

## Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: figuring out Fortnite in (hopefully) less than a fortnight

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## **Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: Figuring out Fortnite in (hopefully) less than a fortnight.**

Librarians and libraries active on Twitter may be familiar with what is affectionately known as “Library Twitter”, which is made up of library workers, users and supporters. This group includes libraries, librarians, staff, academics, patrons, authors, and others who work closely with library and library adjacent occupations. The phrase is often invoked when this group of Twitter users respond to a particularly polarizing or enthusiastic statement on libraries. These responses range from embracing a celebrity whose first trip to the library in 23 years results in a “seriously. go to the library. it's a delight.” tweet [1] to scathing criticism of an article proposing the elimination of libraries and replacing them with Amazon (Grothaus,2018). As described in an entry on the *ACRL Blog*, the benefits of Library Twitter are many, including staying connected with the profession and the “fun stuff” (DeWitt, 2019). Many times these two combine to create a viral tweet that highlights topics in librarianship that are both important and fun. An excellent example of such a tweet is Orkney library’s twitter thread about the online video game Fortnite, which includes information on the game along with an excellent pun referencing a Dusty Springfield song [2]. In a win-win situation the viral nature of this tweet surely brought Fortnite to the attention of many libraries and librarians and, potentially, brought libraries to the attention of Fortnite players. Orkney library is probably not the only library to have been getting questions from patrons about Fortnite related materials, and also not likely to be the only library whose staff are unfamiliar with the cultural phenomenon that is this multiplayer online game. The tweet thread happily ends with the patron explaining more about Fortnite to the librarian, and there are many more anecdotal stories of students and patrons helping to provide a better understanding of the game to teachers, librarians and the non-playing

adults in their lives. The sweeping popularity of Fortnite is comparable to that of Minecraft and Pokémon Go (Anderson, 2016) and libraries and librarians can leverage the popularity and positive aspects of the game for outreach and engagement.

**“Is it a film? No. A cartoon? No. An [sic] game, like Pokemon or something?”**

The librarian in the Orkney tweet asks the above questions in order to get more information on Fortnite, trying to determine where best to look for more information by asking the above question. What is interesting is that while Fortnite is best described as an online multiplayer shooter game, it actually does have the elements of both a film and a cartoon. There is a loose narrative to the play and it has been described as cartoon-like in its appearance. These characteristics are combined with competitive game play, constantly changing game elements and a space for connection and socialization to entice 250 million users to register to play with a steady increase in engagement since its debut in 2017 (Business Insider, 2019). The height of Fortnite’s popularity was during the summer and fall of 2018, but there continues to be a growth in registered users.

The most basic description of Fortnite is that it is an online multiplayer shooter game, with multiple players fighting shared enemies, or each other with a final goal of survival. There are many games within this genre, including Overwatch, Call of Duty and Halo, all well-known games within the industry. Fortnite is a third person shooter game which means the player sees their own avatar while playing from the avatar’s point of view. The originally released version of the game by software development company Epic Games [3] in July 2017 was a cooperative shooter game, pitting teams of players against “husks” or zombie type creatures in a survival challenge that required acquiring materials in order to build shelters and places to hide. This combination of cooperative construction and defensive shooting earned Fortnite the nickname

“Minecraft with Guns” [4]. There was some initial interest in the game, but its popularity didn’t explode until the free to play *Fortnite: Battle Royale* arrived on the scene and expanded to multiple platforms [5] . The zero cost for download and play, and its availability on multiple platforms (PC/Mac, Xbox, PlayStation, iOS, Android and Nintendo Switch) made the game accessible to large numbers of players who might otherwise face barriers to entry due to cost, platform and access.

