

## ***Fortnite Battle Royale (2017, pre-print)***

### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses the history and the mechanics of *Fortnite Battle Royale* (Epic Games, 2017), originally developed as a specific game mode of the survival and construction game *Fortnite* (later renamed *Fortnite: Save the World*). After a brief presentation of the game's development phase, we focus on its specific gameplay characteristics, as well as its strategies in the construction of a transfictional and serial universe. The success and reputation of this "free-to-play" game is in part due to its business model. Although the game does not feature loot boxes, *Fortnite* makes extensive use of in-game purchases within an emerging video game genre ("Battle Royale"). *Fortnite* also stands out as a social platform, particularly tailored to the needs and expectations of contemporary "platform capitalism", and designed to integrate a wide variety of practices. *Fortnite* is simultaneously an online multiplayer shooter and a platform for discussion and sharing, as well as a place to socialize where you can attend a Marshmello or Ariana Grande concert. It is in its singular combination of preexisting playful, commercial, social, and cultural characteristics and models that the game finds its specificity, making it an important landmark in the history of video games at the turn of the 2020s.

### ***Fortnite Battle Royale (2017)***

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The highly successful release of *Fortnite Battle Royale* could suggest meticulous planning leading to its release on September 26, 2017 as an alternative game mode to *Fortnite* (later renamed *Fortnite Save the World*, hereafter *StW*), launched on July 25, 2017. The advent of this multiplayer game created by Epic Games, a company famously known for its game engine Unreal, can, however, be perceived as a particularly serendipitous event. After a long and challenging development phase (*Fortnite* was unveiled back in 2011), Epic Games tried to boost their product by capitalizing on the success of the "Battle Royale" genre, particularly in fashion following the success of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG Studio, March

2017; hereafter *PUBG*). Epic Games had provided technical support to PUBG Studio during the development and launch of their game in early access, the latter running on Epic Games's Unreal Engine 4. *PUBG* was finally released on December 12, 2017. Meanwhile, Epic Games developed *Fortnite*'s Battle Royale mode in two months<sup>1</sup>. The proximity between these companies, and *Fortnite*'s success overtaking *PUBG*'s, incidentally led to a lawsuit for copyright infringement (later abandoned) – the first in many that would follow in the history of *Fortnite*.

### ***Fortnite: A User's Manual***

In the original game, *Fortnite StW*, players use building mechanics reminiscent of *Minecraft* to create forts in order to withstand repeated assaults by waves of computer-controlled opponents (based on the “Tower Defense” game format). The unexpected merger of this gameplay with the codes and conventions of the “Battle Royale” led to the core structure of *Fortnite Battle Royale*, which quickly overshadowed its parent title.

The name “Battle Royale” is derived from the Japanese dystopian film *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) in which a group of students trapped on an island are forced to kill each other in order to be the last survivor of a satirical TV show. Battle Royale games were initially developed within the modding communities of warfare simulations (see the *ARMA* series, Bohemia Interactive, 2006-). A game of *Fortnite* starts with a hundred players, confined in a flying school bus, being parachuted onto a fictional island. Each player (or team) chooses a landing spot, finds material and equips themselves to fight their opponents. A “storm” progressively engulfs the island and tightens the game space in order to force the

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<sup>1</sup> Note that a PvP mode for *Fortnite* had been envisioned years prior to its release.

players to converge towards the same location. This extrinsic constraint sets a time limit to the game experience (around 15 to 25 minutes) until only a single person (or team) remains.

*Fortnite* specifically taps into the intensity of the “DeathMatch” multiplayer mode introduced by *DOOM* (id Software, 1993), while replacing the cramped corridors of first-person shooters (FPSs) with the vast expanses of open-world games. To some extent, *Fortnite*, in which the character is seen from a third-person point of view, offers an alternative to the “tunnel vision” that Rune Klejver argued was a necessity in FPS games, in that “enemies can potentially attack from any direction (this is why there will always be corridors in the fps no matter how capable the technology: the tension of having free space in all directions must be carefully regulated)” (Klevjer, 2006, p.2). It is precisely this permanent threat of being attacked “from any direction” that the game fosters, all the more so as the initial position of players can lead to immediate confrontations. In the case of *Fortnite*, the regulation of this tension is achieved through the agency offered by the building mechanics. By erecting temporary barricades, ramps, or roofs out of various materials collected on the island, the players can protect themselves from attacks, while creating a secure space to spot the opponent and plan their response. Such a high-intensity multiplayer experience is also reinforced by the direct elimination of players when they reach 0 hit points and are automatically switched to the point of view of their victorious foe, enjoying a brief respite before being sent to the next match (a fate shared by all players/teams but one in every match!).

