

Situating the Appeal of *Fortnite* Within Children's Changing Play Cultures

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Abstract

Fortnite is a massively multiplayer online “battle royale” game that rapidly grew in 2018 to become one of the most popular digital games in the world, with a reported peak of 10.8 million concurrent players and 250 million registered players in March 2019. Based on 24 interviews with young people aged 9–14 (17 boys and 7 girls), this article sets out to provide an account of the appeal and experience of *Fortnite*. While it is impossible to pinpoint exactly why *Fortnite* has been such a phenomenal, global success, in this article, we argue that its appeal can be better explained by its intersections with YouTube and game livestreaming, the way the game acts as a vehicle for social capital and the performance of identity, and the rich sociality of play.

Keywords

online games, *Fortnite*, battle royale, YouTube, temporality, first-person shooter games, children, children's digital cultures

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Fortnite is a massively multiplayer online “battle royale” game in which 100 players compete in a shrinking playable area to be the sole survivor, employing a range of weapons and strategies to overcome their opponents. Since 2018, *Fortnite* has grown to become one of the most popular digital games in the world, with a reported peak of 10.8 million concurrent players and 250 million registered players in March 2019 (Conditt, 2019). Industry research firm SuperData estimated that the game drew US\$2.4 billion in revenue in 2018, “the most annual revenue of any game in history” (SuperData, 2018). This success is in part due to *Fortnite*’s unusual popularity with children aged 8–12,¹ but unlike the similarly successful *Minecraft*, *Fortnite* has been plagued by an addiction media panic. Various news stories reported on attempted suicides, incontinence, and divorce due to compulsive and obsessive *Fortnite* play, and Prince Harry specifically called out the game as being “created to addict” and more addictive than drugs or alcohol (Lanier, 2019).

In contrast to these portrayals of *Fortnite* play as a series of “dopamine hits,” this article focuses upon young people’s perceptions and experiences and the ways in which these factors—and the adoption of new games after *Minecraft*—transformed as young people aged (e.g., Horst et al., 2019). Drawing upon qualitative interviews with 24 young people aged 9–14 (17 boys and 7 girls) years in Australia between October 2018 and November 2018, we explore what *Fortnite* offers young people as they move from “children’s gaming” into genres that appeal to tweens and teens, among other demographics. Specifically, we were interested in studying the transition from *Minecraft*, a widely accepted and positively viewed title (Mavoa et al., 2017), to more “difficult” or “teen” game titles, or away from gaming entirely (Kowert et al., 2017). We argue that *Fortnite* and the intersection between *Fortnite* and other social media video sites such as YouTube and livestreaming sites such as Twitch enable young people to participate in a broad repertoire of information and cultural practices around the game, including dances and knowledge of key players. Engagement with these partner sites enables the development of expertise, the performance of identity, and a sense of social capital. While none of these elements are unique to *Fortnite*—indeed many of the experiences we described in this article are afforded by other games—the ways in which these factors are so closely interwoven and resonate with broader developmental shifts contributed to the appeal of *Fortnite* among this particular demographic.

Children’s Gameplay Over Time: A Brief Overview

News media coverage of *Fortnite* has largely supported the stereotypical portrayals of child gamers as “socially inept teenage boys, hypnotically engaged in their gaming worlds” (Kowert et al., 2014, p. 145). Such stereotypes shape parental attitudes toward gaming and the mediation of gaming practices and games (Nikken & Jansz, 2006; Mavoa et al., 2019). They also inform the attitudes of policy makers and educators who shape the broader context in which children experience play via digital devices (Blum-Rose & Livingstone, 2017; Cover, 2006). Existing research

looking at children and digital gaming has been dominated by the “media effects” tradition (Davies, 2010), where gaming is reduced to quantifiable sets of relationships between number of hours spent in gaming and scores on varying measures of developmental outcomes (Kowert et al., 2014). Such studies produce findings that, apart from being generally “weak” statistically (Kowert et al., 2014), provide little help in understanding the reality of children’s everyday video game experiences and the context in which these occur (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). However, there are some notable exceptions to the dominance of quantitative media effects studies that do not fall victim to treating “children as though they were part of a homogenous group, indicating that it is age that determines how one handles games,” as Pål Aarsand (2013, p. 121) suggests.

