

Fortnite

(2017)



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Component 1: Exploring the Media

Focus areas:
Media industries
Audiences

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- Produced by Epic Games, the *Fortnite* franchise is a series of multiplayer **free-to-play** battleground games available on a number of platforms and devices. It was launched in July 2017
- The franchise includes *Fortnite: Battle Royale*, *Fortnite: Save The World*, and *Fortnite: Creative*
- Fortnite: Battle Royale* is the most successful free-to-play videogame ever, making \$1.2 billion in the first 10 months of release. Initially, players had to buy ‘battle passes’ to play, but in September 2018 the *Battle Royale* version was offered for free.
- The *Fortnite* franchise had **revenue** of £2.4 billion in 2018
- The franchise has helped make Epic Games a hugely successful company. In 2012 they were worth \$825 million; in 2018 they were worth \$5.8 billion.
- Fortnite: Battle Royale* won ‘Best Ongoing Game’ in the PC Gamer and IGN awards in 2018.

Gameplay

- Players, in groups of 100, are dropped via a flying bus onto a deserted island that is about to be hit by a natural disaster.
- The aim of the game is to fight to the death, with the last player standing the winner. Players seek out weapons and other materials, but are also able to demolish structures and rebuild them into forts, towers etc.
- As the game continues, the storm starts to encroach, driving the players into smaller and smaller areas and forcing conflict.
- In terms of **genre**, *Fortnite* could be considered as fusion of battle games (like *Battlegrounds*) and construction games (like *Minecraft*).

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media industries

Social and cultural contexts:

The global videogame industry has been growing since the early days of Atari home entertainment in the 1980s. In recent years, the diversity of game genres and platforms on which they can be played has meant an explosion in the gaming industry. Based on a 2015 economic forecast videogame sales are expected to reach \$90 billion by 2020.

In 2014, it was calculated there were 1.8 billion gamers in the world - 25% of the global population. This challenges the stereotype of gamers as young geeky men. In 2018 in the USA, 28% of gamers were under 18, but 23% were over 50 years old. There was a 66/44% male/female gender split.

The range of genres - from first-person-shooters to puzzles and learning tools - has varied the demographic for gamers. The variety of platforms - not just home consoles, but on tablets and smartphones - that high quality, complex and engaging games can be accessed has also led to the growth of the industry.

Gaming has increasingly become a social activity. In 1997 *Ultima Online* became the first on-line multiplayer game, and since then socialising in the game world has become an everyday activity for millions of people, usually geographically far apart. People develop alliances, friendships and even romantic relationships as their game characters. ‘eSports’ - live competitive gaming events between celebrity players has also become popular, attracting millions of viewers through sites like Twitch and even packing huge stadiums like traditional sporting events.

Consider the impact of new technology and convergence:

- One of the things that have made *Fortnite* so popular is the ability to access the game from consoles, PCs, laptops, smartphones or tablets. You can also download it for a range of operating systems. Not only this but you

can move, mid-game, between devices without interrupting gameplay. This means it can be played at home, or on the move, on a tiny screen or a video projector. This is a good example of **technological convergence**.

- Epic Games use an operating system called Unreal Engine to develop *Fortnite*. They have made this available on their website, and encourage their audience to use it to develop their own games. Unreal Engine has also been used by professional game developers to create titles like *Batman: Arkham City* and *Infinity Blade*.
- *Fortnite* is also a good example of **cross-media convergence**, where more than one media brand or form joins to promote each other. *Fortnite* is the most viewed game on YouTube, and has also used streaming platforms like Twitch (owned by Amazon) to broadcast live competitions.
- It has also incorporated other media **brands** and **franchises**. In collaboration with Marvel Studios, there was a special *Avengers: Infinity War* segment and recently a tie-in with *Godzilla*. The format of *Fortnite* means that any kind of costumes, weapons and games can be introduced to keep the game fresh. Films/TV/sports can promote their brands to over 20 million of players, whilst famous collaborations keep *Fortnite* in the news and social media.
- Epic Games has a good relationship with various non-gaming celebrities such as Drake and basketball star Ben Simmons. This helps to promote the game beyond the traditional gaming market.

Consider Epic Games as an institution:

- Epic Games was started by Tim Sweeney in 1991 and was originally run from his parent's house. These humble beginnings may explain Epic's decision to make the Unreal Engine available to amateur games designers.
- In 2014, the *Guinness Book Of Records* named Unreal Engine as the 'most successful videogame engine'
- Epic Games owns video game developer Chair Entertainment and cloud-based software developer Cloudgine, and has sub-studios in the UK, Japan, and Germany.
- Tencent - a Chinese investment company focused on internet and AI development - bought a 42% stake in Epic in 2012.

