating. The first time I was paid to do something online I was 16. At that point when somebody said, "How much do you want for it?" I did not know. It is a whole new world in this whole new industry and we are all trying to navigate it and work out for ourselves what we are worth.

The important thing to remember is that it should come under the entertainment industry. Essentially what we do is create content that is free.

Q206 **Clive Efford:** So I am clear, you do get an income now as a result of setting up?

Jack Edwards: Yes.

Q207 **Clive Efford:** You did not set out to do that, it is just a consequence of what you are doing?

Jack Edwards: I remember seeing a survey of primary school children where they went into a class and asked them what they wanted to do when they were older and I think 60% said a YouTuber. That is my job. When I was that age, this was not a career prospect. It was not something you could aspire to be, it did not exist. I never set out to be a YouTuber or to be an influencer, as people call it. I tried to make content that would help people. I think because it was authentic people responded to it and it developed into that.

Q208 **Clive Efford:** You can live off being a YouTuber or influencer?

Jack Edwards: Yes, it is a job.

Q209 **Clive Efford:** We are not going to ask you what your income is but thanks for that. When you enter into an arrangement with somebody who is going to pay you, how do you judge whether they are an appropriate person, organisation or body to associate with?

Jack Edwards: The issue with that is that it is completely down to your discretion. I have always been very lucky in that there have been a lot of opportunities. However, I have always been very aware that, whether I intend to or not, I am speaking to an impressionable audience who value my opinion perhaps more than a random person that they met on a street because I have that platform.

I think we have, as content creators, a moral obligation to remember that the people who watch us are also consumers, not just of our content but also of the brands that we promote. Therefore when you align yourself with a brand it has to be something you completely believe in. I will



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always try to test a product first. The issue is that when money comes into it obviously people can be tempted. For me personally I would always test a product first to make sure it was something I enjoyed and liked using. For example, I worked with a laptop company. It was not the company that my actual laptop is, which I use on a daily basis. What I did when I made content for them was to check it out first and I was like, "Yeah, I like this laptop, it's good". When I made the content, I used it in the video to show exactly what it did. I did not lie. I did not say, "This is my laptop". I just said, "I'm going to use this laptop for a week and show you what it can do". I think that is a fairer way of doing it.

Q210 **Clive Efford:** That judgment is down to you as an individual?

Jack Edwards: Yes.

Q211 **Clive Efford:** Do you think this is an unregulated area of activity on social media that needs to be regulated?

Jack Edwards: It is almost an impossible mission. It is the same way any company can advertise on the television to a certain degree. If they are an established company then they can advertise on the television. YouTube or social media are essentially just another entertainment platform that people can pay to advertise on. The influence and marketing side of it is just a person holding up this product rather than an advert before the video saying, "Check out this product". When you add that personal level I feel an obligation to know that this person who values my opinion and watches my video could buy this and spend their hard-earned money on this.

Is that my voice?

Giles Watling: He pressed the button.

Jack Edwards: There is a gremlin in there.

Simon Hart: Sorry about that.

Jack Edwards: That is okay.

Q212 **Clive Efford:** A surreal experience. As someone who is on social media a lot, are there are other things going on there that you would want to draw to our attention that you would say, "This is something you should look into"? For instance, the issue about free betting on social media that entices young people into skin betting and playing poker.

Jack Edwards: There are issues with that. These betting companies could still advertise regardless of whether they ask me or if they just paid to have a billboard, a sign on the Tube or something. It needs to be regulated probably in the same way. However, I think there are so many complications in terms of what companies can do that because essentially they just approach you.

One of the main issues I would flag up is in terms of education around social media. When I was growing up the whole education around social



media was, "Don't talk to strangers online". That is impossible now. My career essentially is based on talking to strangers online. It has given me amazing opportunities; I would not be sitting here if I did not talk to strangers online, I have done presenting work for the BBC and we have a number 1 podcast. There are so many opportunities I have gained, at the age of 20 now, which I would not have been able to do without talking to strangers online. That is one side of it.

