

It is Not an Island It's A World: Fortnite and "Worldness"

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Abstract

Fortnite is a massively multiplayer online first-person shooter that grew rapidly in 2018 to become one of the world's most popular games, with current estimates of 350 million active players. In this paper we argue that Fortnite's success can – in part – be attributed to the affective sensation of worldness that it creates via its 10 week 'seasons'. Via a study of children's digital play cultures, we discuss the implications of this way of thinking about the spatial, social, and material structures of the gameworld for understanding Fortnite's success, countering discourses of 'videogame addiction', and guiding future research.

1. Introduction

Fortnite is a freemium massively multiplayer online 'battle royale' game in which players compete in a shrinking playable arena to be the sole survivor. In 2018, *Fortnite* rapidly grew to become one of the world's most popular games, with current estimates of 350 million players [1]. *Fortnite's* unusual success with younger players was a seismic shift in youth digital gaming cultures, and its massive popularity was accompanied by a global media panic around videogame addiction that saw *Fortnite's* creator, EPIC Games, called to testify at UK Parliamentary hearings [2].

Drawing on a study of young people's digital gaming, this paper interrogates the appeal of *Fortnite* with a specific focus on the game's 10 week 'seasons'; a game-monetization strategy that is increasingly being adopted in other titles in the genre such as *Call of Duty: Warzone* and *Apex Legends*. During an individual season, players compete to win challenges, unlock content, and follow narrative events that impact the playable world. While prior work has discussed the pressures that this temporality places on players to play [3], in this paper we argue that the significant effect that the seasons mechanic has on players is that it creates a sense of worldness – similar to games with pervasive virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* or *EVE Online* – that is core to understanding its widespread appeal and phenomenal success.

Via interviews with 24 children (17 boys, 7 girls) between 9-14 years of age, conducted at the height of *Fortnite's* popularity in late 2018 and early 2019, we argue that *Fortnite's* seasonality constructs an affective sensation of 'being' within the world of *Fortnite* play, closely interwoven with its paratextual practices on sites like YouTube and Twitch, and conducive for children's digital play cultures specifically. We consequently discuss the implications of this way of thinking about the spatial, social and material structures of the *Fortnite* gameworld for understanding *Fortnite's* success, countering discourses of 'videogame addiction', and guiding future research.

The idea of 'worldness' is not new, but well established via early scholarship in game studies of early massively multiplayer online games such as *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft* and *EVE Online*. We begin our paper by revisiting this scholarship, which we draw on to develop an understanding of the worldness of *Fortnite* via our participants' experiences. In particular, we account for the ways that *Fortnite's* seasons establish a sense of persistent place and geography; are entwined with the social capital that players develop through play; create a sense of temporality in play; which result in an affective sense of worldness and belonging, or not belonging, for some players.

2. Revisiting Worldness

What do we mean when we say 'world', and what makes a game a world? The concept of worldness in game studies has been developed first through text-based virtual worlds [4], [5], but more substantially in early games in the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) genre such as *Ultima Online* (1997) and *Everquest* (1999) that were distinguished from other digital games by their persistent and shared virtual space which players 'enter' and become embodied, a sense of virtual 'worldness' that was used to understand the immense popularity of this emerging genre.

In discussing her introduction to *Everquest* (EQ), T.L. Taylor notes the ways that EQ was framed as a ‘world’ by players and developers, meaning more than just a ‘game’ [6, pp. 28–29]. The lack of clear winner and sandbox style gameplay, and game’s early tagline ‘you’re in our world now’ evoked “the feeling that what you do in EQ is immerse yourself in a space” [p. 28], made possible by the advances in 3D computer graphics and networked technologies first possible at that time. As such, many of the ways in which prior research understands worldness are tied into these ideas of a persistent and shared virtual space ‘physically’ occupied by an avatar, something *Fortnite* lacks as the gameworld is re-set for each match.