The original iteration has been renamed *Fortnite: Save the World* and does not have the widespread accessibility of Battle Royale and remains only available for purchase. A third mode called *Fortnite: Creative* was released in December 2018, allowing players to embrace the cooperative building and creative aspects of the game without the shooting and need for survival. *Fortnite: Battle Royale* remains the most popular mode, which is not surprising since the “battle royale” format of video games has been increasing in popularity. This genre first arrived in the form of a mod in Minecraft that was modeled after the scavenge for supplies while fighting to survive goal depicted in *The Hunger Games* (2008) and the Japanese Film *Battle Royale* (2000), (Hornshaw, 2019). This genre continues to grow and is not expected to lose momentum as more game developers look to provide competition and alternatives to *Fortnite: Battle Royale* in order to profit from the popularity of the genre (Livingston, 2019).

### **Post-apocalyptic dance party**

As evidenced by the popularity of both the bestselling *Hunger Games* books and movies, there is a universal appeal for post-dystopian battle royale narratives amongst a variety of ages and genders. Introducing this narrative to multiplayer games presents the players with opportunities for connection, collaboration along with the competition. Just as Katniss and her fellow tributes had to learn to strategize, create alliances and be creative in order to survive, so to

must the players of *Fortnite: Battle Royale* when they are dropped into a playing field. Players leap from a flying “Battle Bus” and use a glider to land alongside 99 other players with the goal of being the last person standing. Players must collect supplies (weapons, ammunition, health, specialty items, building materials), build or seek shelter and battle each other in order to win the game. While it is possible to play defensively, hiding out while others are eliminated, the presence of a storm that forces all players into an increasingly smaller space in the gameplay area does eventually force some type of engagement in order to be victorious.

The engagement comes in the form of mild, cartoon-like violence (ie; no blood, gore or visible injuries) with a vast array of weapons. This lack of graphic violence was intentional in order to make the game appealing to more people, as well as make them want to engage with the game for long periods of time. Game designer, Peter Ellis, at a game designers conference notes an intention to make *Fortnite* look more like a Pixar movie and less like a bleak apocalypse (Morris, 2018). The distancing from the usual bleak environment of a post-apocalyptic dystopian landscape is strengthened by the inclusion of dance moves performed by the avatars (emotes), colorful and, at times, comical skins (costume or appearance of an avatar), and other various additions such as “back bling” (backpacks) and themed weapons and gliders. These elements turn what could be a dire dystopian experience into essentially a post-apocalyptic dance party. There is even a weapon called a “boogie bomb” which actually forces players within range to stop and dance.

These obtainable in-game extras provide Epic Games with their revenue stream and contribute to the universal appeal outside of the gameplay itself. The game is free to download and play, and it is entirely possible to play without spending any additional money if one is content in not embellishing their avatars and equipment. The in-game extras, which are

purchased with V-Bucks, in game virtual dollars, are purely aesthetic, unlike some games where in-game purchasing provides enhanced functionality. Gameplay is unaffected by not spending additional funds, but the visual performative nature of the game remains in a “default” mode. Obtaining these aesthetic enhancements are a major part of what drives the games popularity with players seeking to make themselves unique and also customize their visual gaming experience. However, there is often a stigma associated with remaining just a default avatar. A combination of the social pressure to not remain a default, alongside heavy promotion of the items compels players to spend enough V-Bucks for Epic Games to report a \$2.4 billion revenue, making the most annual revenue of any video game in history (Arif, 2019).

The in-game purchases are obviously successful in the gain of revenue, but they are also largely responsible for helping Fortnite become a cultural sensation. The presence of dance moves, or emotes as they are called has helped Fortnite penetrate the cultural discourse, becoming popular outside of the virtual realm. Emotes are simply the ability for a character to perform a dance move, adding aesthetic and personality to the game. The emotes have specific names and are often modeled after, and, some might argue, plagiarized from popular and historical moves and dances. There have been several copyright claims and attempted lawsuits by artists with copyright claims against Epic Games (Avakiantz, 2019).

