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Soc 250
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Digital Immersion Paper

For my digital immersion assignment I chose to spend my time both playing the popular video game called “Fortnite,” as well as watching videos on YouTube that showed Fortnite gameplays. Since the game’s launch in July of last year, Fortnite has generated over 1 billion dollars in revenue, and there have been over 125 million players worldwide in just over a year of the game being available to the public, per DMR statistics (Smith 2018). What’s even more shocking about the game’s exponential growth in such a short time is the fact that it is free to play. In this essay I will briefly describe the game itself, as well as analyze from a sociological standpoint how the Fortnite “community” is so influential in the world of digital culture.

Fortnite features a “battle royale” style of gameplay in which 100 players compete to eliminate one another until there is one man left standing. Each individual player starts every match by parachuting from the sky and landing in different locations across the map that limits players’ movements. The player starts with no weapons, so he or she must land and search the various areas within the map for different items that can be used in combat. The game itself is on a continuous timer – as the time winds down, each player must be wary of the “storm” that encloses the map and makes the overall area that players can operate in smaller. This has the effect of pushing players into closer proximity with one another as the game goes on so that more gunfights take place. Something that is unique to Fortnite is the fact that the players can build structures by gathering materials – wood, brick, and metal – so that they can defend themselves and provide counter attacks against enemy players. No other game on the market has this feature, which certainly can

be attributed to the game's massive success. Furthermore, the game developers continuously add new aspects to the game every week, including new weapons, locations, consumables, and customizable items that can be purchased in the game's "store" feature, which the gamers anxiously await. Overall, the game provides new challenges every time you jump into a battle royale, and it leaves the player striving for more each time he or she completes a match.

I personally enjoy playing Fortnite very much for a number of reasons. First of all, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, there is always something new and different being added by the multitude of software engineers responsible for managing the game. They release "teasers" in the news section of the home loading screen in order to spark interest and desire to come back to the game to try out the new items released. Second of all, as I play more and more, I get better at the game and thus enjoy seeing my skills progress. Everyone enjoys things they are good at, right? Lastly, there is a highly social aspect of the game that I love: I can play online which allows me to talk and interact with my friends all across the country. I am able to play in the same match using Fortnite's "squad mode" with up to three friends at a time, no matter where they are. I have friends from all over, so I am able to talk with them and stay connected while playing Fortnite. Lindgren (2017) refers to this notion I was experiencing online as the "social interactivity" afforded by digital media. He states that digital media "has the ability to enable groups and individuals to communicate with, and relate to, each other" (Lindgren 2017:69).

While analyzing my experience from a sociological perspective, the first thing that came to mind was how my social identity played a key role in this aspect of digital

culture. Lindgren notes the importance of one's identity when engaging in online interactions. He states, "it is more and more obvious today that people's online identities are not separate from their 'real identities.' What we do on the Internet and in social media can extend or augment, rather than replace or fully alter, our offline persons" (Lindgren 2017:81). With this information in mind, I noticed several aspects of my offline identity that were continuously displayed while playing Fortnite. I have a large social circle, which enables me to connect with my friends from different groups easily and efficiently through the game's online platform. I am able to act and perform my identity with my friends in the same ways that I would do so if we were actually sitting in the same room, as opposed to being miles and miles away from each other. Also, being an athlete, I am very competitive by nature. I am always driven and motivated to try to win each game I enter, so this spirit of competition is definitely present. There's also no doubt in my mind that the other players I am competing with share the same drive to be the last man standing. This spirited relation, in combination with the actual online platform of Fortnite, is referred to by Lindgren as an example of an affinity space. He states, "in affinity spaces, people come together because of a feeling of similarity or like-mindedness. Such ways of relating to, and connecting with, each other have become increasingly prominent in today's digital world" (Lindgren 2017:120). This brings me to my next point of analysis, which is the fact that there is a definite sense of community that has been created by Fortnite.

Lindgren (2017) argues that shared interests can regulate the interactions of individuals through the Internet and social media. He states, "groups of individuals that interact through the Internet and social media, situated around shared interests, and in

which the sense of unity and support is strong, have been called online communities, or sometimes virtual communities” (Lindgren 2017:86). Although it is impossible for me to interact with the millions of players on Fortnite, I definitely feel like I am a part of the large community of players. This is due to the notion of imagined communities. Lindgren references Benedict Anderson and how communities are “imagined.” Lindgren says, “a sense of community relies largely on people ‘imagining’ – as in feeling and talking about – their communities into existence. The strength of a community is derived from the ways in which its members maintain the sense of their community through symbols and language. As most community members will never know of most of the other members, and are even less likely to meet them in person, community mainly exists in people’s minds” (Lindgren 2017:88). One way in which this sense of community is manifested on a daily basis is done by the biggest, most well known players of the game who have massive followings by Fortnite players, and fans alike.