The main thing I think we need to focus on in educating young people is that, as I said earlier, it is a highlights reel. It is an edited life that is not necessarily wholly accurate. People take pictures of world-famous landmarks and Photoshop bits out to make it look more aesthetically pleasing, which is absurd to me because they are landmarks and already are super exciting and incredible to go and see. It is really important for us to emphasise, especially to young people who are so impressionable, this is an edited life that is made to look perfect and it is not necessarily exactly like that, also that the people you are watching can be paid to promote a product.

Clive Efford: Thank you.

Q213 **Chair:** I know members want to respond to things that have been said, we will take Simon and Jo next and then we will go into topical questions mode.

Simon Hart: I wanted to pick up a slightly serious question on mental health issues. Is now a good moment to do that?

Chair: Yes.

Simon Hart: It is following on really from something James said earlier on. There have been various Committees and inquiries within Parliament over the last few months—you have been probably seen most of them—about online intimidation, bullying and the long-term effects that may have, and the anonymity that can sometimes come with it. Alongside that we are seeing this extraordinary statistic of the teenage suicide rate going up by 67% in the last 10 years. I do not want to force you into expressing a view if you do not want to but is it reasonable of us to even explore the possibility that there may be a connection between social media addiction, social media activity and serious mental health consequences? Is that an avenue down which we should or could go?

Jack Edwards: Yes, I think there is a huge correlation. If you are having a bad day and click onto Instagram, instantly, at the touch of a button, you have everyone's best day of their life right in front of you and it can be really harmful. A lot of people message me saying that my life is so perfect and everything is going so well but I do not show absolutely everything that is going on ever, because it would be impossible, so we want to keep certain things private. It can be very easy to see other people always thriving and enjoying themselves and it almost seems like it is constant. Now, on social media like Instagram and Snapchat there is a stories function, so people upload on the go, so once you click one,



then you press next and it takes you to the next person's one, and the next person's one, and you can go down a hole of watching 100 people's days, and it is the highlights reel. So that is the biggest thing; to me that affects your mental health if you see it. It would be a situation of thinking, "Why isn't my life like that? Why isn't my day like that? Why am I not on that holiday that you are on?" That is the main thing.

Q214 Simon Hart: You have a huge reach, which as you have just discovered is extended, but do you see yourself as having a role in trying to help people who may be victims of that kind of world?

Jack Edwards: Like I said before, I feel like I have a moral obligation to talk about that. So a group of us set up this podcast, because online a lot of people talk about having a lot of academic success and being at university and that kind of thing, so we made a podcast about failure called "The Wooden Spoon", to talk about coming last and owning it, and embracing imperfections. I think it is really important for us as people who portray a lifestyle that is really motivated, productive and proactive to also show this is not every second of every day and we can talk about when we trip up and things do not go to plan. We are not saying don't fail, we are saying everyone fails so how can we pick ourselves up and turn it into a success? I think that was a very conscious thing that we wanted to do, to talk about how as young people we can accept that life is not this perfect bubble that social media depicts, and we speak about mental health as well on the podcast. I think it is important to hear it from young people.

Q215 Simon Hart: My last question on this, from my understanding, when James was talking earlier one of the points he made very persuasively was the impact on mental health from an addiction to online gaming. Does that necessarily translate across to other online activities or just people's obsession with, connection with social media, because I wonder if the two things are connected and how you as an influencer draw the line between making sure your business works, which relies on loads of people spending loads of time on your particular YouTube channel, or whatever it is, and at the same time recognising that might be addictive in itself. Where do you draw the line?

Jack Edwards: One of the most interesting things that James said that I picked up on in relation to social media was about the kind of endless universe of possibilities, where you go into this fantasy world and you can keep getting a new outfit for your character, and stuff, and in a way social media is also this endless—when you go on to the internet because there are so many people on the planet and a vast majority will be on social media now there is always someone to talk to, there is always someone awake, there is always someone sharing something and there is always something to discuss. There are always nuances to that discussion and you can just fall down these rabbit holes, so I definitely think that is really interesting as a comparison.