The emotes travel off the screen into real life dance classes and playgrounds and the real life dances make their way into the game with Epic Games reaping the monetary rewards and individuals and official partners gaining exposure, advertising and popularity and further embedding itself in contemporary discourse. Fortnite’s success can be attributed to savvy trend tapping and the establishment of beneficial partnerships. During the World Cup, players could buy jerseys and soccer themed items and continuing the sports theme, National Football League

jerseys were sold for players to show support for their favorite team. Movie crossovers are popular from the addition of an emote from Disney's "Ralph Breaks the Internet" to Thor playing Fortnite during Avengers Endgame and a skin resembling the actor Keanu Reeves in his role as John Wick in coordination with the release of John Wick 3.

Another interesting partnership was with electronic music producer and DJ Chris Comstock who performs under the moniker Marshmello. In February 2018 he performed in Fortnite's first ever in-game live concert to an estimated audience of over 10 million (Webster, 2019). Weapons were disabled and players were invited to experience the live virtual concert and show their enthusiasm and dance moves through performing emotes. There were of course, Marshmello themed skins, weapons and new emotes available for purchase for this historic event. Marshmello himself plays the game and tweeted out enthusiastically before the show, inviting his fans to join the concert and promoting the themed items for purchase.

The audience of 10 million only accounts for the people who were logged into the game in order to watch the live event. The popularity of Fortnite has been embraced by live streamers who are able to monetize off of their own gameplay and streaming videos and the presence of these live streams and videos broadens the audience to even those who are not registered users of the game. As was explored in an earlier column (Anderson, 2018) live streaming of video-game play is a popular and profitable endeavor. The entertainment factor of Fortnite goes beyond the actual game play, both players and non-players alike can watch their favorite celebrities and gamers battle for survival via streaming services such as Twitch, which reported a worldwide viewership of close to 295 million hours in the last quarter of 2019 (Streamlabs, 2019). Fortnite has even been given credit with helping to mainstream Twitch and other streaming platforms that previously were used by less mainstream and more gamer-centric audiences (Kelleher, 2018).

The popularity of watching Fortnite did not go unnoticed by its creators and the first Fortnite World Cup took place in July 2019 with a sold out stadium holding 23,000 for in person viewing and hundreds of thousands watching virtually as players competed for a 30 million dollar prize pool, the largest in esports history (Perez, 2019).

### **Who is playing it and why?**

There were no women playing in the first Fortnite World Cup despite the fact that Epic Games estimated the female player fan base at around 35% (Carpenter, 2019). Fortnite players only skew slightly more male than the US average of 60% male and 40% female (FHE, 2018) with a reported 70% male and 30% female distribution (Verto, 2018). It should come as no surprise that the largest percentage of this base is reported to be primarily 18-24 year olds (Verto, 2018b) given that this age group also represents the highest percentage of gamers in the US (Entertainment, 2018). The statistics of Fortnite players by age however, do not include those who are under 18, and thus does not represent the 45% of players 8-17 who have ever played (Common Sense Media, 2018). The official age rating for the game from Pan European Game Information (PEGI) is 12 due frequent mild violence and is deemed not suitable for children under 12 years of age [8]. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) has assigned it a rating of “Teen” for violence, deeming it suitable for ages 13 and up [9]. In a survey on the perceived minimum age of players, respondents indicated that it would be acceptable for children under these age restrictions to play (Common Sense Media, 2018b). The cartoon-like violence and lack of blood and gore are noted as reasons for allowing younger players who are attracted to the multiplayer format and the silly fun-loving nature of the game. The addition of *Fortnite: Creative* pulls from the Minecraft crowd, providing the creative imaginative experience with



new worlds and adventures, and in some cases a bonding opportunity with older friends and family members who play Battle Royale. A guide for parents explains that Fortnite “takes lots of the enjoyable gameplay concepts from more mature shooting games but places them in a non-threatening, non-realistic world” (Stuart, 2018).