The most renowned Fortnite gamer is Tyler Blevins a.k.a. “Ninja,” (his online username). Ninja is a full-time online streamer of Fortnite gameplay. Through streaming services such as YouTube and Twitch.tv, Ninja broadcasts and uploads daily gameplays. I follow him on both YouTube and Instagram, in which he has over 19 million and 10 million followers, respectively. During his daily gameplays, Ninja is able to interact with the community through a live chat room that displays comments from his viewers throughout the day and in real time. As a consumer of his content, I can speak from experience about the nature of some of the comments that he reads aloud to his viewers. One of the most common types of comments Ninja receives are about how his gameplay and his interaction with the community truly uplifts people and brings joy to them on a

daily basis. Viewers can say something along the lines of “I’ve been sick this whole week but watching your videos makes me so happy and I thank you for the content.” Ninja, seeing this, can respond and speak directly to that user and wish him a speedy recovery. Lindgren talks about this idea in chapter 5 as well. He states, “the availability, and feeling of relative anonymity, of online communities offer the opportunity for people to turn to others for comfort, security, or to boost their self-esteem during stressful times. At the same time, community members that are able to support others might be gratified by this activity” (Lindgren 2017:89). Thus, this mutual exchange is something that I see regularly in Ninja’s videos that he uploads to YouTube, and it contributes to the sense of a community as a whole. Something important to note about the content that Ninja posts on YouTube is the fact that his videos include his face as he plays the game live. People are able to see his expressions and mannerisms while he interacts with the people watching his stream by responding to comments like I mentioned above. Lindgren talks about the significance of this action by saying, “they fulfill the function of getting across the feeling that a particular moment – which might be large or small – is shared between the creator of the video and its viewers, subscribers, likers, and commenters. The act of ‘showing’ the online presence of individuals in videos establishes communicative connections with others” (Lindgren 2017:123). By watching his YouTube videos, I can see Ninja’s face and reactions and am able to identify with him through the gameplay experience that he is undertaking, and the emotional responses it is creating. Furthermore, a wide variety of Fortnite streamers, including Ninja, contribute to the offline community as well. They constantly organize charity events in which gamers get together in different locations and receive donations from viewers and sponsors and use the revenue generated

by the event to donate to certain charities. Their involvement and the sense of community contribute to bettering society.

There is one consequence that paints Fortnite in a bit of a negative light that is worth noting. I have spoken about the ability for players to connect with their friends online while playing. However, the game also enables players to play and connect with strangers, which sometimes has its downfalls. Lindgren (2017) talks about the action of “flaming” which he defines as, “online social actions that express affect in the form of aggression, insults, and hatred towards other users.” There is a ‘wraithlike’ nature to digital communication, which tends to make hostility escalate much faster online than in face-to-face situations” (Lindgren 2017:132-133). Unfortunately, due to the competitive nature of the game and the ease to communicate with other players online, this type of behavior has been known to exist. I have not personally experienced this, but I have heard from content creators and other gamers that this takes place. With that being said, Fortnite has a “report” function installed in the game, in which people can report instances of this rude, bullying-like behavior to the game developers, who can then take action and remove a player from the game. This works to safeguard against any hateful commentary and actions directed at players and tries to maintain a fun, safe, and enjoyable space for the players to battle.

As somewhat of an “insider” to, and a follower of the Fortnite community, I expect that the game’s popularity will continue to grow in the future. Changes are constantly being made that entice players to keep coming back, and the fact that the game is free means it is accessible for nearly all audiences. I can say for certain that I will continue to play Fortnite in the future, and that having done this exercise, in which I take

a step back from the game itself and analyze the experience from a sociological perspective, I look forward to noticing my role as well as the sense of community generated by this form of digital media.

Works Cited

Lindgren, Simon. 2017. *Digital Media and Society*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Smith, Craig. 2018. "45 Interesting Fortnite Facts and Statistics." *DMR*.