Consider different funding and profit models:

- *Fortnite* is an example of the '**Games as a Service**' (GaaS) model - where there is a constant revenue stream from '**in-game purchases**' after the initial purchase (or providing the game for free)
- Some of these are '**micro transactions**' where players pay for weapon, costume and game upgrades rather than 'grinding through' the gameplay to score them. In *Fortnite*, players use V-bucks to purchase these items, and these can be earned in the game or bought using 'real world' money. Another game that does this is *Candy Crush*.
- Unusually in *Fortnite* the upgrades are purely 'cosmetic' i.e. they don't actually affect the gameplay. They often consist of new 'skins' (to alter your character's appearance) and 'emotes' (victory dance moves after a kill). These are only available for a short period of time, increasing their value and encouraging players to pay rather than 'grind' for them.
- Another revenue stream for GaaS titles is to offer '**season passes**' - like a subscription that allows you to access new content over the course of a period of gameplay (the 'season') that play-for-free users can't access.
- *Fortnite* offers players 'battle passes' and then drip-feeds limited edition and exclusive content to these players over the course of the season.

Consider regulation of the media:

- **Age ratings** are systems used to ensure that entertainment content, such as computer games, are clearly labelled by age according to the content they contain. Age ratings provide guidance to consumers (particularly parents) to help them decide whether or not to buy a particular product. The rating on a game confirms that it is suitable for players over a certain age.
- In 2012 the **PEGI** system was incorporated into UK law and The Video Standards Council was appointed as the statutory body responsible for the age rating of video games in the UK using the PEGI system.
- *Fortnite* has the PEGI rating of 12 for "frequent scenes of mild violence". It seems that parents are more concerned with issues surrounding addiction than the levels of violence.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Audience

Historical and Political Contexts

The relationship between videogames and audiences has been a controversial area, with many **moral panics**. These ranged from fears that violent games encourage **copycat** behaviour, to worries about addiction and the amount of ‘**screen time**’ that is healthy. *Fortnite*, when compared to other successful titles like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call Of Duty* contains very little explicit or realistic violence, and the cartoon-like graphics also make the game suitable for younger players.

In addition, there seems to be little racism or misogyny expressed by the players compared to other videogames - perhaps because free players are randomly assigned race and gender ‘skins’ at the start of each round. Critics have also praised the **collaborative** nature of the gameplay that encourages players to work together and protect each other (until the finale).

The main concern seems to be about addiction: with reports from teachers and parents that children are distracted from school work due to their engagement. One psychologist even compared it to heroin! There have been reports that Premier League footballers were being treated for addiction, and Prince Harry said the game is ‘dangerous’.

Consider the way media industries target audiences:

- *Fortnite* has used a combination of addictive gameplay, media/technological convergence and marketing to target a diverse and varied audience. 78% are male, 22% are female, 53% are 10-25, and 42% are in full time employment.
- The unrealistic violence and cartoon-style graphics, along with the emphasis on construction as much as killing, make it appealing to a younger audience.
- The rise of ‘eSports’ stars, mainly consumed via streaming platforms like YouTube and Twitch (where *Fortnite* is the most watched game) has led to players becoming major

celebrities. Ninja, the most famous *Fortnite* player has over 10 million subscribers and earns over half a million dollars a month. Ninja ranks highest in the world for social media interactions (i.e. people posting or sharing using their name - no.2 is Cristiano Ronaldo!

- This creates gamer celebrities that have become **aspirational role-models** for some audiences.
- The use of **non-traditional** gamer celebrities such as rappers and NBA athletes widen the appeal of the game. The popularity of ‘Twitch Girls’ (female streamers like KatyPlaysGames) has also appealed to women.
- *Fortnite*’s use of ‘seasons’ - with rumours and gossip about future seasons - follows the cable TV/ on-line subscription style of **long-form TV drama**.

Consider active and passive audience responses:

- The basic gameplay of *Fortnite: Battle Royale* is interactive and collaborative, encouraging players to work together. By being able to deconstruct and rebuild the game environment, players are encouraged to be creative.
- *Fortnite: Creative* is a different format that allows even more creativity in designing ‘skins’, ‘emotes’ and landscapes.
- In addition, Epic Games have made their operating system Unreal Engine available (at a price) to encourage the next generation of games developers.

Consider theoretical perspectives:

- Blumler and Katz’s ‘**Uses and Gratifications**’ theory considers why people interact with media texts.
- *Fortnite* - along with many videogames - could relate to the ‘**escapism**’ and ‘**catharses**’.
- However, the collaborative nature of the gameplay could also provide **social interaction**.
- The use of gamer and non-gamer celebrities could also relate to the search for role-models that contribute to personal identity. This could be linked to **Dyer’s ‘Star Theory**’.