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The Fortnite Phenomenon: Should Christians be Wary? (Part I)

Abstract

"Evidence shows that video game addiction is much more of a concern among young people using video games to escape or cope with challenges in their lives."

Posting about parental responsibility in managing children's leisure activities from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-fortnite-phenomenon-should-christians-be-wary-part-i/>

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in things

July 10, 2018

The Fortnite Phenomenon: Should Christians be Wary? (Part I)

Donald Roth

The news coverage is enough to make concerned parents switch to panic mode: **a young girl is so addicted to Fortnite that she wets herself rather than get up and leave a match, leading her to be committed to a rehab clinic for gaming addiction.** Parents have long looked at video games with at least a sideways glance, worried that they are making kids more violent and lazy—while also leading to a generation of losers who never leave their parents’ basements. Regardless of the truth in any of these suspicions, there are ample anecdotes and urban legends that make the rounds to substantiate any of our worst fears. This means that when a game like Fortnite comes along raking in **\$100 million a month and boasting something like 2 million people playing online at any one time**, it becomes a magnet for all parent’s worst fears.

So what should Christian parents do? Should we be fearful? Well, I have a simple, biblical answer that can guide all parents who are worried about whatever the new gaming craze is—be it Fortnite or whatever inevitably replaces it in a few months. As a special bonus, the answer comes straight from a book of wisdom (so you know it is good!):

There is nothing new under the sun. (Eccles. 1:9)

I know, I know. It is going to take some convincing to get you to buy into this, and I plan to get to that, but it really is a helpful mantra to repeat to yourself anytime the news media has you preparing to ring the alarm bells and run around doing your best Chicken Little impression.

There’s nothing new under the sun

Before we dive in to looking at Fortnite, we should pause and consider the mantra that I am recommending. In saying “there is nothing new under the sun,” I am not saying “...therefore, there is nothing to be worried about.” What I am saying instead is that even though we have

learned how to package things up differently over time, rarely is something entirely novel. Instead of being an encouragement to just shrug things off, “there is nothing new under the sun” is a call to be careful students of history.

Fortnite is popular for reasons that we have seen before—one being that it touches on aspects of who we are. Therefore, where there are reasons for concern, we are not completely unequipped to deal with the challenges presented. If we approach the issue from a posture that breaks down a phenomenon like Fortnite into its constituent parts, and we assume that no single part is unique until proven otherwise, the whole thing becomes a lot less scary and intimidating.

Using this approach, the important thing to attend to is how Fortnite serves in the formation of our children. Anyone familiar with James K.A. Smith knows about his emphasis on the formative power of habit. That is, what we do and the way we do it has a substantial shaping effect on who we are and what we desire out of life. However, our desires aren’t just shaped by what we do but also by what those actions mean to us. In other words, our self-identity affects the way that our habits integrate into who we are, especially in how “sticky” those habits are and what direction their formative effect takes. For this reason, I like to add a dimension of emphasis to Smith’s focus that points to the imaginative aspects of our identity. That is, who do we imagine ourselves to be, and how does something like Fortnite play into that self-image in a way that shapes a player’s disposition and desires?

So, in the rest of part I and part II of this piece, we will assess the Fortnite phenomenon by looking at an aspect of Fortnite, thinking about how it might be forming players, and thinking about how parents might work to guide the formation of their children in this area, drawing throughout on lessons reinforced by our mantra. Specifically, we will focus on the formative aspects of Fortnite as a video game, in its most popular playstyle, and as a profit generator.

How are Kids Shaped by Video Games like Fortnite?

The leading edge of concern over the Fortnite phenomenon is the fear of addiction. Kids are spending hours playing Fortnite (or other video games), and that can’t be good for them, can it? Young people have declining levels of **mental health, empathy, and creativity**, and they’re playing more video games, so it must be rotting their brains, right? As a result, a strain of popular culture that resonates with parents **thinks of video games like dangerous narcotics**.

Actually, the culprit researchers suspect is most to blame is a loss of unstructured play time, and video games are often one of the few types of relatively unstructured play that kids enjoy anymore. In other words, video games **may be lessening, rather than aggravating, these negative trends**. Kids need play time, and video games are play, not drugs, and they have many of the same benefits that come from freeform play in any environment.

So how does Fortnite fit in as an example of unstructured play? The game itself has a colorful and simplified aesthetic that feels somewhat cartoonish, and the gameplay is a mix between

crafting and survival games like Minecraft and a more traditional shooter game. That is, players will harvest resources from their environments to craft walls, ramps, and more complex devices like traps and launch pads while engaging in combat using weapons they find in their environment. Players have a certain amount of health and can accumulate shields/armor that augment that, but each blow they receive will chip away at that total as a little cartoon number that pops out of their body on a successful hit.

The gameplay style of Fortnite encourages good awareness of one's surroundings, conservative, but decisive play, and creativity in the formation of buildings or the laying of traps. Players have to constantly be aware of their immediate surroundings, keep a mental tally of their preparedness for combat (such as their ammunition), plan to accomplish immediate and long-term goals, pay attention to the ever-shrinking map, and be ready to adapt to new challenges at the drop of a hat. As a skillset that's needed to succeed in the game, this is actually pretty cognitively complex. Alternately, players can lean in to their creativity and just mess around building absurd traps or structures. Either way, Fortnite taps into some of the benefits of more unstructured, creative games like Minecraft while also accessing some of the cognitive benefits of shooter games, which have been shown to have **a positive effect on players' abilities in areas of spatial navigation, reasoning, memory, and perception.**

As to addiction concerns, evidence shows that video game addiction is much more of a concern among young people using video games **to escape or cope with challenges in their lives.** This isn't unique either, and the root concern shouldn't be with the inherent evil of video games or the moral failing of those who play them. Instead, parents should be seeking to figure out *why* their kids are playing video games, and where it seems to be rooted in coping, draw on a **wealth of advice** from other areas to help foster healthier coping mechanisms than escapism.

In short, Fortnite has more in common with playing in the back yard than it does with snorting cocaine, since it is likely to form players in ways similar to unstructured play while providing other cognitive benefits. We don't tend to be as critical of a kid who spends all day shooting hoops, and that same attitude can be of use here. People playing Fortnite are cognitively engaged in a valuable way, but, like with diet, healthy variation is valuable, so sedentary free play needs to be complemented by exercise, reading, and the whole variety of activities that make for well-rounded adults. If advice on this part of thinking about Fortnite seems less than earthshattering, it's because it is: there's nothing new under the sun.