

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

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COVID-19 HAS RESULTED IN INCREASING POPULARITY FOR VIRTUAL RACING

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In the past few months some new words like COVID-19, social distancing, lockdown, have become part of our everyday vocabulary. One other thing that has emerged and become quite popular, particularly with motoring enthusiasts, is virtual computing. The Cambridge dictionary describes virtual computing as, "Something that is virtual, can be done or seen using a computer, and therefore without going anywhere". It is also defined as "A set of images and sounds, produced by a computer, that seem to represent a place or a situation that a person can take part in".

The pain caused by the Coronavirus pandemic has been slightly lessened by these virtual technologies that allow one to escape from reality even if it's for just a little while. With the actual F1 races

being either cancelled or postponed, a "Virtual F1 Grand Prix Series" was held with races happening on exactly the same dates as the real ones. This virtual series was created to enable fans to continue watching Formula 1 races, despite the disruptions due to COVID-19. It ended with the virtual Canadian F1 GP held on June 14, and had a record 30 million views across TV and digital platforms. In all, eight races took place and they featured F1 and other racing drivers, sports and music stars, and several other celebrities. Current Williams F1 Team driver George Russell, participated in seven of these virtual races and completely dominated the series with four consecutive wins. The irony of this is that when the F1 racing season actually kicks off with the Austrian Grand Prix scheduled for July 5, it's highly unlikely that George Russell will enjoy similar success.

A "Virtual 24 Hours of Le Mans" also happened on June 13 and 14, the same dates on which this legendary event was to be run. Fifty teams and 200 drivers, including many past and present F1 drivers, competed along with professional gamers and sim racers. The Toyota Gazoo Racing Team, winner at Le Mans in 2018 and 2019, entered two cars and I believe the Japanese team treated the event like a real race! They had their regular crews and usual technical staff who were backed by two sim racers, and their cars finished 11th and 14th. The Virtual 24 Hours of Le Mans was broadcast live and was beamed in some 500 million homes across the globe! Some fans even stayed glued to their screens non-stop for 24 hours. The drivers, instead of being behind the wheel in the cars' cockpits, were seated in simulators in their homes or offices! All this is so unreal that I still cannot believe it even happened. What is more incredulous is that the rising star and current Ferrari F1 team driver Charles Leclerc is keen to try a real Le Mans 24 Hours after competing in the virtual version! Leclerc was driving in the GTE class in a Ferrari 488 and finished 18th. At one point in the race just after he exited the pits, his car rolled on its own! Yes, Leclerc's race was ruined by server issues! Isn't that just so surreal?

If that was not enough, German driver Daniel Abt who drives for the Audi team in the Formula E Racing Series, was found to be using a ringer or impersonator in one of the virtual "Formula E Race at Home Challenge Series" events! After failing to score a single point in the first four rounds of this virtual home series, Daniel Abt's subsequent third-place finish raised suspicions among his fellow competitors. Investigations revealed he used a ringer to drive in that race for him. A video feed of all of the drivers is supposed to be available throughout the race, but in this particular race, Abt's face was obscured and later it was discovered that professional gamer Lorenz Horzing had been behind the virtual wheel. After this deception, Daniel Abt was fined 10,000 euros (approximately Rs 8.5 lakh) and Audi Sport, a team he had been driving for in Formula E since the sport's inaugural season in 2014, also fired him.

In this lockdown period some techies also came up with an App called "Drive and Listen", that allows you to virtually cruise the streets of various cities around the world through a screen! You can also listen to local music and radio stations, and sitting in my home in Mumbai I did a virtual drive of Delhi and listened to Bollywood hits. Interestingly, the person who provided the in-car footage for this App, drove in typical Indian style – tailgating, over-speeding in traffic, rashly overtaking from the left, etc.

One thing that I have personally enjoyed a lot while being stuck at home, are the virtual game drives and safaris in various wildlife sanctuaries. The great thing of course is that though these were safaris I went on while sitting on my sofa, they were really taking place. A team in a Maruti Gypsy was actually driving through the Kanha Tiger Reserve and providing the live footage along with commentary. In fact, I even saw a tiger hunt a wild boar, something I am still to witness in person. I wonder when we will invent the technology to enter a screen and then time travel to the actual location. Given the way our lives have changed so dramatically due to this pandemic, nothing will surprise me anymore. Now I expect the unexpected! 