

It's not an island, it's a world: Fortnite, Temporality, and Worldness

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Keywords

Fortnite, virtual worlds, worldness, temporality, game cultures, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

Fortnite is a massively multiplayer online 'battle royale' game in which 100 players compete in a shrinking playable area to be the sole survivor, employing a range of weapons and strategies to overcome their opponents. Fortnite rapidly grew in 2018 to become one of the most popular digital games in the world, with a reported peak of 10.8 million concurrent players and 250 million registered players in March 2019 (Conditt, 2019). Industry research firm SuperData estimated that the game drew US\$2.4 billion in revenue in 2018, "the most annual revenue of any game in history" (Superdata, 2019).

One of the key design features which distinguished Fortnite from its predecessors and competitors was the design of its 10 week 'seasons', over which players compete to win challenges and narrative events impact the appearance of the gameworld (culminating in late 2019 to the world's total destruction at the end of Season 11). In this presentation, we will argue that this feature creates a sense of temporality to the gameworld which gives Fortnite play an affective sensation of 'worldness', similar to games like *World of Warcraft* and *EVE Online*.

METHODOLOGY

In brief, this study draws on interviews with 24 (17 boys, 7 girls) children between 9-14 years of age about their digital game play practices and engagement with games related content on sites like YouTube. Conducted in late 2018/early 2019, half regularly played Fortnite (all boys) with 6 (3M/3F) occasionally playing it, while 5 (4F/1M) had never played the game for various reasons (dislike, parental control, access, ect). Participants were recruited from three locations, Sydney, Melbourne, and regional New South Wales. Interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, and we structured around participants history and current interactions with gaming (not limited to digital games).

SEASONS AND TEMPORALITY

Seasons have a profound impact in giving the play of Fortnite a temporal quality; they heavily influence how players organized and recalled their experience playing. Our

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2020

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participants knew exactly when they started playing, by what season, when in the season we were, and subsequently organized their play around it. In part, this was by constraining the availability of challenges – and their rewards – to specific windows of time within a season, the relative importance of play shifts and develops. Each repetitive round is imbued with a different kind of contextual, player-dependent importance as a result.

Similarly, this temporality is key to the experience of Fortnite’s unfolding (and often incoherent) narrative. The island game world is constantly changing, introducing new areas and obstacles that are gradually hinted at and unveiled throughout a season. Our participants would excitedly tell us about these developments, and how it introduces “*drama to Fortnite*” which “*keeps you interested in the game*”, going on long spiels about the history of ‘Kevin the Cube’ and speculating on what they think might happen next. Demonstrating expertise about the history of the gameworld was a way for our participants – who were often novice players – to demonstrate skill at Fortnite.

AN AFFECTIVE SENSATION OF WORLDNESS

What we intend to argue in this presentation is that seasons and this temporal quality creates an affective sensation of worldness, making the Fortnite gameworld more akin to *World of Warcraft* than *Call of Duty*. We’re reflecting here on the early scholarship in game studies which focused heavily on the persistent, shared virtual worlds as being key to putting the ‘world’ in *World of Warcraft*; the coherent and imagined ecological environment that extended beyond the player avatar’s engagements with the game (Jorgensen, 2013; Krzywinska, 2008; Zonaga & Carter, 2019). This experience was contrasted to the lack of worldness in online multiplayer games in the first-person shooter (FPS) genre, such as *Call of Duty*, where the repetitive style of FPS matches saw the gameworld replicated each play session, and where the player has no sensation of persistence – and thus no sense of worldness.

As players drop into the world for a new game, they enter a persistent world shaped by the conditions and moment of its current season. The ebbs and flows of the changing world become embedded within the broader lived and performed youth culture that surrounds Fortnite; the pervasive and performative articulation of the game that occurs through dances, knowledge and discussions of seasonal changes, and the accumulation of skins, dances, and items earned through season-based Battle passes. The worldness of Fortnite is not due to the existence of a persistent online space, but rather the conditions of the world that shift with each changing season. This is unique to Fortnite and its rising popularity – the shifting world acts as a place to enter, to be social, but also to understanding through broader digital gaming practices of researching, or the performance of knowledge through dances and current in-game events. That is, to be in Fortnite’s world is not to enter the game for hours at a time, but to check in and revisit – to keep in touch with the world.

BIO

Marcus Carter is a Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures at The University of Sydney, where he conducts research into player experience at the intersection of Human-Computer Interaction and Game Studies research.

Kyle Moore is a sessional lecturer and research assistant at the University of Sydney. He researches locative media and urban media platforms. He was awarded a PhD from the University of Sydney in 2018, where he studied location-based gaming practices situated within their sociocultural and material circumstances.

Jane Mavoa Jane Mavoa is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. Her research looks at children's play in digital spaces, particularly the game Minecraft, and its surrounding social and cultural contexts.

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