While studies of preschool-aged children provide the richest descriptions of digital play (Edwards, 2013; Giddings, 2014; Marsh et al., 2016), studies of older children tend to capture insights around digital gameplay’s role in social relationships, family functioning, and contemporary cultures of childhood. Ito et al.’s (2009) collation of ethnographic studies of 12- to 18-year-olds’ media practices, including gameplay, reveals the diversity of “genres of media participation,” specifically practices related to “hanging out, messing around, and geeking out” (p. 201) around interaction with digital games. Aarsand (2010) describes the social negotiations that take place for 6- and 7-year-old boys around gaming in both digital and nondigital spaces such as playgrounds and homes. He demonstrates the key role that gaming knowledge or gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007) has in children’s broader social structures. More recently, Willett (2016) describes the role of family context and “tweens” developing need for autonomy in relation to 7- to 11-year-old children’s online gaming practices. This scholarship demonstrates that the ways in which young people engage with games and game culture over time change. This has as much to do about the design and mechanics of the game as it does the social development of young people as they grow older and attempt to come to terms with new social contexts through which they operate.

It is important to not understate the central role that YouTube plays in contemporary childhoods and young children’s gaming culture, particularly in the Western context (Burgess & Green, 2009). Mavoa et al.’s (2018) survey found that more than a third of children watched *Minecraft*-related content on YouTube, and Dezuanni et al. (2015) emphasize how central YouTube was within their study of young girls aged between 8 and 9 years, where it became integrated into the “learning lives” of their participants as they navigate learning, sharing, and socially playing *Minecraft*. While literacy is part of young children’s navigation of digital gaming—what games are appropriate, what are the social norms surrounding play, and moreover learning how to play the game itself—we move beyond an educational model and instead view YouTube as one of many paratextual elements that shape the emergence of a digital gaming culture for young people, with *Fortnite* as a keystone in these shifting developments. While *Minecraft* is key to an early developmental stage of children’s digital gaming practices (Mavoa et al., 2018), the following results indicate a shift—

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms, Age, Gender, and Frequency of *Fortnite* Play.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	<i>Fortnite</i> Play	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	<i>Fortnite</i> Play
Toni	9	F	Never	Charles	11	M	Regular
Harry	9	M	Regular	Jake	11	M	Regular
Andrew	9	M	Regular	Narrah	11	M	Regular
Lucas	9	M	Regular	Travis	11	M	Regular
Addie	10	F	Never	Lewis	12	M	Never
Todd	10	M	Occasional	Rick	12	M	Occasional
Amber	10	F	Occasional	Shaun	12	M	Occasional
Sammy	10	M	Regular	Mike	12	M	Regular
Ben	10	M	Regular	James	13	M	Never
Carlos	10	M	Regular	Elizabeth	13	F	Never
Rose	11	F	Never	Liam	13	M	Regular
Becky	11	F	Occasional	Rajavi	14	F	Occasional

particularly for the young boys we interviewed—into a unique cultural niche that bridges youth culture, broader adult “gaming culture,” and children’s development of new skills and autonomies in the “tween” phase. We suggest that this provides a better way to understand digital gaming practices in young people beyond the limitations of an educational framework and follows Willet’s (2016) recent emphasis on “the importance of analysing preteens’ online gaming from an approach that interrogates the context of gaming practices”.

About the Study

The material presented in this article is drawn from 24 (17 boys, and 7 girls) semi-structured interviews with children between 9 and 14 years of age (see Table 1 for summary). Initially, the study was designed to examine what games children were playing after *Minecraft*. This was because research conducted by Mavoa et al. (2018) found that *Minecraft* was played by almost half of children aged 3–12 years ($n = 753$) but began to decrease in popularity, at least for boys, after the age of 11. Thus, recruitment focused on participants who have recently stopped playing *Minecraft* or significantly reduced the amount of time they played *Minecraft*. The popularity of *Fortnite* at the time of data collection (October–November 2018) meant it emerged as one of the main topics of the interviews, especially among boys of whom half regularly played *Fortnite*. Those who had never played offered various reasons, ranging from disinterest to disgust, to more broadly having an interest in other genres and styles of games and gameplay. Interview participants included Australian families from a diverse range of backgrounds and geographical locations, including a mix of inner-city and suburban children in Sydney ($n = 9$) and Melbourne ($n = 8$), and children in semirural Australia in the regions surrounding Byron Bay ($n = 7$).²

Our analysis identified four interrelated key qualities of *Fortnite* that help explain its appeal and success to our cohort of participants.³ We argue that the appeal of the game for many young people after *Minecraft* can be attributed to (1) its rich social experience for players to interact, (2) its close intersections with YouTube and game livestreaming, (3) the particular play experiences its design affords, and (4) how its microtransactions leverage these aspects to allow players to perform their gaming social capital. As we will argue in the following discussion, these results illustrate how *Fortnite* is best understood as a phenomenon at the point of intersection between the contemporary ecology of digital game cultures and contemporary cultures of childhood, as young people move from one stage of childhood to another.

