Jason Kemp
Professor Wallace
SI 110 Section 003
24 March 2022

Fortnite: Free Yet Competitive

To capture the attention of gamers is extremely difficult. With the constant emergence

of new games, better graphics, and revolutionary ideas, being able to capture even a fraction of

the online gaming market is impressive. Many new games are released each year, but many fail

to capture the hearts of young kids. However, Fortnite is not only dominating the online gaming

market, but it is becoming the staple of what new games should aspire to become. Since its

release in July 2017, Fortnite has become the face of online gaming. As of April 2021, some 80

million monthly users enjoyed the platform. This rapid domination and consistent fanbase

allowed Fortnite to be the most played Xbox and PlayStation game of 2021 (Kana). There is no

denying that the popularity and longevity of Fortnite is impressive. Fortnite has been able to

dominate the global gaming industry over the past three years, competing with games that

allocate billions to their sales and marketing teams. How has Fortnite done this? What factors

led to Fortnite's becoming so popular? And how has Fortnite stayed so popular in an industry

that is always seeking new and improved gameplay?

For the past two months, I have been proactively interacting with the Fortnite online

platform to try and answer the pressing questions above. I have been interacting with Fortnite's

"Battle Royal" game mode. Four players are randomly assigned to a team to eliminate all other

players in a last man standing game in this game mode. I have accrued over 80 levels by playing

this game and have played with countless players. In addition, I have interacted with fellow

players in a variety of ways, including using the in-game chat function and Fortnite's messaging

system. By communicating with fellow players and experiencing the platform for myself, I have

been able to explore the features that allowed Fortnite to dominate the market for gaming. By

combining the emotions that I had occupying Fortnite and the emotions of fellow gamers, I was

able to determine several factors that allowed Fortnite to outperform their competition.

Although we have learned about many topics so far this year, I decided to focus on Fortnite's

algorithm and their public good business model and explain how these two factors set Fortnite

apart from their competition and leave many players highly satisfied with the game. Before I

can explain the impacts that these course concepts have on the popularity and likeness of

Fortnite, I must first better explain what Fortnite is, the aspects of the game, and the overall

layout of the platform.

    The first step to interacting with Fortnite was downloading the Xbox store's game. Unlike

most games on the store, Fortnite is listed as "Free" and can be downloaded without paying.

Upon downloading the game, users are greeted with a home screen that is easy to navigate and

understand. The

figure to the right

shows the home

screen of Fortnite.

As seen in the

image, the seven

tabs at the top

allowed me to be able to easily understand and maneuver the platform without spending much

time learning how to operate it. Furthermore, a convenient video was played the first time

entering Fortnite that taught me how to navigate the platform, interact with others, and the game's basic controls. Unlike many platforms that rely on self-discovery, the tutorial that Fortnite provided relieved a lot of the stress involved with occupying a new platform. On the "Play" tab, players can select the game mode in which they would like to play and decide if they would like to play with themselves or with others. Further, the "Party Up" tab shown to the right shows players that you have "friended" and past teammates that you have competed with. I utilized this tab when reaching out to past teammates on their thoughts and feelings regarding different aspects of the Fortnite platform. By conducting mini-interviews during the past seven weeks, I captured the feelings of others who occupy the Fortnite platform.

You may be asking yourself, although the platform is easy to use and navigate, what makes Fortnite vastly more popular than other gaming platforms? Everything explained above may make you think that Fortnite is the same as other gaming platforms. However, this is far from reality. As suggested early, the business model of the Fortnite platform is pure genius and is one aspect that is very different than most games. For most gaming platforms, users will have to spend money purchasing the platform to play the game. However, this is not the case for Fortnite. Fortnite is a free game that requires no payment to play or participate. Furthermore, making Fortnite available to all inherits the same trails as a public good. As explained in class, a public good is both "non-excludable" and "non-rivalrous" (Wallace). By providing a public good, in a space dominated by private goods, Fortnite has been able to distinguish itself from competitors while exploding in popularity. One recent article writes that the "free-to-play" business model has both "set Fortnite apart from its peers" and has also been "one of the reasons for its great success" (Webb). While spending time on the platform, I constantly

compared my feelings towards Fortnite to other games I had to purchase to play. Although

Fortnite experienced similar issues as other games, such as long lobby wait times and server

crashes, I felt way more accepting of the platform failing since I did not pay for the game.