Also writing on *EQ*, Klastrup [7] developed a definition of ‘worldness’ as a combination of immersion and presence - the shared experience of moving between gameworlds and non-game worlds. “Worldness in general seems to be the sum of our experiences within the framework provided by the gameworld in its instantiation as a particular and new genre of a fictional universe that you can actually inhabit and share with others, and of our experiences with it as particular game design, which both enables and restricts our possibilities of performing and interacting in and with the world” [7, p. 13]. It is important to look at some of the common design elements of these worlds - the inclusion of events, the continuation of intertextual engagement outside of the immediate space of the game and into other forms of media. To summarize, Klastrup’s definition of “worldness” is to include being present, being social, understanding boundaries of genre/text, a way of thinking about the social and material structure of these games that saw early scholarship focus heavily on questions of identity [7].

Krzywinka’s [8] study into *World of Warcraft* notes specifically the rich intertextuality - the existence of a lore that is knowable within the game, but also builds from established genres of fantasy – that is crucial for what makes *World of Warcraft* a world. For her, it is the interplay between gameplay, player agency, and these ideas of ‘myth’ that are important. A world needs to have a history. While Krzywinka is referring to an established ‘myth’ and ‘lore’ through the game’s intertextuality, equivalents can emerge through play and we can start to consider this temporality of games also as being integral to a sense of ‘worldness’. Part of this history is to start to look to in-game ‘events’, common in early MMOGs, that are grounded historical contexts - occurring across time and space as moments within the game. Krzywinka [8, p. 143] suggests festivals and events help tie the rhythm of the game-world with the ‘real-world’, while scholarship on games like *EVE Online*

emphasize the histories of the game that develop through player-driven warfare and practices like player-journalism [9]-[11]. These temporal intersections provide a sense of a pervasive world - one that has its own temporal rhythm, and one that exists alongside our own - a world to enter and to be within.

The way that gameworlds traverse the boundaries of the game is important to understanding ‘worldness’. On *Minecraft* Dezuanni [12, p. 389] discusses the socio-materiality of digital gaming - an inclusion of both online/offline and the traversing of boundaries. Specifically, Dezuanni is discussing Let’s Play videos, where content creators will stream or record themselves playing digital games such as *Minecraft*. As young people engage with a range of digital media practices relating to the gameworld, [12, p. 390] suggests that “they practice a host of social-material literacies as an aspect of media life.” Key to this sense of *Minecraft*’s ‘worldness’ then is not just engagement with the game software, or practices within the virtual spaces of the game, but the host of ways the game is “constructed and circulated within children’s daily life experiences” [12, p. 390]. Something not dissimilar to the importance of the offline communities that surrounded early virtual ‘world’ games like *EverQuest* that were “constantly interlinked” with the communities that surrounded them [6].

Following this prior work, we argue that key to understanding the ‘worldness’ is acknowledging that worldness is something that is more than just about the technical creation of a persistent virtual landscape, but something that is intertextual, social, across a range of media landscapes that incorporate ‘play’, where a sense of agency and presence is evoked, and that participation within these spaces is key. Thus, even though *Fortnite* does not have a persistent virtual world similar to those in games like *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft*, we can begin to understand how the gameworld of *Fortnite* can provide the same affective sensations of worldness. If understood in this way, we can consequently see how the genre of virtual world games – in decline since the early 2010’s – is in fact reimagined and reconfigured into contemporary digital play practices.

3. Methodology

The study involved semi-structured interviews with 24 (17 boys, 7 girls) children between 9-14 years of age. Initially, this study was proposed to examine what games children were playing after *Minecraft*. This extends research conducted by Mavoa et al. [13], who 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. We were interested in studying the transition from *Minecraft*, a widely accepted and positively viewed title [12], [13], to more 'difficult' or 'teen' game titles, or away from gaming entirely. Thus, recruitment focused on participants who have recently stopped playing *Minecraft* or significantly reduced the amount of time they played *Minecraft*. The interviews were more generally about digital play and related practices, such as YouTube.

The popularity of *Fortnite* at the time of data collection (October-November 2018) saw it develop as the most prominent theme, with half regularly playing (all boys). 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. Families were recruited 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 semi-rural Australia in the regions surrounding Byron Bay (n=7). The data consisted of interviews lasting between 20 and 60 minutes with children, predominantly in their home, with a parent or carer present. Both were provided a participant information statement and consent form about the research, requiring signatures from both carer and 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.

