

Gamer Ali-A chats to bestselling author Taran Matharu about the crossover between video games and books: full interview from October 2017

Taran: Hello everyone, I'm author Taran Matharu, author of the New York Times bestselling Summoner series, and I'm sitting here with Ali A, who is bringing out a graphic novel and is also a massive YouTube game star.

AA: Yes, I play games, put them on YouTube and I'm so excited to have a new graphic novel – so really excited!

Taran: So, first question for you (it's a toughie): you are known as a gamer. Why are you bringing out a graphic novel?

AA: I never thought I'd release a book. That's what I always tell people. But when this opportunity presented itself, I was, like, this is a really, really good opportunity. And it's a book that I would have loved to have read if I was a little bit younger – that's what I always say. I was super into my comics and those sort of adventure-y books when I was younger, and this ties all of that into a really cool story, into a graphic novel, which puts me as the lead character doing cool things, and you can't get much cooler than that. I was like, if I can make kids, who are a little bit younger (and a lot of my audience are male, as well, although there are girls, as well) to pick up a book when they wouldn't normally read, then that is an amazing opportunity. So hopefully that is exactly what my book does and I'm really, really excited for it to come out.

Taran: It's a nice middle ground between books and games, as well, because there's that visual element that books don't have – so I think it's a great idea.

AA: Yeah, I wanted the book to be visually amazing, and drawing people – even on the front cover...

Taran: ...Which is awesome by the way. And you designed that yourself, right?

AA: I helped to change things around. I was, like, I want a big explosion here, I want me here, I want a controller there... And it's all come together really, really nicely. So even if somebody doesn't know me, they can come along and look at the front cover and be like, why is that guy holding a game controller on the front of a book? Hopefully they'll think it's got something to do with games and pick it up, and maybe then as a gamer, they wouldn't necessarily read, but this book will make them – that's the idea.

Taran: Awesome. What do you think the crossover is between reading and gaming?

AA: I think maybe at face value, they're not too similar, but when you think about it, they're actually very, very close. I play a lot of games and did play a lot of games as a kid... Trying to get lost in a world and spend my free time thinking about something else rather than homework or school or something I didn't really want to think about, and just get lost in this environment – and video games are amazing at doing that. And you can draw parallels between that and books, as well – where you just get lost in this world, and story, the characters, and your relationship between you and the characters is really important, which also relates to video games as well... And arguably, sometimes it's even stronger in books. And I think that is one of the big comparisons you can draw between them. And as much as with a video game you have that end goal of completing it or getting to the end, a book in my

mind is kind of the same, in terms of ‘How close am I to the end?’ And as I get closer and closer and closer, I realise how much I’ve read, and I get closer to the end – it like completing a video game is like completing a book. And just as when you complete a video game, you probably go on to play more, with a book, when you finish it and if you enjoyed the author or that type of story, you go on to read more, as well. So I think they’re actually a lot closer than people think.

Taran: Yes, and you need writers in video games, as well: people who write the story of the video game. Terry Pratchett is perhaps one of our most well-known British authors, and his daughter is actually a video game writer. I think she did Bioshock.

AA: Oh wow, amazing, yeah.

Taran: Yes, so it’s the same skillsets, the same storytelling – but a different medium.

AA: Yeah, definitely. And just as video games are very visual, when I read a book, I can visualise it all in my head, but it’s just told in a slightly different way. And I have definitely been addicted to a few different books, where I just can’t put it down. It’s normally holidays where I’ve finally picked up a few books and I just get lost in them and it’s very easy to do – just like it’s easy to get lost in video games, as well.

Taran: A lot of video gamers sometimes say: ‘I just don’t read’. What advice would you give them to get them into reading?

AA: I think the first thing really is if you want to try and read, you do need to set some time aside for it. Even if you were maybe going to play video games for an hour or so in the evening, spend a bit of time thinking ‘Actually, I’m going to sit down and read a book in that time’ because you need some time to get into it. Just like you sit down and play video games for however long, you can do the same very easily with books, if not even longer. And the second thing I’d say is that there are so many genres of books out there, which span vastly, just as much as video games do, that you can find an equivalent book that matches the style of video game you like. And I know a few friends who very recently who picked up books that matches the kind of fantasy games they play, and they just got lost in it. And rather than sitting down and texting me about the game they’re playing that evening, they’re actually there saying ‘I can’t stop reading this book’. So once you know what kind of books there are out there and you find that kind of genre you like, you’ll probably get absolutely lost in the world of those books. It’s just about knowing that they are out there.

Taran: OK, that’s cool. So if I throw out a game, can you try and recommend a book that they might like?

AA: I’ll try my best!

Taran: So – Forza. What would you say there?

AA: Forza. I love that game. I’m all about the fast-pace and the cars and action. And actually, going back to a series I loved reading as a kid was the Alex Rider series. And I always imagined myself as that sort of Alex character: sort of undercover spy, teenage kid doing all these amazing things. And I always remember all of the crazy buggies and go-karts and parachuting...

Taran: Yeah, there’s a snowmobile chase, isn’t there? That’s pretty awesome.

AA: All of these amazing things to do, which also is similar to all of the racing and high-speed action in Forza, as well. So if you’re the kind of person who likes that sort of adrenalin

rush, that action and the fast speed and races of cars, then Alex Rider is a great category to jump into and series to start reading.

Taran: I agree. I loved that series growing up. So... How about Skyrim?

AA: Skyrim! So many people love Skyrim and I have many friends who've put hundreds of hours into that game! I actually haven't...

Taran: Me too, me too...

AA: There you go! We've got a big fan right here... I need star play in the game, but obviously I know what it's all about. And Eragon is an awesome series – so similar with dragons, fantasy, magic, which aligns so well with the Skyrim video game.

Taran: It's probably the best known, epic fantasy kind of young adult book so I think that's perfect, actually.

AA: Yep, a great place to start, and if you love going around in Skyrim, and trying to save the day using your magical powers, then this is a great place to start reading as well.

Taran: OK. Probably the hardest one, then... Pokémon.

AA: Pokémon! Oof. I love Pokémon, I was playing it today, actually – I play it almost every day. I'm still addicted. I think a great book series to start on would probably be Northern Lights.

Taran: Oh, that's very true.

AA: Now, for those of you who don't know too much about it, obviously in the Pokémon series, you have your own team of Pokémon, and you've often got your favourite one, right? And in Northern Lights, you've got your own personal – daemon, is it called?

Taran: Yep.

AA: But they're nicer than "demons", as such. But it's your personal daemon that will actually change its form and be the animal that it is until it gets to the point where it's set as your own personal soul or partner, almost...

Taran: A spirit animal.

AA: Yes, a spirit animal. There you go. And it's very, very similar to Pokémon where you have your team of Pokémon with you all the time. So if you like the idea of going out and building up friendships and capturing these creatures, it's a similar link there with Northern Lights. And I think it would be a good place to start, yeah...

Taran: That's spot on. Well, thank you so much for the interview, I really appreciate it.

AA: No worries, thank you so much – it's been good fun, really good fun.

Taran: Awesome.