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Also the idea of on football games building a perfect team, and it is impossible to have the perfect team. I think social media is the same thing, because it is based on numbers, so on your photo, if you get a certain number of likes, and if that is the most likes you have ever received, then the next time you post a photo you want to get more. In a way we do not talk about it in the terminology of addiction because it feels more like real life. It just feels like our every day. I can post a photo right now, I won't, but then maybe I would be like, "Would that get more likes than what I posted last week and will that be more successful?" I think you can never reach perfect because you can never have everyone in the world following you, so you want to keep going up to that point. Whether that is on the platform I have, and I am lucky to do it as a job, but there are also kids at school who want to get more followers, to have more than the other people in class. There is a competitiveness, for sure.

Q216 **Jo Stevens:** Jack, do you monitor your screen time?

Jack Edwards: I have and was mortified when I saw how much time I spend on screen, yes.

Q217 **Jo Stevens:** You do not do it as a matter of course?

Jack Edwards: No. I think for me especially since it is a job as well I do end up spending a lot of time, but for me because I am really lucky to have a really dedicated group of viewers who are so engaged with everything that I do, so as soon as I post something there is a response, and in a way it is hard, especially when people are talking about you, with YouTube comments like I said before it is me sharing my lifestyle, so I will share an authentic, honest week in my life at university, and then people in the comments section will pick different things about it, like my relationships with certain people and like I said before about grammar and things like that. People do really pick things apart, so for me it is really hard not to read all of the things before I reply.

Q218 **Jo Stevens:** You said a few minutes ago that you want to keep some things private, so much of your adult life so far is online for the entire world to see. Do you think you will ever regret having that sort of exposure and displaying that much of yourself to the world?

Jack Edwards: I have always tried to prioritise having a good influence, and I never promoted gambling or anything like that. I have been really lucky to work with the United Nations and a lot of charities, and that is more where I think this is so valuable and it is so cool that we get to share these things.

In terms of regretting things, I think that now we are a lot more aware of our digital footprint. It is also the curation of a feed and an aesthetic and what you share. We are all very aware of our online identities now, as young people, more so than when I was growing up. I know there have been scandals with television shows where celebrities go on and then tweets that they have written 10 years ago have resurfaced, and that kind of thing. I think that we need to be aware of how much we share



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and that it is there forever. Once I press “publish” that is it, and even if I delete it, somewhere in some kind of, I do not know how it works, some kind of coding will keep that forever.

Yes, it is making sure that young people are aware of that, even now with private messages we need to be aware that what you are posting online is a permanent thing and if a screenshot is taken and then shown out of context it has your name next to it and your profile, which is yours.

Q219 Jo Stevens: Do you think it is best to educate people, not just young people, because obviously older people use social media? How best do you think we should educate people about the sort of things you have just talked about, but also about resilience when you post stuff online and you get responses, some of them favourable, some not?

Jack Edwards: It is the same with sharing any opinion on any platform, or in every day discourse. If you share an opinion, you have to be prepared to defend it and discuss it. Yes, I think it is something that we are all navigating and trying to work out. It is still a new, growing thing and I think it is important to remember that it is not going to stop. Whenever we look at dystopias now they are all about where technology will go next, rather than whether technology will stop, and I think that is really telling. I think we have to adapt.

In terms of educating, I think we have to keep talking about the lifestyles that we share and our online personas being a creation and an edited version of things, and talk about how your digital footprint does last for a very long time. The problem with it is it is hard to show someone until it is too late and until it bites them, and I think that is where the trouble is at the moment. I personally do not know the answer to how we show someone that what you just shared online an employer could see in five years’ time and not give you a job. It is probably easier to target that in schools rather than talking about, “Don’t talk to strangers online”. We already know that you will, so how can you control that and what you are sharing?

Q220 Jo Stevens: It says here you have over 100,000 subscribers on YouTube and over 30,000 followers on Instagram. I am very struck, listening to the evidence today, we have three men in front of us here, and it seems a very male-dominated area. Do you know for example out of your subscribers and followers whether you have a balance of men and women or is it predominantly men?

Jack Edwards: I think it is about 65% to 70% female. Yes, I know here we are all men, but in the industry I think that there is some sort of equality in terms of representation.