This article presents the results of an analysis of the interview data - informed by constructivist grounded theory techniques [14] - which was transcribed, with a focus on understanding the impact that the 'seasons' mechanic has on play and player experience. 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 [12], [15]. Themes emerged from a broad range of gaming practices discussed by our participants. Through close reading of interview transcripts, the research team concluded that the construction of social worlds and the importance of *Fortnite*'s Seasons were integral to how young people framed their play was worthy of further study. As such, clear themes relating to the impact of Seasons emerged which form the basis of our paper structure.

4. Fortnite as Battle Royale

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 minutes, 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' (2 players working together) or 'squad' (4 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.

At the conclusion of the match, the island – the virtual playing field – is deleted. The structures assembled, buildings destroyed, and player corpses, removed. When a player dies, they are removed from that instance of the island to be respawned on another battle bus, flying over another identical instantiation of that same virtual world. Thus, unlike MMOG games like *EQ*, *Fortnite* replicates the typical first-person shooter matchmaking experience where the playable territory of the game is much more akin to a chessboard on which play takes place – reset at the conclusion of each match - rather than a 'virtual world' the player inhabits. This world exists not once, or a few times, but tens of thousands of times simultaneously to support millions of concurrent active players.

Like all games, the play and appeal of *Fortnite* is not simply situated in engagement with the game itself. In our prior work [3], we discuss how *Fortnite*'s experience is a social one, deeply interwoven with practices on sites like YouTube and Twitch. The result is that – for the children players we studied – *Fortnite* becomes a vehicle for the accumulation and performance of social capital, both online through gameplay but also offline through the demonstration of expertise about the gameworld or game practices.

Principal among these is *Fortnite's* popular 'emotes' or dances, which can be unlocked or purchased, that the player avatar can perform in-game, and the player can replicate in the real world. Thus, while many of the elements that make up *Fortnite* are afforded by other games, the particular configuration of *Fortnite* means the game is exceptionally popular with young people, especially those whose play is moving away from the tightly controlled and mediated, educationally framed 'messing around' type of play in games like *Minecraft*. Instead the freemium status, higher skill ceiling but still variety of achievable challenges provide a popular yet accessible way for children to participate in a broader digital gaming culture.

5. Results: Fortnite as World

To describe *Fortnite* as a Battle Royale is just one way to think about the spatial, social, and material structures of the gameworld. As we will unpack in the following sections, *Fortnite* can be productively thought of as having the same affective sensations of 'worldness' as games in the MMOG genre. By this we mean that - unlike the popular matchmaking shooter games that preceded it - the way in which the temporal, economic, and procedural elements of *Fortnite* gameplay interact results in (1) a sense of temporality in play (resembling the myth and lore that make up the worldness of other MMOGs); (2) a sense of persistent place and geography (despite the replication and reset of the world); and (3) are entwined with the social capital that players develop through play (as a site for the formation and play with identity). This results in an affective sense of worldness and belonging, or not belonging, for some players.

6. Seasons and Battle Passes

One aspect of *Fortnite's* design worth describing in further depth is its monetization. As a freemium game, *Fortnite* operates under a voluntary subscription model through 'Battle Passes' - a paid entry to the current in-game 'season'. Within the Battle Pass, players can earn 'skins' and 'dances' - ways of emoting and embodying the game world, some of which can be purchased directly although at a comparatively high cost. Although the game can be played for free, the social community around the game celebrates the skins and emotes that are most difficult to unlock within the 10 weeks season, requiring both extensive effort and skill, a visual representation within the game world of the players prowess and

gaming capital. Some reports suggest that as much as 34% of players purchase a Battle Pass, far higher than the typical 10% of players who make purchases in freemium games [16].

