EA exec on how the pandemic changed development: ‘I don’t think we will ever go back’

Today, Electronic Arts announced a handful of new projects, including a remake of *Dead Space* and a story-driven racer complete with Hollywood talent. It’s part of what feels like a busy period for the publisher; last year, EA says it launched 13 new games and more than 400 updates for existing titles. That productivity is especially notable given that, like most companies around the world, EA’s studios were forced to work remotely due to the pandemic. Laura Miele, EA’s chief studios officer, says the publisher is still learning how to best make games remotely. And while it’s not clear what the future of EA’s studios will look like, there will be change moving forward. “I don’t think we will ever go back to how we were before the pandemic,” Miele tells *The Verge*.

Miele oversees 25 different studios — including recent additions like Codemasters, Glu, and Playdemic — and initially, she says, the biggest hurdle for remote work was “pure production,” meaning the nuts and bolts of developing a game. That’s also the place where she believes the publisher has made the most progress. “In the beginning of the pandemic, we were experiencing a certain level of production hit that we’re actually making up progress on over the past year,” she says, noting that teams have developed internal tools, as well as techniques like always-on Zoom warrooms, to get around some of the logistics.

“We’ve learned the production mechanics and some technology solves. I think we’re still learning about the human factor

and how people are impacted on an emotional and human level," she adds. It's an issue that came to light last year when *Apex Legends* developer Respawn responded to complaints of its pandemic work schedule, particularly when it came to maintaining a healthy work / life balance while dealing with the demanding nature of a live service game.

"You do lose some creative energy and connection when you kick a new project off."

Dealing with these issues appears to have been helped in part by EA's scale. Modern blockbuster games are typically built by multiple teams, and the upcoming *Battlefield 2042* is no exception. While DICE is leading development from Stockholm, LA-based Ripple Effect is handling the newly announced *Battlefield* Portal mode. Meanwhile, Criterion Games – a studio previously best-known for the *Burnout* series, which has since become something of a stringer for EA – came aboard later in development to help out. "Criterion came on to the project at the beginning of this year," Miele says. "They know [the Frostbite game engine] well, they're incredibly seasoned production talent, and so they came on and really helped the team with working from home and the logistics of that."

Arguably more challenging than production problems has been kindling the creative spark of artists and designers. This has been less of a challenge for games that were already well underway when the pandemic hit, but developing brand-new ideas remotely has proven tricky. "You do lose some creative energy and connection when you kick a new project off, that initial incubation / creativity phase," says Miele. "We're losing some connection there."

It's not clear yet what the long-term effects will be on EA and its many studios. Miele says she's particularly interested in seeing how things develop over the coming months as many countries ease restrictions, and offices start to open in a limited capacity – though she stops short of outlining any specific changes with regards to remote work moving forward.

“We’re going to learn in this next phase, and that will really inform how we think about perhaps a more hybrid model as we go back,” she says. “I think it’s too premature to make a big declaration about ‘We’re going to be doing *this*.’ I want us to continue to learn.”

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