Fortnite Play Is Social: Hanging Out and Messing Around

Among our participants, playing *Fortnite* with others was, in general, the preferred way to play—in squads, duos, or in the four-player “Playground Mode,” a sandbox-style game mode for creative play, practice, and exploration. The social nature of *Fortnite* was ad hoc and casual (in comparison to the organized sociality of persistent virtual world games like *World of Warcraft* or *EVE Online* [Carter et al., 2016; Chen, 2012]) and reinforced existing social relationships from school and neighborhoods. Andrew described a typical situation where he and his friends just “sort of agree on a time and then we just see if we can get on at that time and if not, then we say maybe another day.” On the weekend, they might text or call each other to try and arrange online play. Unlike most other first-person shooter (FPS) games, *Fortnite* allows for play across different platforms removing a common barrier that might otherwise limit social play.

Playground mode supports this kind of ad hoc, “hanging out” casual play, where sociality is the primary focus. Andrew explained that “whenever there is a new item . . . me and a few of my friends usually hop into playground and see if we can find it and test it out,” also explaining later that one of his friends uses playground mode to teach him “building tricks and stuff like that.” With the exception of Harry—who had not yet figured out how to add friends in game—and Rick—who has “always liked solo more because it’s like you are the one winning,” rather than the team—*Fortnite* was overall described as a richly social experience, driven by the desire to play with their existing friends. The players we spoke to often had 20–25 friends added to their in-game friends’ lists, so the chances of being able to find someone to play with after school, or on the weekend, were quite good. Travis, Narrah, and Liam knew all their in-game friends, but Jake only knew five in person, the others he had met in-game. There was a wide range of strategies to utilize voice chat during play, some who had headsets and microphones for their consoles used in-game voice chat, but others use FaceTime, Gmail, Discord, or Steam chat to communicate during and around their play.

This sociality was an extension of their offline social worlds (Aarsand, 2013; Ito et al., 2009; Ofcom, 2018). The general attitude among our participants was that they

“don’t wanna play with random people who I don’t know” (Narah). Our findings reflect the recent Ofcom (2018) research, which also found that children “are more than twice as likely to chat through the game to people they already know outside the game (34% 8–11s, 53% 12–15s)” (p. 7). For Sammy, this was decided by his father who would not allow him to play with strangers. Some of our participants had encountered negative experiences in the game world; Travis suggested that random players in *Fortnite* “can be mean . . . they’re just saying rude stuff,” and Lucas—who only plays squads, which means sometimes random people join his team—had a stranger call him “something rude,” but “only once . . . usually they’re not mean.” Narah described a specific encounter where he was playing “with a guy, and he asked me where I lived and stuff, so I just stopped.” Although this highlights this as an ongoing issue, none of our participants indicated that this had been significantly problematic. This reflects recent work by Willett (2017) that highlights how children’s engagements with strangers in online games are casual in nature and not necessarily a source of social risk (see also Livingstone et al., 2017). Others have also argued that the value of games and online engagements for learning and literacies involves taking risky opportunities, with peers and others outside of their normative worlds (Livingstone, 2009). It also reinforces the fact that participation in games such as *Fortnite* plays an important role in the social development and cohesion desired among children as they age and, in most Western contexts, become less dependent upon parents and family members.

Watching as Playing: YouTube and Livestreaming Paratexts

While much has been said about YouTube as a platform for participatory culture (Burgess & Green, 2009), and YouTube as a site of skilled professional play (Taylor, 2018), little research engages directly with YouTube, gaming, and young people’s engagement beyond literacy and pedagogy (Dezuanni et al., 2015). Within game studies, the concept of paratexts refers to the materials that surround our consumption of games, such as gaming magazines, strategy guides, box art, and online discussion forums (Carter, 2015a; Consalvo, 2007). YouTube “Let’s Plays” and livestreams on Twitch are widely understood as key paratexts, working to shape “what we know about video games” (Consalvo, 2007, p. 51) before we play them and serving “a specific role in gaming culture and for gaming capital; they instruct a player in how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world” (p. 22). In this way, YouTube, and to a lesser extent livestreaming, played a crucial role in our participants’ discovery of *Fortnite*, how they educated themselves about the game and stayed “up to date” on new events, and as a distinct form of entertainment that highlights the broader conceptualization of “playing” *Fortnite* that children have.