Battle Passes are not unique to *Fortnite*, This has become a model for a number of contemporary games, originating as a 'season pass' in *DOTA 2* [18], and has since been incorporated into popular games such as *Call of Duty* and *Apex Legends*. Nieborg [17] examines the economy of free-to-play games, breaking it down into three types of commodity: the product commodity, the 'prosumer' commodity, and the player commodity. Respectively, he is discussing how in-app purchases, players social networks, and the data accumulated around the player, provide forms of monetization within free to play games. These forms of commodification are not mutually exclusive and start to frame how players are economically orientated within a battle pass economy. Furthering this idea, Harvey [18] discusses the emergence of 'invest/express' forms of ludic economies. Here players, opt into the previously outlined commodification process, where economic investment comes with the chance to customize and personalize the world. Joseph [19] notes that rather than 'replacing' other forms of monetization, battle passes augment and abstract these forms. The world of *Fortnite* may, on the surface seem 'free to enter', but there are complex layers of investment linked to expression and social capital. Within *Fortnite*, it is not just an economic 'investment' you are opting into, it is entering the world in a very particular way.

While you can play without paying, young participants noted that there was often hostility towards those with 'default' skins. They noted that they may be targeted, viewed as 'unskilled' within the game's world - either as a new player, or someone who doesn't play well. Rick (12, M) spoke about how "*kids don't want to get teased for being default*", both by their friends but also in-game. Ben (10, M) and Carlos (10, M) discussed how "*people kind of bully the defaults*" by thinking, "*Oh, he's a default, we can get him*", an expectation of an easy opponent to fight. In this case, the visual appearance of the default skin represents their lack of gaming capital, something players quickly learn, motivating them to make in-game purchases to adorn their character better.

Similarly, Carlos (10, M) pointed towards the desire to complete all the challenges in a given timeframe as being "*addictive*", because challenges "*makes you kind of addicted to it 'cause you wanna finish it*" (Carlos), although Carlos did not describe any problematic or excessive play. The monetization of *Fortnite* was also linked closely to this for Charles (11, M), as he felt this desire to be seen to have the best

skins was why other kids are “stealing their parent’s credit cards and buying V-Bucks” (the game’s virtual currency), although he knew no kids who had actually done that. For the most part our participants described a non-problematic desire to ‘unlock’ and ‘earn’ their skins within the allotted time frame, but these comments demonstrate the power that battle passes, and the structure they provide, has in shaping and configuring player experience in *Fortnite*. As we discuss elsewhere [2], our participants often struggled to negotiate the pervasive media panic about *Fortnite* as ‘addictive’ with their normal and healthy desires to play. As Cover [20] has previously discussed, the tension between when something is a hobby enthusiastically engaged in, versus a problematic behavior, is a key characteristic of videogame media panic. Thus, the question of how battle passes work to compel play and engagement with *Fortnite*, while worthwhile, is a larger one beyond the scope of this paper.

7. Seasonality

Seasons are directly tied to Battle Passes. While each purchase allows you to fully participate in the season’s events, compete in challenges, and earn skins, dances, weapons, and other rewards, there is more to a season than just a purchased subscription. The term ‘seasonality’ is used in this paper to conceptualize how the economic function of the Battle Pass creates a sense of world - tied to the temporal and procedural shifts within the game itself. To play *Fortnite* is not just to purchase one season, but rather to know the game’s history, and situate yourself within the shifting world.

Fortnite has both popularized and developed the mechanic of seasons over its history, which were not initially launched with the game. Early seasons saw comparatively minor changes to areas of the map between each season, such as a having a medieval or space theme, or introducing a new area on the initially de-populated map. By Season 4 (mid 2018), and coinciding with *Fortnite*’s rapid rise in popularity, seasonal changes began becoming ongoing throughout the season, with things like meteorites that impacted the map throughout the season, or the island sinking causing a flood. The first ten seasons culminated in the end of Chapter 1 with a ‘live event’ – watched by 7 million people - that consumed the entire playable world in a black hole, taking the entire game offline for 36 hours. Players were pushed onto fan sites and YouTube to speculate about what might happen next. Chapter 2 resumed with a new map, and a still developing storyline focused on a mysterious organization called ‘The Agency’. Via these seasons,

Fortnite creates a self-referential world where each season builds on previous developments that have happened in the game world.