Q221 Jo Stevens: So you are talking about presenters on YouTube, effectively?

Jack Edwards: Yes. The main media example, I do not know if you know of Zoella who is in the millions of subscribers and she has her own



products in Superdrug, she has made a real business out of it and she is now essentially a brand. I think there is some sort of representation. The interesting thing is that the most followed people on the internet are generally gamers, which I think probably statistically speaking the audience of that will mostly be males, but then there is also this hugely flourishing beauty and lifestyle industry, which will appeal more to girls, stereotypically speaking. People can be interested in both or either/or, of course, so I do not think it is a male-dominated sphere, personally.

Q222 Jo Stevens: You have led me very neatly, thank you, to ask James and Matúš about that, because again the impression I get is that the gaming world is very male-dominated, both in terms of the developers, people who play the games, and the people that develop behavioural or compulsive behaviour as a result of the gaming. I am interested to know, when you played games, where you were playing with a community, were they normally men?

James Good: Probably 95% at least, if not higher.

Q223 Jo Stevens: Why is that?

James Good: I thought about this recently, and I think it is due to the competitive nature of gaming, and the guys tend to be a bit more trying to one-up each other and be more competitive with each other. There has been quite a big insurgence recently of women saying, "Hang on, we play games as well. We are gamers" a huge amount of people, but they do not tend to identify as gamers.

Q224 Jo Stevens: Bingo games are predominantly female, for example.

James Good: Yes, and there is a lot of mobile gaming as well. Personally I have not seen women take gaming quite as far as men do, playing hours and hours. It is only men that I have seen do that, and I do not know why.

Matúš Mikuš: I want to add that the games that I played were very competitive team-oriented games. Usually when there is a girl on the team and she speaks out and it becomes known that she is a woman she will get harassed and if she makes a mistake her mistakes are amplified because guys will be like, "Oh, it is a girl. She does not know to play it well" and it has always been like that. Usually I played with my friends who are all guys, but just the way we can talk about it, it is a very stereotypical way and if there is a girl we play with then it is, not anymore, but it used to be that you would make fun of the girl, the girl would be looked at as a girl, not as a person but as a girl, and I think that can be off-putting to girls.

Q225 Jo Stevens: It sounds very much like experiences 30 or 40 years ago when girls wanted to play football, exactly the same thing and it has gone full circle.



Jack Edwards: There is also a reason, there is a beauty guru called James Charles, a male who came to the UK and they shut down a whole shopping centre because so many people adore what he does. It was on the news and the presenter made the comment just after they showed this montage talking about how she takes her makeup tips from women, so I think there is still that weird thing of assigning genders, like gaming is for men, beauty is for women, but the beauty of the internet is that we can cross those borders and we can show people that anyone can get involved in these things and we need to break down those walls.

Q226 **Jo Stevens:** Yes, I can see from what you say that it is different in your sector, but in gaming it is so stark. This is what stands out to me, and what worries me. The other thing I wanted to ask you both, James and Matúš, is when you were playing games, when you stopped playing did you find that your behaviour and what you were doing in the game then seeped over into your behaviour once you had stopped playing? So that kind of pressurised competitive nature, did you find that your behaviour changed if you had been playing games?

Matúš Mikuš: For me, somewhat, yes, in that when I stopped playing games I would have to find a replacement for the competitiveness and goal-related activities, so I still have to have something like that. I think it was a good thing, because if I have some kind of goal, if I have something to work towards, then I am more likely to get there. I like that I have some goals and activities. There is obviously a lot of lingo I have learned, a lot of skills and lots of things I picked up over the years of playing games that I still use or think about different things in a way that is related to the games and I still sit in a lecture and right away in my head pops up the thought of me playing a game when I was 15, so it is still something that is very much with me in some way, but I think I have learned to channel the way I play games and the energy I put into playing games into different but maybe similar avenues. I would say I do not game anymore but I am involved in the digital sphere. I like computers and I like to work with computers and I think that has come from me playing games for all these years and being involved in computers in a very intimate way.

