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Donald Roth

Dordt College, donald.roth@dordt.edu

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

Abstract

"Video games should be viewed as providing teachable moments rather than dangerous temptations."

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.

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in things

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

Donald Roth

In Part I of this article, I rolled out my “revolutionary” approach to the pressing question of how worried Christian parents should be about the current video game sensation Fortnite. For those of you who didn’t click on that part, here’s the quick version: remember, ***there’s nothing new under the sun***. If we look at the formative aspects of the game, we’ll see them echoed in many other areas, and we can use insights from those other arenas to inform how we respond to this particular phenomenon.

I ended part I by encouraging parents to think of video games more as playtime than dangerous addiction. Today, we’ll poke at two other aspects of the game, its “battle royale” game mode and the business model that has made it such an astounding profit generator.

Will Battle Royale Turn my Child into a Serial Killer?

Okay, that subtitle is a little bit of a strawman, but many Christian parents’ first concern with a game like Fortnite will be the violence of the game’s most popular play mode, “Battle Royale.” This game mode plays like the rules of the recent Hunger Games phenomenon, with players parachuting off of a flying bus as it sails over the game map and scavenging what they can from where they land while the playable area of the map is progressively reduced as players are killed off. Eventually, one player (or team, in team mode) is the last one standing and is proclaimed the winner before a new round starts. Rounds take around 20 minutes from start to finish, but players who are killed off can leave to join a new round as soon as they die.

There it is: players are killing one another off in some sort of deathmatch scenario. This must be malforming children somehow, right? Yes, the action is to kill off other players, albeit in a rather cartoonish style that is more reminiscent of *Looney Toons* than *Call of Duty*, but this is where my little tweak on James K.A. Smith from last time is important. It would be simplistic to stop at analyzing the game as a habit of killing off other players; instead, we should look to the skills needed for success and what disposition is actually fostered by the game.

Solid research in the area of video games and violence shows no connection between in-game violence and serious real-world violence; although, some studies do show a weak correlation with more minor forms of aggression. Looking at the behavior promoted by these games, the same skills are rarely used in the sustained violent aggression that plays out in serious real-world violence. Yes, a certain aggressive, decisive impulse is required, but it is often checked by careful assessments of the costs and benefits of action. That is, gamers are trained to be decisive when a good opportunity presents itself but disciplined and measured in their aggression, lest they make themselves vulnerable. This is especially true of Fortnite, where health can be hard to come by, combat can be costly, and overly aggressive players are often the first ones knocked out.

What about the more minor aggression? Well, what this amounts to is kids smack-talking one another or getting frustrated while they play, something that can escalate, but which is hardly unique to the world of video games. Fortnite can be frustrating at times, but the business model of the game, which I will get to shortly, is built around minimizing this and keeping things fun and light. So, again, it's not the worst example out there.

However, this doesn't mean there is no reason for concern, and again, the application of our mantra can be helpful. So where else are kids getting frustrated or leaning into tribal or competitive tendencies? How about sports? In this arena, we see the frustration of losing as something that **actually teaches emotional self-regulation**. Sports are good because they teach kids character, but we think a video game is bad because little Jimmy chucked his controller across the room. However, *there's nothing new under the sun*: when we see something that presents a challenge to our children's ability to control themselves, our default response shouldn't be to cut them off from it but rather to help our kids develop better skills in this area. That is, **self-regulation is only learned by practice**, and emotional self-regulation, like the broader issue of self-control, is one of the **most important skills our kids learn**. There may be cases where the situation has deteriorated so far that it's better to cut a child off, but video games should be viewed as providing teachable moments rather than dangerous temptations.

Should We be Concerned by How Fortnite is Making so much Money?

The real secret of Fortnite's **astounding financial success** is rooted in its particular iteration of the free-to-play revenue model. Free-to-play games are games that can be downloaded and played without paying any up-front fee; however, unlike just about every stupid free-to-play mobile game on my iPad, the paid elements of Fortnite are purely cosmetic. That is, there is no advantage to spending money in this game, and you don't have to watch a bunch of commercials to keep playing. However, if you want have access to any of the massive array of customizable looks and accessories, you almost have sign up for the "Battle Pass" as a paid subscription that accelerates how quickly you earn new cosmetic items.

This is one area where Christian parents should be *more* concerned than they probably already are. The things you buy in this game are all cosmetic add-ons, but these cosmetic add-ons are what make your character stand out as unique among a sea of generic characters. Rather than

the pure gambling mechanic of loot boxes made popular in other game franchises, Fortnite players buy in to a progression system where they are rewarded for playing more by unlocking more cosmetic items. This encourages players to outdo one another in their commitment of hours to the game, as often the most desirable cosmetics are achieved at the highest levels of progression. This creates both a sense of accomplishment in winning a silly hat and a temptation to excessive play.

This revenue model is accented by the way that this game taps into a social component by letting gamers play with their friends, but even more by the way that Fortnite features strongly in related media, such as Twitch and YouTube. Kids can play with their friends, then, when they can't play, they can watch their favorite streamers play to pick up on new techniques or ways to mess around. Overall, this creates an immersive environment that plays into both our social impulse and the (especially American) narrative of individualism. If kids want to stand out (kids do) or gain social status among their friends (kids do), they need to play a lot.

Now, I know I said before that Fortnite is more like playing outside than doing drugs, but you might be questioning me at this point. It sounds like Fortnite is more addictive than other games because it taps into a powerful impulse in the narrative of what it means to be an adolescent (in which social status is hugely important) and an American (you are unique), but, again *there's nothing new under the sun*. These are powerful narratives that permeate many areas of our culture, and the real upshot is just discerning that the same narrative is at play here. Fortnite is profitable because it taps into this cultural identity at scale (the free-to-play model making it extremely accessible), not because it's unusually pernicious in doing so. The key is for parents to teach their children to engage in what Smith calls *cultural exegesis*, discerning the spirits of our age, naming the counter narratives that might seek to draw attention away from who (and whose) we really are, and resisting them through intentional formation at church, home, and school.

Conclusion

To pull everything together, it may be beneficial to think of kids playing Fortnite as roughly equivalent to kids playing any game. Kids will often have a favorite, but we don't tend to get as worked up if our children are playing capture the flag all the time outside; instead, we just make sure they have sunscreen on and set boundaries like "don't go in the road" and "no shoving each other over." We embrace the benefits (exercise) while correcting for the negative risks (sunburns, injury). Fortnite is the same. We can encourage children to translate the cognitive benefits to the real world while correcting negative behaviors. In addition, parents can use the reality of frustration as an opportunity to learn emotional self-regulation and curb excessive time investment to learn the critical adult skills of delayed gratification and self-control. We can identify positive dispositions that might be fostered by this particular game, and we can name those to our children, encouraging them to integrate these positive traits while steering them away from negative ones. Most of all, we can resist the urge to freak out. Fortnite might be unique, but it is not really new, and it will be old news before long. After all, there's nothing new under the sun.