Participants locate themselves temporally within seasons. For instance, Charles, (M, 11) traced his in-game history for us, giving insight into the development of *Fortnite* as we know it today. “Season 1 and 2 no one really played except like really older people, like the YouTubers and stuff. Season 3 is when it started to spark appeal, I think that was when they [introduced] the battle pass theme. And season 4 it spiked.” (Charles, M, 11). Many of our participants also framed their participation in *Fortnite* via the season that they started - with many joining in season 3 or 4 (February-April 2018). Seasons allow players to track their presence within the game - and start to form affective bonds with the gameworld, bringing their personal gaming history in line with the game’s lore and ongoing narrative.

Revisiting Krzywinska’s [8] definition of a world – that in game events play an important role in creating shared experiences and histories – we see how *Fortnite*’s seasons mechanic imbues the constantly refreshed gameworld with this sense of worldness. This can be best illustrated by recounting a significant event that took place in the time our participants had played was the introduction - and subsequent death - of ‘Kevin’ the Cube. Explained to us by Sammy (M, 10);

And then in season five, there was this cube, his name was Kevin. He died now. It was a very sad death. Anyway he went into this giant lake and he turned this lake into a very bouncy lake, it was very fun. In season six, Kevin came back out of the lake and onto a ... connected to an island. And that island had a tornado around it. And that island went all the way around the map and back. And then, the island split up into a few. And then, Kevin exploded.

Excitedly explained and recounted through the eyes of Sammy (M, 10), it is clear this in game event was impactful on the games world, story, and how these young people orientated themselves within the world and games history. Alongside battle pass reward tiers, the appearance of the mysterious cube in Season 6 created a constant ‘checking in’ with the world of *Fortnite*. Checking in may not always mean logging into the game. It could be discussing with friends, or even watching videos on YouTube. The name ‘Kevin’ was itself a nickname provided by the player community, disseminated through these informal networks of *Fortnite*’s myth and lore. Many of our participants may not have been able to actively play enough hours required to complete all the tasks (as noted by Charles, M, 11). So, many of them will rely

on favourite YouTube streamers as a way to keep on top of these events and understand how the game has changed since they last visited.

The seasonality of *Fortnite* directly contribute to its sense of world. The game is designed, economically, narratively, and procedurally, to be 'checked in on'. For these young people, this means socially connected with others; friends, schoolmates, YouTubers, as a way of checking in on the world. It is the intersection of streaming culture and *Fortnite*, culminating around season 3, that gave such visibility to the game, and even one of the key elements to the game's success [3]. It is important to note that the seasonality of the game is entwined with a players' identity as a player, which in turn gives them sense of presence within the world. Through unlock Battle Pass tiers such as skins, dances, and other items, players can approach seasons from the perspective of 'I was there' and orientate themselves – and their embodiment - within the game's history and world.

8. Fortnite as a Place

"*You start off in a battle bus*", Carlos (M, 10) recalls as he speaks with Ben (M, 10). Moving from one side of the map to another, traversing multiple landscapes across the island. There are multiple areas you can choose to jump off the bus, using a hang glider (customizations are available to purchase or earn). Where you choose to land holds strategic value within the game. "*There are different places, obviously, so you can land.... Titled Towers, Dusty Divot.... You can put your marker on Retail Rowe or something*" and knowledge about these places holds both real and symbolic value.

Some locations may change with the seasons and may be worthy of your attention. This is the world of *Fortnite*. A series of interconnected locations - each with specific details, connected to the changing seasons, and afford multitudes of playful possibilities. While one approach may be to focus specific on the 'optimal' location to win the game, this is not always the case. These are places within a digital world - it holds its own knowable geography. As time in the game (and outside the game) pass through seasons, so do these locations, and this is key to how the changing geography of the game creates a sense of 'worldness'