Similar feelings were expressed when discussing these phenomena with fellow teammates and

strangers. The figure to the right shows a conversation that resulted after a fellow teammate mentioned his love for free games. After the game had concluded, I
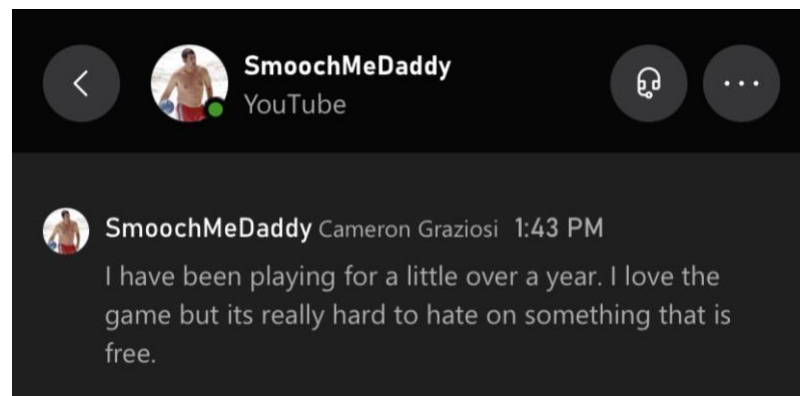
messaged this player in hopes he would expand upon his love for Fortnite's public good

business model. As the player states, "It is really hard to hate on something that is free,"

especially when other games "cost upwards of 70 dollars to play." It is clear that by providing

customers with a free product, Fortnite has captured the hearts of so many.

Apart from the fact that Fortnite is a free game available to all, another aspect that

further contributed to the soaring popularity is Fortnite's timing in the "Battle Royal" market.

Fortnite is the first game that introduced the world to the "Battle Royal" style. In Chapter 2 of

"Information Rules," written by Carl Shapiro and Hal Varian, the importance of market timing is

highlighted. Shapiro and Varian write, "the best way to secure a leadership position in a market

is an early presence in the market, combined with a forward-looking approach to pricing"

(Shapiro & Varian). Fortnite was the very first game of its kind. Many first-person shooter

games provided different modes, but never a battle royal mode. As Shapiro and Varian state,

being early, and in Fortnite's case, being first, has further allowed them to grow in popularity.

After the success and popularity of Fortnite's first person battle royal game, many companies

attempted to develop a rival game. However, because they were not the first to do so, Fortnite

has been able to maintain its vast popularity. One recent paper looked to answer how Fortnite

was able to gain popularity so quickly, especially in such a competitive market. The paper found

that Fortnite was "trying to maximize the player base" rather than focusing on "profit levels"

(Alha). To see if others agreed with this hypothesis, I asked several random players why they
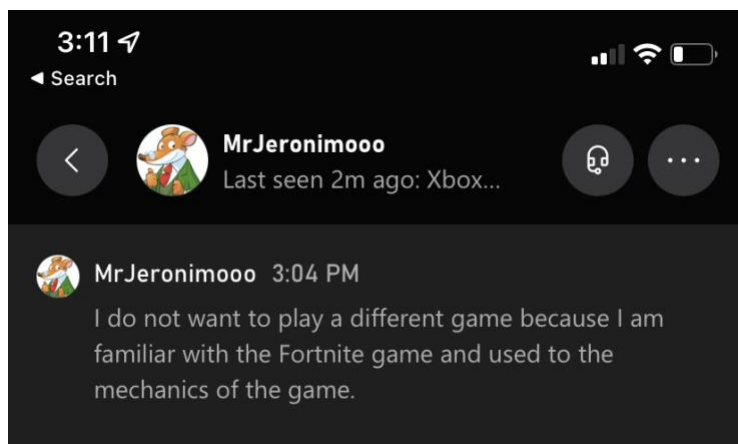
continued to play Fortnite when other free battle royal games were on the market. The figure to the left shows a conversation where the player states that the reason for which they continue to play Fortnite

is that they are "use to it" and "familiar" with the platform. Since Fortnite emphasized

expanding their user base quickly, many players flocked to Fortnite even though it may not

have been the best overall battle royal platform. During my own experience, because of the

free pricing and the vast number of players on the platform, I also felt like I could not see

myself on any competitor's platforms.

