

# You probably know someone who just got into Formula One

That's a good problem for the video game designers working on F1 racing games.

By Luke Winkie

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Formula One Grand Prix are averaging a million viewers per race in America. The FIA, the governing body of the sport, just christened a new course in Miami, and plans on opening another track in Las Vegas next year. My Twitter timeline, a constellation of gamers and doom-scrolling journalists, rumbles into life on darkened Sunday mornings as the drivers take their marks in far-off European hamlets. I've become fluent in all the dictums and memes of the culture; Max Verstappen is a pout, Charles Leclerc is an angel, Ferrari can't get the job done when it matters. The verdict is unanimous: F1 is officially a big deal in the United States.

For Codemasters, the British company that has been making F1 games for more than a decade — and released “F1 22” earlier this year — that means their niche racing series is now reaching more people than they ever could've expected.

Like so many other longtime F1 die-hards, Lee Mather, senior creative director of “F1 22,” seems delightfully baffled by the American racing boom.

“When we first started on this series we were always catering to the F1 fan, and F1 fans are a very defined audience,” he said in an interview with The Washington Post. “But in recent years it's absolutely blown up. [There's] a new audience coming to the game through a completely different route.” Namely: the internet.

Mather's diagnosis of the phenomenon is two-pronged: The FIA has worked hard to bring live events for the sport across the Atlantic, and they've done a fantastic job of adapting to online culture and marketing their drivers worldwide. There's no better example of this than the Netflix serial “Formula One: Drive To Survive” — the wildly popular docuseries that glosses over the heady mechanical gumption of open-wheel racing in favor of headstrong, Real Housewives-esque drama. (The first season, where Daniel Ricciardo stabs Red Bull in the back, is one of the most compelling storylines ever told on television.)

But more importantly, the generation of drivers currently competing in F1 are extremely personable and outrageously online when they're not behind the wheel. Lando Norris, who competes for McLaren, streams his "Fall Guys" matches live on Twitch during his off days. (Ferrari's Charles Leclerc does the same, but he usually sticks with racing games.) The official F1 YouTube channel now hosts a trivia show with the drivers, which is the sort of silly fan-service that slots in perfectly among the many stan videos that crowd my feed. Here's one called "Max Verstappen Being Savage For Nine Minutes Straight."

"There was a time when Formula One didn't have YouTube, or Instagram, or Twitch," Mather said, detailing just how much ground the brand has made up in a short amount of time. F1 was always a fascinating universe, but as the sport became more web-literate, young people were given the tools to discover it on their own terms.

"The politics between the teams, the fact that the cars seem to be made of cardboard and stuck together with bubble gum, the rivalries between the drivers — all of that keeps me invested in the actual sport, not just the dramatized version on Netflix," said Simone de Rochefort, senior video producer at Polygon and a newly minted F1 fan. She fell in love with the sport in part because it resembled some of her favorite sports anime.

"The underlying strategy of it all was also a pleasant surprise to me," de Rochefort said. "The fact that the drivers are basically getting battle tactics over the radio from their engineers is very cool and exciting. I think from the outside, it's easy to look at the cars zooming around and think that's all there is to it. But there's so much more, both on the drama side and the tactics side."

All of this means that Mather is now in charge of a franchise that possesses a player base beyond those who obsess over tire pressure and air resistance. Codemasters has not announced any specific data on "F1 22's" sales figures, but series publisher Electronic Arts said the previous game, "F1 2021," performed "well above expectations."

Mather said that his team has prioritized accessibility in the titles for years, long before you could chop it up about the Mercedes-Red Bull rivalry at countless sports bars across the country. Still, it's been an uphill battle.

"Every time we tried to do something outside of the core of Formula One, it didn't take for us because the audience wasn't there. But now that's broken through," Mather said. "We brought in a steering assist, to help people actually steer the car. We did an automatic reset to track, so instead of the frustration of getting out of the gravel that the hardcore [players] want, you can jump back on course. The off-track surfaces are simplified, so if you did go into the gravel, you could just drive right out. This year we have adaptive AI that adjusts its pace to keep you in the battle."

Those initiatives have finally paid off. At last, the casual fans that Codemasters always hoped to entice are materializing.

"It's a journey we started in 2019 and 2020 to make the game easier to play," Mather said. "And now there's that audience out there who are craving Formula One."

Perhaps the largest signifier of F1's broadening appeal is the introduction of Breaking Point to "F1 2021" — a story-based, single-player mode where you take control of a newcomer driver, rubbing shoulders with the open-wheel elite. With it, Codemasters tapped into the glamour and intrigue that sucked me and so many other Americans into the sport — less fretting over fuel loads, more angry blowups with the pit squad. Breaking Point didn't return in "F1 22," (the mode is on a biyearly release schedule) so Codemasters will soon again be fleshing out a fantasy for Americans dreaming of Silverstone, rather than Lambeau or Fenway.

“Formula One drivers were known among the community, but people outside of that didn’t know who they were. I’m not a soccer or a basketball guy, but I know who the key people in those sports are, because they transcended the sport, and that wasn’t something F1 had achieved,” Mather said. “But now, these drivers are huge celebrities right at the beginning of their careers. The lifestyle, the excitement of who these people are, has finally gotten outside of the F1 fandom.”

De Rochefort is one of those F1 initiates eager to integrate her latest fascination into her lifelong gaming hobby. That being said, what she likes most about the sport — the characters, the grudges, the meta-narratives surrounding every hairpin turn — is not easily replicated in a racing series. She’s more excited about the forthcoming “F1 Manager 2022” from Frontier Games, a spiritual sequel to 2000’s “F1 Manager” and the first officially licensed F1 management simulation to come out in over 20 years. It’s a game that allows players to fine-tune their rosters of drivers, scientists and engineers between each season — perhaps poaching a pitman from a cross-country automotive adversary. You know, the sort of chicanery that’s ripe for a “Drive To Survive” arc.

“I doubt it’ll have the precise drama of [the show,] but it’s definitely approaching the sport from an angle that I find inherently interesting,” said de Rochefort. Andy Fletcher, game director on “F1 Manager 2022,” told The Post the team has attempted to keep their title airtight for hardcore consumers, while “also giving players [the option] to automate key events ... so they can kick back and enjoy the stunning broadcast-experience of the race weekend.” (As someone who knows zilch about automobile physics, I’m intrigued.)

This will likely be the challenge for anyone making F1 games for the foreseeable future. How do you tap into the exploding market, and more importantly, how do you mirror what excited people about this universe in the first place? The first thing you learn when you start following Formula One is that the races are the tip of the iceberg; that philosophy has also taken hold at Codemasters.

“Just because someone wants to do a 100 percent race distance with all the assists off doesn’t mean that they don’t want to kick back with something more casual, or more fun,” Mather said.

He has a legion of freshly enthralled Formula One fans in the palm of his hands. Frankly, that’s a good problem to have.

*Luke Winkie is a journalist from San Diego, he has contributed to the New York Times, The Atlantic, Vox, and Rolling Stone. Follow him on Twitter [@luke\\_winkie](#).*