While our participants were mostly driven to play *Fortnite* by their friends, YouTube was crucial for how many of our participants learnt about *Fortnite*, what it was, and how to play it. Todd tried to explain the popularity of *Fortnite* to us as

being because, “I think it just got trendy because a lot of big YouTubers saw it and they started playing it and that just gave it a boost. Then everyone started playing it.” Several described a similar process where YouTube personalities that they watched for content about other games started playing *Fortnite*, exposing them to the game. For instance, both Andrew, who “was probably the first one in my group of friends to play *Fortnite*” and Travis, were first exposed to *Fortnite* via the YouTuber DanTDM (who has 22.4 million subscribers). Andrew watched DanTDM for *Minecraft* content, while Travis was watching DanTDM for content on the game *Subnautica*. These examples highlight the crucial—and powerful—role that YouTubers play as cultural intermediaries in contemporary game culture (Taylor, 2018), as they do in youth digital culture more generally (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2018).

As has previously been identified in other games such as *Minecraft* (Dezuanni et al., 2015; Mavoja et al., 2018), all our participants used YouTube as a resource for solving problems and overcoming challenges that were presented in their play. Narrah even described how he used YouTube to install *Fortnite* on a PC, which was challenging because he had “never downloaded a game like that before. It was new to me, so I’d say it was kinda difficult for me to do it. But with the video, it made it a bit easier.” YouTube also facilitates gaming expertise including accomplishment of in-game challenges. One of our younger participants, Harry, had only recently started playing *Fortnite* and had yet to master the game. When asked how he was learning how to play, he excitedly described how one of his favorite YouTubers (Ali-A, who has 16.4 million subscribers) “builds up and then shoots down . . . and builds around so he can go down and up,” in-game strategies he was trying to mimic in his own play. Similarly, participants like Mike described how he “usually watches a lot of YouTubers play, so I’ve seen them do all this stuff . . . I like to try to do what he does, to get wins.” Not all our participants preferred YouTube for this purpose, both Sammy and Lucas use the text-based website IGN.com.

“YouTubers” were like idols or celebrities to our participants, admired for their competency as players, but also as entertainers. Just as our participants would enthusiastically talk about the game world of *Fortnite*, its story, and their play, many also worked to establish their gaming capital with the interviewer by discussing the YouTubers they follow and their knowledge about them. Narrah followed all his favorite YouTubers on Instagram, liking their cars (“Ninja has a Ferrari, and I like that”). One striking finding was the prominence of Australian streamers (particularly LazarBeam [12.3 million subscribers], Muselk [8.1 million], and Lachlan [12.3 million], who frequently play together). Possibly due to cultural proximity (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008), it mattered to our participants (all Australian) that these streamers were Australian, although few could articulate why. Liam suggested they were more “relatable,” while Sammy liked the frequent swearing and the possibility of encountering the YouTuber in-game; “since my favourite YouTuber plays on Oceania, I decided to change because sometimes you could kill him [LazarBeam] in the game.” In our research, we were struck by the sheer number of different YouTube and Twitch personalities enjoyed by children; some participants mentioned

dozens of individual streamers that they followed. There was also a pronounced gender difference. Boys almost exclusively watched male content producers, while the girls all mentioned and prioritized female content producers such as iHasCupquake (6.6 million) and Vixella (1.1 million).

Despite the rapid growth of livestreaming in recent years (Taylor, 2018), our participants overwhelmingly favored prerecorded YouTube videos over live content on platforms like Twitch. YouTube was a more suitable and efficient use of their limited “screen time”: Charles described how Twitch requires too much timing and preparation;

[Twitch’s] very hard to because it takes a lot of preparation to kind of watch a live-stream, you need to know when it’s going to turn on, and you have to like sit there for like an hour to two hours like waiting for the livestream to start and I . . . find that quite annoying.

Liam, who prefers Australian YouTubers, also noted that few are “really famous,” which was also important to Shaun, who wanted to watch Shroud (the second most popular Twitch streamer) but could not since he started his stream at the wrong time of day to be able to watch it. Notwithstanding these barriers, Andrew preferred the authenticity of Twitch, as it was important to him that the players he watched were genuinely experts at the game.