Some may ask, are there factors other than the design and economics that lead Fortnite

to outperform its competitors. The answer to that question is yes and has to do with Fortnite's

unique and engaging matchmaking algorithm. The Day 3 lecture slides indicate that an

algorithmic filter uses "processing power" and "data manipulation" to complete a function

(Wallace). By using that function to "implement or express" an outcome, Fortnite can

successfully utilize an algorithm within their game, as defined by Noson Yanofsky's "Towards a

Definition of an Algorithm" (Yanofsky). In the case of Fortnite, the platform successfully uses

algorithms to sort and match players based on a wide range of criteria. When first beginning

the occupancy of Fortnite, I noticed that many of the players in my game had shared similar

traits with me. When first starting off, players' accuracy is often imperfect, their movements are

sluggish, and they do not have a well-defined strategy for winning the game. One report stated

that factors such as "how often you play, total wins, accuracy, and skill level" all contribute to

the difficulty of your opponents (McEvoy). Fortnite can reduce the frustration when first

learning a game by having this algorithm in place. The two images below display the lobbies

when I first started occupying Fortnite versus after participating with the game for six weeks.

One thing to notice is the numbers next to each player's name in the top left of the screen. As

you can see in the top left corner of first image, I was level 1 and just beginning my journey.


Because of this factor, along with others, I was paired with players who also had a low ranking.

However, in the second image, my level is much higher, resulting in me playing with players

with a high rating. By forming games that will have players with similar experiences and skills,

Fortnite can create a competitive yet engaging environment. One recent academic study found

that by incorporating a "skilled based match making system," games can "significantly improve

player engagement and rating" (Sarkar et al.). If skilled based matchmaking was not a feature

that Fortnite implemented, many players would feel outmatched and unable to compete with

the more experienced players. In addition to providing users a sense of competitiveness,

Fortnite's skill-based algorithm matches players who may share similar backgrounds and

experiences with the platform. When I first began occupying Fortnite, I noticed that most of my

teammates were also newcomers to the game. As I continued to play and refine my skills, the

experience levels of my teammates increased dramatically. One article states that the high

retention rates of Fortnite are caused by players being "confident to win the next game" (Kana).

Many other gaming platforms do not have skill-based matchmaking. By not including this

feature, many games leave newcomers feeling hopeless and unable to achieve a high level of

gameplay. The Fortnite platform has successfully implemented the use of an algorithm to make

its users feel comfortable and willing to continue to play the game.

Fortnite has maintained popularity over the past several years and has also upheld very

high customer satisfaction because of the combination of the affordable price of the game, the

design and layout of the platform, and the matchmaking algorithm that maintains competitive

lobbies. When exploring the ratings and reviews of Fortnite, these three main factors were

behind a lot of the high
ratings. As seen in the
image to the right, this
individual left a 5-star
review. The rationale
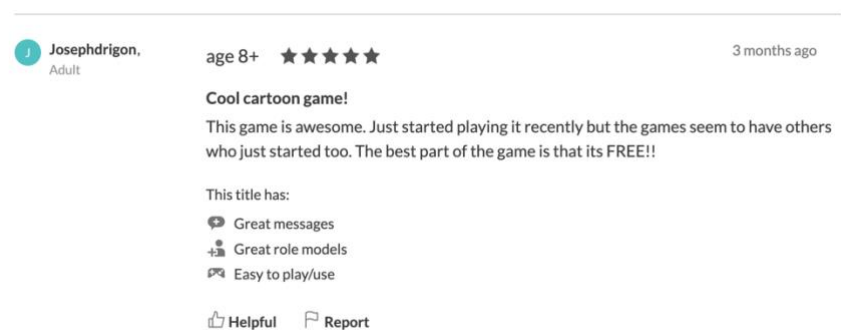
behind this review was that the game was "free," "awesome," and had similarly skilled players

who just "started too." All of these factors have led to Fortnite distinguishing itself from its competitors. When looking at the ratings of games on the Xbox and PlayStation game store, Fortnite is currently the highest rated game. Furthermore, as shown by messaging fellow players, along with evaluating Fortnite reviews, many fellow gamers attribute the insane popularity and uniqueness of the game to the free price of Fortnite, the ability to dominate a majority market share in the battle royal space, and by providing competitive games made possible by Fortnite's matchmaking algorithm. Kevin Webb, a writer for Business Insider, explains that "the low barrier of entry" and the "competitive battle royal matches" are both profound reasons to why Fortnite has "dominated the global gaming market" (Webb). Throughout my experience occupying Fortnite, Kevin Webb's rationale that makes Fortnite extremely popular are the exact reasons I attributed to my enjoyment of the game.