Fortnite is not just a series of connected digital places, it is a place in and of itself. While it has been established that *Fortnite* procedurally changes with given seasons, it is important to acknowledge the work that players will do in contributing to this social construction of place. *Fortnite* is a social place – after all, it is an online multiplayer game. As noted by both Stuart [21] and Hassan [22], *Fortnite* is more than a

game, it is a social place – likened to a skatepark for its embedded socially and playable environment. For Stuart, *Fortnite* is "*a hangout where players are given a huge amount of autonomy to seek out the experiences they want*". The term 'third place' is used to describe the game, drawing from the work of Oldenburg [23] to describe public places located between home and work. He notes that "*the third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work*" [23, p. 16]. Wimmer [24] theorises the applicability of this concept to online multiplayer games, hinting at the potential for a 'fourth place'. With *Fortnite* however, we see that the concept of place becomes deeply embedded within the sociality of worlds. Yes, there are places you can visit in the game, but the game itself is situated as a place to visit – it is persistent, ever changing, and warrants a constant 'checking in' and 'hanging out', a place to schedule with friends to visit. There is a deep belonging to place that we see being performed by our young participants. Rather than clearly existing between home and work (or school), we see the game permeates the boundaries of home and school, where the geography of *Fortnite* exists 'outside' of these places, the social construction of place, and sense of belonging to it, continues beyond the game.

Returning to the idea of seasonality and 'worldness', we see these changes as a key element. These are narrative - introduced through cutscenes - but they are also procedural, happening slowly alongside play. How these young people understand the place of *Fortnite* is through reference to the key events that take place within seasons and keeping up with these changing events is key to being an adept player. The aftermath of Kevin was that players "*couldn't use your guns or anything*" (Sammy, M 10) and other key procedural elements, such as the lake becoming bouncy, or the destruction of key landmarks, mean it is important to stay connected to gameworld changes to know how to compete in the battle royale, and demonstrate competency as players navigate through these spaces with friends.

9. Affective Sense of Worldness

"*I'm known for my dances*" states Andrew (M, 9). When asked about his engagement with *Fortnite*, Andrew recalls how at school he is known for his dances, often performing them on request by friends and fellow classmates. Here, we see the world of *Fortnite* extending well beyond the reach of the game and starting to live in the everyday life of its players. 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 [15, p. 124]. Part of this can be thought about in terms of social capital; Andrew knows this one specific part of the game so well he can replicate it on request. He has earned so many in-game dances through his seasons of play, or even has watched countless hours of play on YouTube to be able to replicate these mimetic in-game moments.

Players can progress through tiers 1 to 100 by earning Battle Stars in challenges throughout the season. While progression through levels and tiers has no impact on the overall game world, this is the key to earning new skins, emotes, and weapons beyond direct in-game purchases. As our participants discussed ‘rare’ skins, they refer to the level of time investment needed to complete challenges and earn enough points to unlock them. Those that are at higher tiers are obviously harder to earn and require more challenges to be completed and more time spent in the game. These become ‘rare’ in our participants eyes, as they are seen more through watching streamers online rather than being unlocked by themselves or players in their social circles.

Like emotes, skins form part of *Fortnite’s* world through their connection to seasons. Skins may be re-released, but often gain social capital through their position within the unlockable battle pass tiers. They form a connection between the player and the world, as well as a way of showing the players ‘investment’ and ‘expression’ of self within the game world [18]. In this way they are a form of gaming social capital, [25], the literacies players develop when playing games, crucially shaped by paratextual materials such as content on YouTube and Twitch which contributes to “one’s sense of belonging to and participating in a gaming community” [26].

Like in many other game worlds, the avatar is the way the player inhabits the world. Unlike other games such as *World of Warcraft*, you cannot individually customize the appearance of your avatar. This is where skins come in – they allow players to reflect part of themselves within the game, anchored to the game world. As Taylor [6, p. 110] notes, avatars are not just abstract anchors, but in fact “central to both immersion and the construction of community virtual spaces”. Because your appearance in *Fortnite* is directly related to your achievements, earning them through battle pass tiers (or directly purchasing them), avatars in *Fortnite* embody not just your position within the world, but the extend of your gaming capital [27] within it. Moore [28] frames such in game achievements, and the way games visually represent them, as an affective engagement with the game world. There is a temporal element to this – the amount

of time invested in a game forms an affective bond with the game world and is the source of a sense of achievement through play. Within *Fortnite*, the achievements are abstracted. Compared to games on Steam, where they are visible and connected to a social user profile, in *Fortnite* skins are a means of expressing your gaming capital (or avatar capital, [29]).