YouTube and Twitch are also popular purely for entertainment. Becky stated that “I just like watching people play games in my free time,” and several of our participants distinguished between entertainment and expert YouTubers. Rick enjoys edited videos “because I find they’re funnier. The YouTuber I watch swore a lot, but was kind of almost like a comedian, which I think appeals to many kids.” These entertainment streamers create comedic and funny content, a form of machinima, via recordings of their in-game play and performance to the audience. Our participants also cited these types of silly and comedic videos about *Fortnite* as being a method to learn about new and fun ways to play, which they then repeated in their own play. In some cases, our participants showed a preference toward watching *Fortnite* rather than the hands-on playing of the game. Travis described how “sometimes I’m kind of bored, or I don’t feel like playing the PlayStation, I just feel like sitting down, watching someone,” while Jake had “stopped playing games for a year” but continued to watch games content on YouTube mainly. Charles also described how he preferred YouTube when he first started playing since “I couldn’t do anything, I’d just wander around and die and die and die.” We argue the extensive and wide-ranging engagement with *Fortnite* on YouTube reflects not a distinct practice alongside playing *Fortnite* but suggests a broader conceptualization of what it means to “play” *Fortnite*. To our participants, watching *Fortnite* on YouTube is one of the ways in which they play, something which is key when console access, limited gaming time, or competency otherwise limits their access to the core game. These highlight how the context of children’s gaming is key to understanding their

experience and should be considered centrally in understanding *Fortnite*'s success and appeal with children.

#1 Victory Royale: *Fortnite* and the Battle Royale Genre

In addition to the social nature of play that is part of the culture of childhood and the ability to engage with a series of paratexts around *Fortnite*, there are aspects of the game itself that appeal to children leaving the world of *Minecraft*. The principal play mode for *Fortnite* is “Battle Royale,” where up to 100 players eject from a flying “battle bus” to disperse over the island. Players need to scavenge weapons, traps, ammunition, and medical supplies when they land. These are randomly placed in buildings and loot chests, introducing randomness and variability to each game. In addition, players can collect building supplies, which they can store and later use in different strategic ways to build structures to hide in, gain a height advantage, or to lay traps. To bring the game to a conclusion within 15–20 min, a “storm circle” gradually envelopes the entire island, causing damage to players outside of the shrinking safe zone, forcing surviving players into conflict over a smaller and smaller game territory. The ultimate goal of the game is to be the final remaining player, a “#1 Victory Royale” or team of players in the “duo” (two players working together) or “squad” (four players to a team) mode. While killing a few players at the outset of the game is achievable, accomplishing a “#1 Victory Royale” is hard, requiring expertise about how to control the player character, work together as a team, navigate the game world, rapidly build towering structures, and what strategies and weapons are most effective. The experience of combat and playing changes throughout a single round, from a hectic melee of 100 players to an escalating series of stressful duels until only one player or team remains.

In discussing *Fortnite* and *Minecraft* with our participants, it was clear that *Fortnite* drew on their expertise with *Minecraft* (at scavenging and building) to scaffold a more interesting—but not foreign—play experience. Narrah who said he “probably like building [in *Fortnite*] the most” stated in his interview that it “reminds me of *Minecraft*” in that way. In fact, following *The Hunger Games* film (2012) that involves a similar battle royale premise, *Minecraft* “Hunger Games” modifications became a very popular genre of *Minecraft* games. Several of our participants had previously played a *Minecraft* battle royale mod, and in many early YouTube *Fortnite* videos, *Fortnite* is articulated as an expanded and graphically improved version of the *Minecraft: Hunger Games* mode. The appeal of *Fortnite* for those who transitioned from *Minecraft* then was the sense that it provided a familiar but advanced form of play. Like *Minecraft*, *Fortnite* has a more child-friendly cartoon aesthetic. Many participants noted their parents let them download the game because it was free and because of a lack of visible violence. Andrew’s parents “said that’s OK because it’s not that violent, it’s pretty graphics and not like realistic,” and Carlos—who otherwise is not allowed to “play many gun games”—was allowed to download *Fortnite* because it “doesn’t have any blood in it.”

While these elements don't fully explain the shift from *Minecraft* to *Fortnite*, they highlight a transition away from parental control and forming of own taste, and a development of more sophisticated modes of play. Unlike *Minecraft*, which has no win state, winning a match of *Fortnite* requires a high expertise. While few participants were able to "win," their developing negotiation of their place within a more complex and grown-up gaming culture meant they were content to playing in a game with a higher skill ceiling. This dynamic is connected with their engagement with skilled gamers on YouTube and *Fortnite*'s spectator mode—which allows you to view the remainder of the game through the eyes of the player who killed you, and following that, who killed that player, until the end—providing the vicarious experience of a high-skilled victory. Thus, we would argue that while the highly competitive structure of *Fortnite* valorizes in-game skill as a form of social capital among players, viewing children's play of *Fortnite* through this game overlooks the crucial role of *Fortnite*'s "Seasons."