This non-threatening, non-realistic world also provides a space for collaboration and communication. The ability to chat with other players has turned Fortnite matches into group chats and phone calls, with players talking about their school day one second and warning a teammate of an approaching enemy the next. While many focus on the gameplay, the opportunity for social interaction in a collaborative effort is one of the elements embraced by fans of the game and should not be overlooked.

### **Fortnite in Libraries (literally)**

The popularity of the game has been well established in the description and statistics and articles declaring it “the most important video game on the planet” (Feldman, 2018). The importance and potential of gaming in libraries has been discussed in library literature for several years. There is not room here to provide a full literature review, but Boyle (2019) provides a strong overview of the relevant literature in their article highlighting the importance of video games in urban academic libraries. The literature approaches the topic both philosophically and practically and librarians considering incorporating gaming into their practice and programming should seek these articles out for suggested best practices, assessment and other considerations.

There are many examples of how libraries are using the popularity of Fortnite for outreach and engagement beyond a clever tweet. Libraries can harness the power of a multiplayer game to expand the virtual experience, providing programming that emphasizes collaboration and imagination in real life. According to McGrath (2018), “what’s required to

make the most of Fortnite is an educator in the room who organizes game play and provides opportunities for kids to talk through their experience with the game”. A library is a perfect space to provide these opportunities and there are several examples of this being done successfully.

East Lansing Public Library created a reading list for “kids who love Fortnite” that include the aforementioned Hunger Games along with other survival type dystopian stories [10]. This is an excellent example of simple way to use the interest in a game to promote the library’s collection. Vose (2018) notes the low barrier to entry and suggests that librarians look into the potential for library programming. There are several examples of libraries already doing this successfully, from setting up laptops for group play to creating Fortnite IRL (in real life). A Fortnite party complete with trivia, a dance class and Fortnite themed crafts took place at the White Oak Library District in Illinois [11]. Glendora Library in California presented a workshop to introduce parents to the game and discuss online safety and the benefits of gaming (Yee, 2018). A school librarian posted on reddit about how they used Fortnite to engage with a group of students who had been labeled problems by the previous school librarian [12]. Several educators and librarians replied to explain how knowledge of and references to Fortnite helped them connect with students and patrons.

One of the most creative crossovers between libraries and Fortnite have been events that bring the teamwork, collaboration, missions, collecting of equipment and survival in the game to real life. Different libraries have approached this in a variety of ways, but most include building materials, scavenger hunts and yes, even nerf guns. Jefferson Madison Regional Library in Virginia hosted such an event, providing 20 participants with nerf guns, boxes and chairs to hide in and around and a marked area for gameplay with great success. A parent observed “any

excuse to go to the library is good, and anything getting them moving is great” (Wrabel, 2019). Emporia Public Library hosted a “Fortnite IRL” event that included missions to get to know the library staff, other players and even find facts. The library staff found that while “the kids seem pretty ruthless when they play Fortnite...in person, it’s much hard for them to eliminate players”. A detailed blog post provides a description of the program, what was learned and also encourages other libraries to host similar events due to its success [13].

### **Isn’t it addictive? Is it dangerous?: Addressing the concerns**

Some of the narrative around Fortnite, at least primarily from those who are not actually playing it has involved reactionary, and at times negative prose. While there are certainly concerns, as there are with any video games or social media platforms, it is important to understand what drives stories of addiction and the outcry of the game being “too violent” . One should be informed and be able to thoughtfully weigh the pros and cons when creating programs around, setting boundaries for or informing others about Fortnite.