This level of abstraction links back to the battle pass – which Joseph [19] argues is a way of abstracting commodities within the game. If purchases, either directly or unlocked through battle pass tiers, reflect an ‘investment’ and ‘expression’ [18] simultaneously, then they are more than just cosmetic identifiers. They are directly linked to amounts of money and time invested within the game. As the battle pass drives the seasons, and the ebbs and flow of the world, it also drives how players orientate themselves within the world and their accumulation of gaming capital. Skins therefore act as a way of understanding ‘avatars’ in *Fortnite*, provide a feedback loop between how the game world changes with seasons, and the challenges players are required to do within the season. Returning to a sense of affect, Moore [28, p. 350] discusses it as a “*residue in the body, a lasting impression that accumulates over time and practice*”. To link ‘gaming/avatar capital’ to skins is then to start thinking about how the player is temporally located, not just in terms of time spent playing, but in terms of how long they have been playing across each season, and how *Fortnite* uses this to create an affective tone.

Returning to our participant Andrew (M, 9), he recalls his one in-game purchase, where he bought world cup soccer skins. Charles (M, 11) notes that it is ‘better value’ to buy a season pass to unlock skins, as they can cost \$15-20 for each item. He notes, “*So I prefer to buy the seasonal pass and that allows me, I have to work for it but it allows me to unblock things*”. Of course, our participants need to ask parents’ permission, with one participate, Rick (M, 12) telling us how “*some parents might not want to spend money on a video game or the kid might not want to*”. He abstracted out his worries around playing as a ‘default’ to ‘other people’ who might worry about being teased, which reflect how there is a larger social pressure to show your skill, or how much you’ve played the game, through your skins. As Walsh and Apperley note [27, p. 5], 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*”.

The seasonality of skins locate players within a play moment. Rare skins will be unlocked at the highest tier and show that you’ve played extensively through the current season or have been playing extensively for several seasons. Carlos (M, 10)

describes a ‘wolf’ skin he had earned “*I have the wolf and I have to say it’s one of the best skins. What you do is it starts off with a normal character, his name’s Dire. Just a normal character. And then the next stage, he starts growing hairs*”. As he progressed through levels/tiers within the season, the wolf would change, the accumulation of his social capital through gaming represented visibly via his embodiment. Aarsand [15] extends this, to link gaming capital to young people’s broader social life. Expanding on this, Van Ryn et al [29, p. 293] discuss the avatar as a form of “*affect investment*”, and accumulation of “*avatar capital*” - the level of gaming capital that becomes attached to and embodied within the avatar itself. Through the display of skins, *Fortnite* players demonstrate this accumulative capital - their history and engagement with seasons through battle pass tiers – reinforcing the affective sensation of belonging in the *Fortnite* world.

It is possible to conceptualize *Fortnite*’s tier systems under what Paul [30] calls the toxic meritocracy of games. Through a levelled progression tree, there is a suggested idea of skills and progress as being evenly distributed. What we see from our participants is that firstly, the lack of progression and accumulation of earned skins, dances, weapons, and so forth, can be viewed negatively within the game world. Secondly, that there is a heavy focus on ‘earning’ these items, rather than paying. This further hides the Battle Pass mechanic under a meritocratic idea of time-spent in game as ‘investment’ rather than financial. Views around ‘time’ and ‘money’ spent become gendered, that young girls are looking at this system as a ‘waste of time’, with young boys following the aforementioned ‘invest/express’ model.

Through the Battle Pass levels and tiers, there are implications for thinking about inclusion and exclusion. This sense of belonging to the world of *Fortnite* was not universal. While all participants noted they had experience playing a game like *Minecraft*, the same could not be said of *Fortnite*. Of our participants, (17 boys, 7 girls), only 3 girls had played *Fortnite*, and even then, it was only occasionally. However, all our participants had some experience playing *Minecraft*, either with family, on their own, or with friends. As Dezuanni [12] notes, *Minecraft* too, has a sense of “*worldness*”, so it is important to understand how the distinct notions of ‘world’ are constructed to understand how some may feel included and others may not. When asked about *Fortnite* one young girl, Toni (9, F), expressed “*No, I hate Fortnite. Disgusting*”. Probing further, she comments “*I don’t know why everyone likes it so much. It’s just like literally every single other shooting game but with minor differences*”. Addie (10, F) echoes these opinions and adds “*It’s a bit inappropriate...*