Battle Passes and Seasons: Worldness, Temporality, and Paratexts

Part of the widespread adoption of *Fortnite* is because it is "freemium," making it much more accessible to children. The principal monetization feature is the "battle pass" which costs ~AUD\$14 and is tied into the game's 10-week "seasons." Seven of our sample's 12 regular players bought battle passes, granting them access to challenges and to unlock different rewards, with each new season requiring a new battle pass. Over the course of a season, various events happen in-game, changing the map territory and infusing the game world with history and temporality. This notion of seasons heavily influences the experience of playing *Fortnite*, giving it a sense of *World of Warcraft* like "worldness" (Krzywinska, 2008, p. 127) not typically found in FPS games. *Fortnite* is unique in this sense, where our participants were less concerned with "winning" matches, but rather experiencing what the seasons have to offer in the limited screen time they have been allocated. This has numerous impacts that better situate *Fortnite* within the context of children's play.

Firstly, the introduction of challenges and changes to the game makes the game more difficult and compelling, and several of our participants placed a high value on achieving every challenge in a season: "I think that really keeps people going, because they want to complete all the challenges of each weekend get to the maximum battle pass" (Charles). While this has the added appeal of structuring play, many challenges require players to seek out information online. For example, Narrah described how he "usually just goes onto YouTube and search . . . 'cause usually they can show you how to complete the challenges . . . if you get stuck," and Ben mentions how he learnt from YouTube the best ways to use the shadow stones, a new item that was added in Season 6 that allows players to become invisible for 45 s. The game advises that completing a season can take 75–100 hr of play, which for some of our participants is difficult to accomplish with the limited amount of time they are

allowed to spend playing the game. Charles explained how “I only have 2 and a half hours per week, and that’s very hard, as the recommended time to complete it is 75 hours total . . . that’s only 23 hours to complete what should take 75 hours,” which drives him online to find out as much as possible about the challenges and efficient ways to complete them. One impact of this challenge structure is that it provides novice players achievable goals, as challenges like visiting a certain area don’t require expertise at the game way the same way that winning does.

Secondly, seasons have a profound impact in giving the play of *Fortnite* temporality, a “relationship with the time in which it exists” (Carter, 2015b, p. 71). *Fortnite*, per Charles’ description, is “organized into seasons which keeps people playing,” and a testament to their importance they heavily influence how players organized and recalled their experience playing. Our participants referred to when they started playing, by what season, and organized their play around it. Both Sammy and Harry said in their interviews exactly how many days were left in the season on the day of the interview since they both hoped to unlock specific items. For Harry, this was a specific skin, but for Sammy this was the maximum level, which meant “while I’m at dad’s I’m practicing really hard, completing lots of challenges and stuff.” By constraining the availability of challenges—and their rewards—to specific windows of time, the relative importance of play shifts and develops. Each repetitive round is imbued with a different kind of contextual, player-dependent importance which distinguished it from other games.

Third, seasons imbue the game with a narrative, which affords new forms of gaming capital around *Fortnite*. The island game world is constantly changing, introducing new areas and obstacles that are gradually hinted at and unveiled throughout a season. In Season 6, an iceberg appeared off the coast of the island, slowly getting closer to the island over the course of the season. In Season 7, the iceberg collided with the island creating a huge arctic region in the southwest corner of the island, with a polar peak that melted during the season revealing a tower, fortress, town, and mysterious ice eggs. Our participants would excitedly tell us about these developments, and how it introduces “drama to *Fortnite*” which “keeps you interested in the game” (Mike), going on long spiels about the history of “Kevin the Cube” and speculating on what they think might happen next. Andrew had even “started a [online chat] group talking about things that could happen in *Fortnite*,” such is the focus and attention given to the changing game world by players. In some cases, these changes are directly relevant to the play of the game—like when the cube “fell into the lake on the map and created a giant, bouncy lake” (Todd) changing the way you need to play in that area of the island—but in many cases, they are not. Literacy about the history of the game world, what was currently happening, and what might happen next becomes another way to demonstrate expertise in *Fortnite* beyond being able to achieve “#1 Victory Royale.” It is in these ways that seasons, through providing structured challenges and changing the game world, work to both monetize *Fortnite* and make the game more appealing through

allowing children ways of engaging with games that fit within their context and social worlds.