*Fortnite* distinguishes itself from its “Battle Royale” predecessors by moving away from the visual and physical realism, in favor of a cartoonish and colorful fictional universe. Despite the presence of pistols and rifles in the game, age ratings suggest that *Fortnite* is suited in most countries for children twelve or thirteen. The aesthetic choices favored by Epic

Games have thus allowed the company to reach a larger audience than previous multiplayer shooters.

### **Playing on a Transmedia Island**

Following the example of contemporary media franchises and TV series, *Fortnite* has built its success by harnessing the serial dynamics of recent cultural productions (Denson & Jahn-Sudmann 2013). The game world is a testament to the sophisticated use of “transfictionality” logics at work in many cultural productions today (Saint-Gelais, 2001). The game is structured in “seasons”, leading to a renewal of characters and items in-game as well as a partial reconfiguration of the island. Usually lasting from two to three months, each “season” of the game gives access to new characters (“skins”) that draw on established cultural tropes (aliens, secret service agents, superheroes, etc.), franchises (e.g., Marvel, 2018; John Wick, 2019; Star Wars, 2019; NBA, 2021) and personalities (e. g., Marshmello, 2019; Travis Scott, 2020; Neymar, 2021), as well as emotes, dances, and various cosmetic objects (gliders, pickaxes, etc.). None of these assets provide advantages in-game with regards to the winning conditions other than the potential psychological impact of the avatar's look on other players.

The in-game store has been available since the launch of *Fortnite* through the game’s main menu. The selection of objects available for sale refreshes every 24 hours to further incentivize purchases. Backpacks, weapon skins, musical tracks and loading screens have been added months and years later to this store, with the same time-constrained purchasing technique.

On December 13, 2017, Epic Games launched “Season 2”, retrospectively naming the first period of the game “Season 1”. Season 2 saw the creation of a paid option, called “Battle

Pass”, providing weekly quests that allow players to obtain in-game assets otherwise impossible to buy. This system, as well as the in-game store, would generate significantly higher revenues than previous shops in free-to-play games, often focused on attracting “whales” – a minority of players who spend large amounts of money to acquire virtual assets or in-game advantages (Tassi, 2018). Since *Fortnite*’s launch, this in-game store has generated significant revenue, with sales figures of up to \$300 million per month.

Despite using assets created for *Fortnite StW*, *Fortnite* rapidly took its own narrative path, developing stories in-game through cutscenes and environmental storytelling (Carson 2000). This parodical – and somewhat paradoxical – universe facilitates the integration of various media and cultural contents, such as the secondary mechanics of dances and tags<sup>2</sup> (further discussed below). It also allows an almost perpetual renewal of the game, through the regular addition of new avatars, equipment, or dance moves, without undermining the coherence of the game world. To the contrary, the constant addition and mixing of cultural icons has led to the participative creation of cross-franchise narratives by the players, often shared and discussed on social media. This notably happened in April 2020 when Xbox’s mascot Master Chief, from the *Halo* franchise, became available in the game store at the same time as Sony’s mascot Kratos, from the *God of War* franchise. In-game screenshots of both characters fighting side by side were massively shared on social media, eventually fueling the game’s marketing campaign, and more specifically its cross-play feature allowing users on most platforms (including the PS4 and Xbox One) to play together.

Since 2018, in order to stimulate purchases on the in-game store and integrate high-value media content into the game, Epic Games has been multiplying partnerships with various franchises and personalities. Meanwhile, they have been accused of pillaging famous

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<sup>2</sup> Players can make their avatar initiate a dance sequence, or graffiti on the in-game environment at any time. These mechanics are often used to interact with other players.

moves from pop culture without any compensation to their authors, in particular dances from African-American musicians or actors (e.g. 2 Milly, Alfonso Ribeiro), provoking a significant media backlash. Although such practices are widely perceived as unethical, online platforms such as *Fortnite* deliberately exploit the limitations of the current legal framework, allowing for the reappropriation of such cultural assets without infringing on copyright law (Ravetto-Biagioli 2021).