there’s rude dances and it swears a lot”. Of course, some young boys also expressed a lack of interest in *Fortnite*, with Lewis (12, M) noting “*a lack of story*” as the thing that made the game unappealing. Similarly, James (13, M) had tried the game once and didn’t find it entertaining, but rather just a clone of popular battle royale game *PUBG* (which he notes, he also doesn’t enjoy). There is a discourse around the game, one that is embedded within notions of addiction [2], but it is also more than that.

The seasonality of the game, the battle pass economy that drives the temporal structures of the world, is also one of the key elements that is creating a rift as young people move from games like *Minecraft* into more ‘teenage’ games like *Fortnite*. The boys we interviewed considered what was the best value – they acknowledge that individual purchases of dances and skins were expensive, and that they would rather ‘earn’ their skins and dances. The girls on the other hand said any purchases were “*a waste*”. Both Addie (F, 10) and Rose (F, 11) discussed the possibility of in-app purchases in their free-to-play games but expressed that they would rather not. Even Rose, who discussed cosmetic items in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* which have a benefit to the game (it is the main goal of *Animal Crossing*, according to Rose), she still thought it was “*a bit of a waste*” to purchase in-game currency and items. These comments indicate issues here with how the game aligns its monetization process with how gaming capital – currently so inherently and pervasively masculine [31]– [33] - is accumulated and expressed. There are implications here for thinking about the gendering of game spaces and worlds that need to be explored further.

10. Conclusion

Fortnite’s seasonality, monetization and online community makes it – like how *EverQuest* was first framed in 1999 – more than a game, a world. Although it lacks the simulation of a persistent shared virtual space, the changing gameworld and evolution of the game immerses players in myth; the social construction of *Fortnite* as a third-place in players’ lives immerses them in a space; and social capital, monetization and avatars entwine to immerse players in a sense of belonging to the world of *Fortnite*. This way of thinking about the spatial, social, and material structures of the gameworld help explain *Fortnite*’s exceptional success.

Through this account this article has made a number of key contributions to understanding *Fortnite*, online digital play, and to the study of youth digital gaming in particular. Firstly, we’ve added to studies of game temporality and game monetization

the concept of ‘seasonality’, to conceptualize how the economic function of the Battle Pass creates a sense of permanent world via the temporal and procedural shifts within the game itself. In doing so we provide a useful theoretical understanding for the study and analysis if this increasingly common design and monetization practice

Secondly, we’ve built on our prior work on *Fortnite* [3] to provide a deeper account of how the rich intertextual mythology and vocabulary around the game are deeply entwined with the game’s communities online, on sites like YouTube and Twitch, and offline, in player’s existing social worlds. This emphasizes the importance of how *Fortnite* reduces the barriers to participation in this world via a combination of accessible cross-platform and freemium play. Understanding *Fortnite* as a world helps us understand the central importance of skins and emotes to *Fortnite* play.

Third, via our limited study we’ve noted how the combination of these elements – seasonality, game communities, and avatars – works to create an affective sense of belonging, or not belonging, to the gameworld. Where these worlds are more than just the digital game itself, but the online ‘gamer’ cultures that surround it, we see how the seasonality of the game and battle passes may also be one of the key elements that is creating a gendered rift as young people move from games like *Minecraft* into more teenage ‘gamer’ games like *Fortnite*.

Furthermore, we believe that situating our understanding of the appeal of *Fortnite* within massively multiplayer online game scholarship, versus scholarship on competitive first-person shooter games, emphasizes what Pål Aarsand has argued, that “*seeing children’s gaming cultures as participatory cultures indicates that these cultures involve much more than just playing the game* [15, p. 124]. Qualitative and ethnographic studies of children’s playing cultures are key to understanding why games become important to the lives of players, particularly children, and for the development of knowledge that counters the problematic and flawed pathologizing of digital play [34].

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