James Good: I do not think I took any specific things that I did in the games, but I always tended towards games that focused on exploration, single player games and these wide-open worlds. I find it quite funny that I am now a freelance entrepreneur, I ran an expedition to Canada last year and I have done all these things out in the world that I love exploring. I do not know if it is some deep-rooted thing in me that wants to explore, but I took that into gaming and subsequently channelled that, once I quit. I do not know.

Q227 **Jo Stevens:** My final question is earlier on I cannot remember but I think some of you were talking about it, about whether or not you should have time limits on games and I think the suggestion came up that if you play for three hours you should then stop. That would equate to 21 hours a



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week. Do any of you watch television in real time at all? Generationally around this table, we probably all used to spend 21 hours a week watching television when we were growing up.

James Good: Yes, my parents are way more than that now and I tell them, they have a go at me for playing games and I say, "You are on Facebook scrolling while the television is on for hours a day and there is no difference".

Jack Edwards: We have a television in my student house, which I think has been turned on twice this year, and they were both for things that were live events that we sat down and watched, but we would all watch things on our laptops.

James Good: Now it is a lot about YouTube and gaming. I do not know if you have heard of Twitch, so when I was playing games I would have someone else playing games on my other screen, and I would watch them while playing. Twitch is huge now and YouTube, the gaming side of that, you can watch hour upon hour of content, which is non-stop, related to gaming. I think a lot of people become quite normalised to binge watch YouTube and Netflix in the same way that people might watch television and they come home from work and they sit and watch Netflix for five hours. Again, it is quite normal for people and I think that is not really normal.

Jack Edwards: From the side of things that I get to do online there is almost a positive spin to that. A community has developed called Studytube, where people will sit and study for hours and people can study alongside it, and that is almost a complete inversion of what you were saying.

Male Speaker: Where were you at university when I needed you?

Jack Edwards: It is almost a productive—there is this cool side of YouTube which is like, "Study with me and get productive with me" and I have made videos like those and people react so overwhelmingly positively to them. That is really cool to see your influence in the real world and seeing you have helped someone who was struggling to find the motivation to start working to do it. I think we can use it in a positive way as well.

James Good: On the other side you have three hours of making an eight year-old cry, "Oh, my god, I made this eight year-old cry playing Fortnite". You can watch hours of content like that. I do not, but you could if you wanted to.

Jack Edwards: It is the same as YouTube, you can go from one to the other.

James Good: YouTube is a rabbit hole.

Q228 **Chair:** We have a few more questions. Jack, you said earlier on that



there are things you will talk about in your films and things you will not. How rigorously do you police that line? Do you ever feel under pressure to say, if someone says, "Perhaps if you talked about this you would get even more views" for a film?

Jack Edwards: I definitely think the term we would use is click bait, so people, the same way if an advert popped up on your screen that was enticing the buzz words would make you click on, and I think people use that to their advantage on YouTube as well, not always in what I would consider a good and positive way. For me the distinction has always been my private life in terms of relationships, family. My family have never really been on my channel unless they were in the background or consenting to be on it. For me it is really important, especially with my housemates, to make sure that they are comfortable with it as well, because even though I choose to put my personal and sometimes private life on the internet it is something that is edited and I oversee all of that, so it is edited by me but their lives are then edited by me as well, so then I would always check with them if that was okay. They always watch them before they go on the internet and I say, "Oh, is that okay if I just film it quickly?" so I think that is a really important distinction to make, to make sure that everyone is aware of what you are sharing. We can talk a lot about being careful about what you share, but it is also about what you share about other people, which can also reflect negatively on them later down the line. It is important to make sure that everyone is aware of what is being published. I think the important word is "published" because to me that makes it sound a lot more permanent. "Share" just sounds a bit like you are in conversation with someone and it can be forgotten, but "published" to me sounds very much like it is in print, and thinking about it in those terms is really useful.

Q229 **Chair:** In a typical week how much footage do you film?

Jack Edwards: I try to upload at least one video a week.

Q230 **Chair:** You said edited down, so how much is filmed?