All these elements of *Fortnite*'s seasons—escalating difficulty, introducing a temporal quality, and a compelling narrative—are deeply interwoven with *Fortnite* content on YouTube. As noted, our participants were driven by the complexity of the game online to search out content about the game to learn the most efficient ways to play. Similarly, our participants used YouTube to “look at like explaining the theories behind the cubes and explaining theories around the meteor and stuff like that . . . keeps me up to date when I haven't been playing *Fortnite* for a while” (Andrew). YouTube is crucial for keeping up with what is happening in-game, to be able to perform their literacy in the game, out of the game. The constantly changing nature of these challenges and narratives similarly imbues YouTube content about *Fortnite* with the same temporal narrative that gameplay has. Whereas content explaining solutions and identifying strategies in a linear, single-player game stays relevant forever, *Fortnite* content quickly becomes irrelevant and outdated. As players search for solutions to new challenges or recaps of changes in the game world, content creators on platforms like YouTube are driven to constantly release new videos on *Fortnite*. Where YouTube videos are crucial for discovering *Fortnite* and being driven to play it, this temporal quality of play *and* paratexts may be crucial for the rapid growth in popularity of the game.

Temporalities and *Fortnite*: Growing Up, Reaching Out, and Gaining Expertise

In this article, we have contributed a deeper understanding about the appeal and success of *Fortnite*, grounded in interviews with 24 children aged 9–14 years, of whom 18 played *Fortnite*. While it is impossible to pinpoint exactly why *Fortnite* has been such a phenomenal, global success, we argue that—rather than being due to “addiction” or the manipulation of vulnerable players—*Fortnite*'s exceptional success can be better explained by its intersections with YouTube and game livestreaming, the way the game acts as a vehicle for social capital and identity performance, and the rich social experience of the game for our players. While none of these elements are unique to *Fortnite*—indeed many of the experiences we have described in this article are afforded by other games—the ways in which these factors are so closely interwoven have made it a deeply appealing and richly rewarding player experience for children. *Fortnite* enters these young people's digital gaming ecology at a time when they are moving away from the tightly controlled and mediated, educationally framed, “messing around” form of play in games like *Minecraft*. Its freemium status and higher skill ceiling, but still variety of achievable challenges, enable child players to participate in a broader range of digital gaming cultures.

As we have discussed, various elements of *Fortnite*'s design push players off the game platform and onto sites like YouTube and Twitch to learn skills about how to play, how to complete different daily and weekly challenges, to get updated on

in-game events and changes to the virtual world of *Fortnite*. These offline–online places become sites for “doing” *Fortnite*, allowing the title to negotiate and fit within the limited amount of time they can spend gaming, suggesting a broader conceptualization of what “playing” *Fortnite* means. As Pål Aarsand has argued, “seeing children’s gaming cultures as participatory cultures indicates that these cultures involve much more than just playing the game” (2013, p. 124). Our participants do not just see hands-on-controller interaction with the game client as a way to play the game, but their broader engagement with it too, from watching expert Twitch streamers to performing dances at school. Andrew, for instance, proudly described how he was “known for my *Fortnite* dances” because he knows “how to do the most, well.” Children’s digital play is complexly interwoven with a broader media ecology that highlights the value of qualitative and ethnographic approaches to understand how emerging digital media are adopted and influencing young children and teen digital lives.

One of the ideas we have introduced in this article is a suggestion that the temporality of *Fortnite* is key to understanding its rapid adoption. In addition to facilitating ongoing appeal, by keeping the game fresh and constantly changing, “seasons” convey a temporal quality to paratextual content about the game. To stay relevant, content creators must continuously produce new content to respond to these changing search trends, shaped by the analytic platforms that guide their response to emerging trends. While the concept of cultural intermediation has previously been applied to game YouTubers and livestreamers (Taylor, 2018), the account we have given in this article suggests an actor–network approach toward understanding the cultural intermediation of *Fortnite* microtransactions (Maguire & Matthews, 2012). It is not just the content creators that create value and qualify different goods (skins and emotes) and services (battle passes), but the nonhuman algorithmic recommendation systems and third-party analytics that shape, encourage, and constrain the content that they produce for the platform. *Fortnite* creates content for YouTubers to monetize, and YouTubers create value for *Fortnite* to monetize. The game-driven audience drives the popularity of *Fortnite* on YouTube, encouraging more streamers to produce *Fortnite* content, cascading and sustaining its popularity over other games.