Personally, I really enjoyed spending time on the Fortnite platform. As I explained earlier, the transition onto the platform was very seamless and did not require me to investigate how to navigate or operate different functions. I spent nearly roughly six weeks participating with the platform. At the beginning of my journey, I knew that I was terrible at the game. However, as mentioned before, since the Fortnite matchmaking algorithm placed me into games with others who were new to the game, I remained content with the difficulty and did not find myself feeling hopeless. As I alluded to before, when starting a new game, I often find myself frustrated at the high levels of my competition and regret spending money buying the game. However, by providing newcomers with a free, public good platform, Fortnite was able to eliminate the feeling of regret. As I spent more time on the platform and my skills increased, my game lobbies became more difficult. However, the increase in difficulty was a

slow transition that felt very natural. Throughout this semester, I attempted to participate with

Fortnite at least three times a week. Often times, I found myself spending more than three

hours a week on the Fortnite platform. Players on the Fortnite platform can increase their

experience level by playing the game more. One's experience level is a way to identify how

skilled a player may be and how much they have played the

game. Experience points are earned through in-game challenges,

winning the game, and playing the game. By the end of the

semester, I had obtained over one hundred levels in the game

and won over 60 online matches, shown in the image to the left.

One of the main goals that I had before starting this journey was

to get to a point where I felt genuinely comfortable navigating

the platform and competing in matches. As I continued to achieve a higher rank, my comfort

level with the Fortnite platform increased. Fortnite is unlike any other gaming platform I have

occupied in the past, and I truly felt highly content with the platform and gameplay. At the

beginning of this paper, I made the argument that Fortnite has successful utilized a public good

business model and a matchmaking algorithm to capture and retain the gamers since the

release of the game. Whether you agree with this statement or not, it is hard to state that the

Fortnite platform has not been able to capture the hearts of millions. I will continue to compete

and enjoy the Fortnite platform even after finishing this project and I believe that Fortnite will

continue to provide users with an outstanding gaming experience.

Works Cited

Alha, Kati. "The Imbalanced State of Free-to-Play Game Research: A Literature Review."

   DiGRA, 2019, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-

   library/DiGRA_2019_paper_340.pdf. Accessed 23 Mar. 2022.

Kana, Michel. "Why Fortnite Became the Most Addicting Game in History." *Medium*, Towards

   Data Science, 2 Nov. 2021, https://towardsdatascience.com/why-fortnite-became-the-

   most-addicting-game-in-history-5e827754f76a.

McEvoy, Jake. "How Fortnite Matchmaking Works - Is It Skill-Based or Not?" *Know Your

   Mobile*, 8 Dec. 2021, https://www.knowyourmobile.com/consoles/how-fortnite-

   matchmaking-works-is-it-skill-based-or-not/.

Sarkar, Anurag, et al. "Engagement Effects of Player Rating System-Based Matchmaking for

   Level Ordering in Human Computation Games." *Proceedings of the 12th International

   Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, 2017,

   https://doi.org/10.1145/3102071.3102093.

Shapiro, Carl, and Hal R. Varian. "Chapter 2." *Information Rules: A Strategic Guide to the

   Network Economy*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA, 2010, pp. 19–51.

Wallace, David A. "Information and Society: Part 4." 9 Mar. 2022, Ann Arbor, Modern

   Language Building.

Wallace, David A. "Information Overload." 12 Jan. 2022, Ann Arbor, Modern Language

   Building.

Webb, Kevin. "'Fortnite' Was the Most Important Video Game of This Decade, and It Will Be

   for the next One Too." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 29 Dec. 2019,

https://www.businessinsider.com/fortnite-most-influential-video-game-decade-2019-

12#fortnite-shows-how-games-can-become-a-social-experience-3.

Yanofsky, Noson S. "Towards a Definition of an Algorithm." *Journal of Logic and*

Computation, vol. 21, no. 2, 2010, pp. 253–286., https://doi.org/10.1093/logcom/exq016.