Jack Edwards: Probably an hour and a half's worth of footage edited down to 20 minutes, but then also in the meantime there are Instagram posts every day and there are tweets as it comes to my head and goes into the Twittersphere, if that is a word. It is almost there is a constant sharing that goes on.

Q231 **Chair:** You said earlier on, I think the expression was living your normal life, but how much do you plan ahead? Obviously you want people to engage with the films, so you have to think about making them interesting. To what extent is it your normal life or is it a life that you have imagined for that week is something that other people would find interesting?

Jack Edwards: When I share about university I am probably quite different, because of the niche of what I share, but because it is university I do—if it is an interesting week coming up then I think, "Oh, I



will film this". What I realised, because I do not know about you but before I did any of this I would not have ever thought that anyone would care about me studying for my exams, but people do, because it is something that they can relate to and especially for young people they do not always know what they should revise for their history A-level, so I have made videos about, "This is how I revised for my history A-level that I have now attained". I had never thought about it in those terms, but it is really people want to see normality and they do respond well to it, really positively in fact. However, there are things that are constructed for entertainment value, so I posted a video last night where my housemate went away for the weekend, and she was so chuffed, she went on a free trip to Paris and she was bragging about it, so we pranked her when she was away and turned her bedroom into a museum. So we put up placards on all of her stuff so that is constructed for the camera, so I think it is clear to see when you watch it that is a specific event.

Q232 **Chair:** How many times a day do you post on Instagram?

Jack Edwards: It really varies. Because we have Instagram stories now, it disappears after 24 hours, so I think those are kind of as and when. It is that natural human instinct of wanting to share things and it just gives us a platform to do it. Like if you go to a famous landmark, outside Big Ben, everyone is taking pictures of it. It is a place for them to then post it and do something with it and say, "Look, I am at Big Ben" and for someone else to go, "Oh, that is really cool. I have always wanted to go". Maybe not now, not at the moment.

Q233 **Chair:** A final question from me, you said at the beginning that you did not think it is right to talk about social media addiction, but I wonder if it is a compulsion. People talk a lot about this idea of the fear of missing out, and that people are constantly checking, they get notifications all the time and they are constantly checking to see if something new has been posted, and if they have missed something then they feel compelled to share images of their own life as well in order to be part of that discussion. Do you think that is a real thing, that people have a compulsion to be constantly checking and messaging?

Jack Edwards: I think so. It is something that my housemates would do, we would just be sitting in the living room and we would all be scrolling and then sharing, "Oh, have you seen this?" It is that thing of, "Oh, have you seen what so-and-so is doing?" and now when my grandparents phone me they say, "Oh, yes, I saw that you were doing this" and I do not know if that is a positive or a negative thing in terms of sharing the act of telling one person individually. I definitely would say that if a person, especially a young person, was not sharing on social media then they would be an anomaly to the general norm, not necessarily to the same extent that I do but I think people do share. I do think it is a natural human instinct to want to show what you are doing and create that discussion.

Q234 **Rebecca Pow:** I am tempted to ask will you be writing a blog about this?



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Jack Edwards: Maybe.

Q235 **Rebecca Pow:** Have you picked up some useful information?

Jack Edwards: All noted.

Chair: It may not be the right audience.

Q236 **Rebecca Pow:** One of the statistics on our fake news inquiry did say that on average young people in particular were looking at their phone 16 times every hour.

Jack Edwards: That does not even surprise me at all.

Q237 **Rebecca Pow:** You made a comment about the bloggers, particularly in the cosmetics and care world, because they are massive, and the PMQ last week about celebrity endorsement of products, they were detox diet products, by some of these celebrities, you might have heard something about what is going on, and the celebrities are paid, for example, £100,000 to hold up one product, which is not trialled or tested and it is causing, according to the NHS, untold problems with young people following these celebrities and doing what they want and ending up with issues themselves, particularly women concerned about body image. Do you have a view on that because you are in that world yourself now?

Jack Edwards: Being someone in that world where you can have a contract shown to you that has a figure of money on it, and then it is a product that you do not like, I cannot trust that everyone would say no, but if it was something that I was not interested in I would never promote it. It is down to individual discretion, I suppose, and it is hard to police that.