A further key contributor to the appeal of the game is how the game acts as a vehicle for gaming social capital (Malaby, 2006), and the performance of player identity. Gaming capital refers to the literacies players develop when playing games, crucially shaped by paratextual materials such as content on YouTube and Twitch (Consalvo, 2007), which contributes to “one’s sense of belonging to and participating in a gaming community” (Molyneux et al., 2015), well evidenced here. *Fortnite* affords a complex ecology of gaming capital, well suited to the skill levels and competencies of younger players. The challenges and rewards provided by a battle pass within a season, and a player’s ability to complete them, allow their play to generate capital. This is important because, as Walsh and Apperley (2009) note, games “are the experiences, actions and texts youth often draw upon in the

construction of their identities and subjectivities in an increasingly networked and globalised world where games matter” (p. 5). To have, or not to have, specific skins and dances available to them drives a desire to play, to be able to display their preferred identity in-game, seen also in anti-microtransaction sentiments and negative attitudes toward “defaults,” when the player avatar has the default appearance. Games are key sites of identity construction and the performance of social capital for children (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2016; Dezuanni et al., 2015), and these opportunities spill out into offline spaces, such as the ability to perform *Fortnite* dances at school, an embodied, gestural performance of both their identity and their gaming capital. In essence, if children’s digital media choices are about their changing social worlds, autonomy, and maturity, *Fortnite* enables the performance of these changes in greater ways than other titles that are available to them.

Finally, it was clear that the appeal of *Fortnite* is also contingent on the rich and rewarding social experience that it offers players. In addition to being something that can be richly talked about, the preferred way of playing *Fortnite* is with others; with friends. As Keith Stuart (2018) has argued, “*Fortnite* isn’t a game—it’s a place [children] go with friends and not with Mom and Dad”, elsewhere likened to skate parks and Facebook (Hassan, 2018), a third space just like massively multiplayer online games like *World of Warcraft* (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Duos, squads, and playground modes offer players the opportunity not just to play cooperatively and for shared experience but for informal sociability (a noted benefit of online gaming, see Trepte et al., 2012). Where children’s play is increasingly restricted (Kuschner, 2012), *Fortnite* provides them their own space to explore, although not a space equally accessible to all (Jenkins, 1998).

Limitations

While our study was initially designed to investigate what games children were playing after *Minecraft* broadly, *Fortnite* emerged as the most prevalent theme and has been the focus of this article. This meant that our semistructured interviews focused on capturing the breadth of experiences, which has limited our ability to account for the frequency of our themes in this article, as each interview unfolded differently, and it meant we did not also interview parents in this study. Due to this focus, we have only briefly discussed the experiences of the girls we interviewed, as none played it regularly, and only 3/7 played it occasionally. As other studies have reported (Ames & Burrell, 2017; Beavis et al., 2015), it was more difficult to recruit young girls to participate in the research. It was clear that gender played a role here, in their social circles and what games their friends played, in the YouTube content creators they watched (see also Maloney et al., 2018), and in the way fathers mediated their sons’ play (Nikken & Jansz, 2006). Finally, for the purposes of scope, we have also not discussed in this article our participants’ experiences with the discourses of addiction that were prevalent around *Fortnite* play, which we plan

to publish on in greater depth in a subsequent paper. Where *Fortnite* is overwhelmingly a positive force in our participants' lives, the aggressive depiction of *Fortnite* in the media as being negative, problematic, and addictive clearly impacted our participants.


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Notes

1. Despite it being classified as 12+ in Australia and Europe and 13+ in the United States.
2. The data consisted of interviews lasting between 20 and 60 min, predominantly in the child's home, with a parent or carer present. Both were provided a participant information statement and consent form about the research, requiring signatures from both the carer and the child for inclusion in the study. In addition to interview questions, participants conducted a brainstorming activity to map the games they played (a lot/sometimes/before) and YouTube or Twitch streamers they watched.
3. This article presents the results of an analysis of the transcribed interview data—informed by constructivist grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2014)—with a focus on understanding the appeal of *Fortnite* to our participants and their perspectives toward various elements of the game. Importantly, following the past decade of research in game studies, we do not conceptualize *Fortnite* “play” as just interaction with the game client but the broader digital cultures, social worlds, and offline practices that surround and inform its engagement and experience. Through close reading of interview transcripts, and discussions and reflections among the research team, clear themes relating to the appeal and popularity of *Fortnite* emerged. These themes form the structure of this article and provide the basis for conceptual development.

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