The game, like other video-games, apps, and social media platforms is designed to captivate the player/viewer and maximize the time spent engaging with the platform. The play for free model relies heavily on the fact that players will want to spend money for improvements to their play, be it aesthetic or functional. Additionally, the motivation to complete tasks and achieve goals for rewards is a strong factor in keeping the audience engaged and coming back for more. Fortnite success is largely in part because it succeeds in maximizing engagement through these mechanisms. This can lead to players playing for long periods of time (one more try to get that goal) as well as strong emotions when not being able to have the time to achieve the goal. This combination of course will lead to conflict of interests between players and non-players, specifically children and their parents. There are several articles that detail changes to these

relationships with Fortnite being blamed for outbursts of anger, addictive behaviors and general degradation of personal communication. These can certainly be taken as cautionary tales but should be used to help inform rather than condemn a single video-game platform, especially when they can be framed with other more positive experiences and stories. Rather than scapegoat a specific game, those who are concerned can learn and even perhaps take the opportunity to play the game. As Kain (2019) points out in his rather scathing condemnation of those who vilify the game, playing the game is a good way to understand it, and provides a window into whether the game is appropriate for a specific individual or a group.

As with many spaces on the internet, Fortnite is not immune to the presence of harassment, bigotry and NSFW content. While there is a very explicit code of conduct which includes the fact that “Discriminatory language, hate speech, threats, spam, and other forms of harassment or illegal behavior will not be tolerated.” [6], there is evidence of ongoing violation of this code. Players are able to report other players for these violations with an easy to use in-game reporting system or outside form, but just as with any social media platform’s reporting system, this does not end harassment or prevent abuse of the reporting system. According to a recent report, 70% of Fortnite players have experienced some form of harassment in the game, with 26% experiencing it frequently (ADL, 2019). Recently, during a reddit AMA, a former neo-Nazi described how Fortnite and other gaming programs are being used to recruit white supremacists [7], which is further evidenced by the fact that the ADL report found that almost a quarter of online multiplayer games have been invited to discuss or have heard other discussing the “superiority of whites and inferiority of non-white” and/or “white identity/a home for the white race” (ADL, 2019). These high percentages are alarming and should not be ignored. Due diligence is needed on the part of adults in monitoring and talking to the tweens and teens

playing. An open line of communication regarding the potential for harassment and introduction of hateful ideologies is necessary in order to thwart those who would attempt to use the positive elements of connection and community to promote hateful ideologies.

As stated before, one of the aspects of Fortnite's appeal is the constant addition of new items to obtain at cost; emotes, skins, stylized weapons and specialty items. This emphasis on style and aesthetic can lead to a stigma against those who do not acquire the items and remain in a default state. Just as in real life where kids bully and ostracize others because of what they are wearing, players in Fortnite are not immune to the social pressures around their avatar's appearance (Hernandez, 2019).

All of these concerns, while not to be ignored, can be used as teaching moments, demonstrating the importance of being knowledgeable about the latest trends in order to educate others about them as well as embrace the positive elements, rather than focus on any negativity. In a world of online harassment and misinformation, librarians can use their skills to prepare future generations with the best way to approach and engage with these trends safely and thoughtfully.

### **A second third place**

As a place for connection and community, libraries are a "third place", a space that inspires and cultivates social interaction, collaboration, learning and communication. Social media is sometimes referred to as a digital or virtual third space. Libraries have been at the forefront of embracing and promoting these platforms and spaces that serve as virtual community spaces; teaching about them, providing access to them, and using them for outreach and engagement. As noted in the ADL (2019) report, massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like Fortnite provide space for social interaction and relationships and can function as

virtual third places for informal social communications and exposure to individuals holding diversity of worldviews.” The report goes on to highlight that a “a non-trivial amount of US adults having positive social experiences in an online shooter: making friends, learning about oneself or others and finding community.” Libraries can embrace the opportunities presented by Fortnite and other virtual third spaces in order to promote connection within the library space.

In asking my Fortnite playing child about what they thought should be included in this column, the response was to let the readers know that “Fortnite listens to its community”. Epic Games is responsive to player feedback regarding bugs, glitches, features and enhancements and communicates well with their base. Libraries are also known for listening to their communities, responding with programming, collections and engagement that meets their community's needs and desires. If the community is playing Fortnite, why not consider giving them a physical space with the opportunities for connection and creativity that can enhance and build upon those virtual experiences so they can be enjoyed safely and used as a learning experience.

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