Q238 **Rebecca Pow:** There is no regulation for this now. Do you think there should be some kind of regulation in this field?

Jack Edwards: I think that perhaps in terms of when it is weight loss or cosmetics that is quite important to talk about the effects and side effects and stuff, and I almost think perhaps there should be some kind of disclaimer. We all have to share when we have been paid to promote something so you have to put "#ad", to show that it is a paid for promotion, which I think is so important.

Q239 **Rebecca Pow:** You do not have to write at the bottom, "This is an advert" effectively, because what you are doing is advertising and you are basically endorsing a product that you are paid to show.

Jack Edwards: Yes, so you have to say, "#ad" and I definitely think that social media personalities are quite closely monitored on that and I think that people would call each other out if they were not doing it. I think the problem more lies from my experience with reality stars and that realm, who come into this industry almost overnight. When a television show airs someone can become an influencer, and that is a term that the media and business have picked up on, to call people like me influencers, because we essentially influence what other people buy and think and we



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can share perspectives that they might not have come across before, and in many ways that is an amazing thing, because you can become exposed to something that you would never have considered before, like a new idea.

Q240 **Rebecca Pow:** You are hot property for advertisers, though.

Jack Edwards: Yes, and I think it is a growing industry and more and more huge brands are getting on board with it and realising the potential of it. I think you can see the value, if you can have a one-minute advert between the "X-Factor", which people switch off from because that is when they go and make a cup of tea, and it is so clearly an advert that you almost ignore it, with social media if you trust my opinion and I am saying, "This is great" you are more likely to listen to me, if I integrate it into my lifestyle and share how I am using it.

Q241 **Rebecca Pow:** That is the danger, is it not, with these celebrities? Kim Kardashian is allegedly one of the people that has been named. They do not necessarily know how safe the product is so do you not think it is a dangerous world that needs more regulating?

Jack Edwards: In a way, yes, and I think that is definitely down to the cosmetic side of things. If I am sharing a laptop you can see that there are capabilities of that laptop and you can see what it does, and that is more probably what I would be involved in. When it comes to cosmetics, which can have dangerous side effects, then that is a different kettle of fish. In terms of moderating it, personally I cannot see how you would even go about setting some kind of regulation, because it is down to personal. I think for the companies to be able to advertise it should work in the same way that they need approval to be able to advertise and perhaps they should have to share that with an influencer before they can work with them, but I think we have a long way to go before that happens.

Q242 **Rebecca Pow:** I feel quite addicted, because my PMQ has had some 240,000 views, so I can see how you can get hooked into the addictiveness of it and that shows how powerful it is.

Jack Edwards: Because it is an immediate response, yes.

Q243 **Clive Efford:** Jack, have you ever been trolled or bullied or abused as a result of what you have been writing and how did you react to that?

Jack Edwards: Yes, when you put yourself out there like that you can have 500 lovely comments and there will be one nasty one and that is the one that sticks with you for the rest of the day, and the next time you make a video that is the one you think about, for sure. That is something that has almost become normal, to expect that, which is not okay, but I think it is that playground scenario of you can have loads of kids playing and having fun and maybe one will make a spiteful comment. Unfortunately it is a human thing and we cannot really silence people or censor people from that kind of thing. There are certain buzzwords that



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people say, James spoke about other people saying to kill yourself and things like that, and I think it becomes a really tricky line to toe in terms of if we could stop people saying that it would be the best-case scenario but also in terms of censoring people it is tricky. Being aware that people can be nasty and horrible on the internet is so important.

Q244 Clive Efford: That is just one-off comments, so is there anything that has ever gone beyond that?

Jack Edwards: There will be people who reply to everything I do with something spiteful and horrible. I can just see, for example, on an Instagram message that they have replied to everything I have ever posted with a horrible comment. In a way, and it is so awful that I am desensitised to it, I find it hilarious reading what they come up with, because you get to a point where you have heard it all, unfortunately, and I know deep down that should not be a normal thing, but I will show my flatmates and be like, "Have a look at this comment. How ridiculous" and I think the more harmful ones are the ones that pick apart things that I do and my relationships with people, because it makes you really start questioning everything and yourself as a person.