### **Cross-Play: *Fortnite* on Every Platform**

From a technical standpoint, *Fortnite* is made with Epic's Unreal Engine. The game originally ran on Unreal Engine 3, and later moved to Unreal Engine 4 in order to display the technical capabilities of the company's latest engine. *Fortnite* demonstrates the in-game chat feature (text and vocal) available through the engine, running independently of any platform's vocal communication system. Available at launch for Windows, MacOS, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One, Epic Games released versions for Nintendo Switch, iOS, and Android in 2018, showing that one given game could be developed, played, and regularly updated on numerous competing platforms. Epic Games's strategy has further involved the promotion of cross-playability between the different versions of the game.

Besides the technical challenges involved, the studio also had to convince Sony, notably known to be reluctant to allow this feature on the PlayStation 4. In August 2019, Sony accepted cross-play as a result of a financial agreement with Epic Games (Warren, 2021). The deployment of the game on numerous platforms, as well as the economic weight acquired by Epic Games in the wake of the game's success, has led to structural changes within the "duopoly" model that Apple and Google maintain in the digital applications market. In August 2020, Epic attempted to circumvent the fees charged by these two

companies by changing the way the game's virtual currency ("V-bucks") was purchased on iOS and Android versions. This led Apple and Google to remove the game from their online store. Epic Games immediately lodged complaints against Apple and Google and launched a public campaign rallying companies like Spotify and Match Group (*Tinder*) within the "Coalition for App Fairness"<sup>3</sup>.

### **Of Battle Passes and Pickaxes: *Fortnite*'s Business Model**

The business model of *Fortnite* is based on the practices that have been in place in the online gaming and mobile application market for the past decade. In 2012, Epic Games allowed Chinese company Tencent to acquire 40% of the company's shares in a move towards the development of products based on the "game as a service" model. That is to say, games regularly updated with new content, in which players are invited to spend money on the long run, either on a subscription (e.g., *World of Warcraft*, [Blizzard Entertainment, 2004](#)), or on virtual in-game assets (e.g., *Candy Crush Saga*, King, [2012](#)). Five years later, the success of *Fortnite* validated that strategy, providing Epic Games with large revenues and allowing the company to diversify its investments.

The commercial success of *Fortnite* attracted substantial media coverage as early as 2018, partly reconducting the discourses of "moral panic" already at work in the reception of video games and "new media" in general (Bowman, 2016). One could easily stumble upon an article arguing that the game was sending legions of young teenagers to detox (Bloomberg, 2018), that it was the source of many divorces (Darby, 2018), that *Fortnite* is as addictive as cigarettes (Fournier, 2019), or that Prince Harry considered the game harmful and wanted it banned in the United Kingdom (Lanier, 2019)!

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<sup>3</sup> It is well worth keeping in mind that this "crusade" against the digital distribution giants took place as the studio was itself branching out into online distribution through the creation of the Epic Games Store, largely funded by the success of *Fortnite*.

The media coverage of the game was all the more important as the latter went far beyond the sole practice of online shooters. Indeed, *Fortnite*'s dances were quickly mimicked by soccer stars, or reinterpreted by YouTubers. The game's competitive mechanics and scoreboards have led to heated discussions in schoolyards. And the game has also generated a lot of para-ludic activity, through Twitch channels, content creation by YouTubers, and the emergence of a professional scene heavily bankrolled by Epic.

Generating and fostering a myriad of activities related to the game itself, such as watching videos online, establishing Twitch channels, or participating in forums, are certainly not specific to *Fortnite*. Nor is its financial model, which is partly based on predatory logics aimed at harnessing the purchasing urges of its (partly young) audience. That being said, *Fortnite* has managed to combine a variety of trends from contemporary game and business models in a single game, making it a platform for sharing and socializing capable of "capturing" a wide variety of practices – and data. This is demonstrated by the celebrity concerts organized within the game, such as Ariana Grande's in 2021, or by the "Playground mode" launched in 2018, which allows groups of friends to meet on an island, to interact or play freely without the competitive constraints of standard matches.

Epic Games has also endured its share of controversies with *Fortnite*, from the traditional moral panics to issues related to cultural appropriation and platform capitalism. As a "game as a service", *Fortnite* will keep going through regular updates and experimenting with business models that are deemed the most profitable. In the coming years, studying this game, or rival games like *PUBG*, *Destiny 2* (Bungie, 2017), and *Apex Legends* (Respawn, 2019), will offer insights on the evolution of multiplayer shooter games and their business models.



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### **Further Reading**

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## Endnotes