Q245 Clive Efford: My reaction to it is the one that is going to kill me is not going to tell me he is coming. Would you say that there is a widespread problem with this on social media? Do you think that it is something that needs tackling and, if so, how would you go about it?

Jack Edwards: I think that targeted abuse of people should be a police matter.

Q246 Clive Efford: Do you think enough is being done around those individuals who take it that far?

Jack Edwards: I would not know what the consequence was. If I were to troll someone right now I do not know what the consequence of that would be in terms of whether you would have to go to court and there would be a fine or whether you would be blocked from social media and how that would work. I have seen in the news a lot about Katie Price's son, Harvey, who is subjected to a lot of online abuse, you can see it everywhere on social media. It is horrendous, it is awful, it is vile, and I think there should be things in place where we can report it. If people are doing targeted abuse you can report it to, say, Twitter, who can then block the person from accessing Twitter, but there is no consequence in the real world, there is no—okay, so now you cannot use that app but you can probably make another account. There are ways around it, but there is no consequence that you face. I cannot imagine being reprimanded in the real world for doing something like that or seeing it happen to someone. I think if there were those deterrents then people would really rein it in. If you have threatened someone with, "I can report this to the police" I think it would instantly stop. This person who replies to everything I do with a horrible comment, if I said, "I have reported



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you" I think that if they knew what the exact consequence was in the real world they would take it a lot more seriously.

Q247 **Clive Efford:** Yes, absolutely. Did it ever spill over into gaming into anything more? Are you aware of anyone suffering any intimidation or harassment as a consequence of failing in a game?

James Good: Personally not necessarily, but there is so much of it that goes on in gaming, all the way up to swatting. I do not know if you know what swatting is.

Q248 **Clive Efford:** No.

James Good: It is where you find, say you are playing with someone, and you spend ages finding their house address online and then you call in a bomb threat or a kidnapping or a hostage situation and they get the armed police into the house to arrest this person who they think has done this, when in reality there is nothing wrong, and people have been killed as a result of this, especially in America where they have been shot as soon as the police have come in. It does have serious repercussions but the fact is that people can do this, just because you called someone a name online. That is pretty much the worst you can get, online swatting, but there is everything from doxing to just gaining their personal details through harassing them online through messages, and there are no repercussions through those. I think if you called someone a name in the real world not much would happen. You may get punched, but it is not going to—I do not know if it should have the same kind of punishment for, say, insulting someone online as it does in the real world, but because it happens so much and is so regular I think something should be done online as opposed to in the real world where it does not really affect anything, if that makes sense. It was not very clear.

Clive Efford: Yes, it does absolutely make sense.

Q249 **Rebecca Pow:** You have opened up a whole new area of discussion. I wonder whether you had any views about grooming online through gaming. It was raised with me that the NSPCC said that this goes on and that there are 5,000 online grooming offences recorded in the past 18 months. It is hard to know the exact extent of it, and this is happening through gaming, a lot of it. Do you have any experience? You are making live connections with other people who effectively could control you. Have you had any experience of that?

James Good: No.

Matúš Mikuš: What is grooming, again?

Q250 **Rebecca Pow:** It is coercive behaviour by another person or an adult of a child or a man or a girl, anything really, and it is clearly a growing issue but has been little talked about. Do you have any experience? It is something that the NSPCC definitely has on their radar now.



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James Good: I have no idea. The only thing that I can think of is that you are playing these games and now you suddenly have something in common with this person and you can talk to them and you feel more comfortable talking to them about this, so you can talk about the game and because it is so easy to chat with these people it is probably not impossible to take it further. There are some weird people that play games, there are some really weird people that you meet online.

Q251 **Rebecca Pow:** You do not know how old they are, exactly, and they could pretend to be somebody entirely different, could they not?

James Good: Yes, you can even change your voice online. You can download software to change your voice and people can pretend to be a girl or an old man or whatever it might be. It is really easy to do that, so I think that could be another issue.

Chair: I think that concludes our questions for this morning. Thank you all for your candour and for coming in to meet us today.