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GREAT ESCAPE

Fortnite Is so Much More Than a Game

Teens have always created their own spaces to experiment, socialize, and indulge idle curiosity

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Credit: Ryan Hubbard. (Images: Christian Petersen and Chesnot/Getty)

We're just not going to make it this time but decide to make a run for it anyway. As we gain speed, we are laughing, because, well, here we are: an esteemed contributor to the *New Yorker* disguised as a bush and pushing a

fortysomething novelist across an abandoned parking lot in a shopping trolley. Under heavy gunfire.

I am playing *Fortnite* with my friend, the journalist and author Simon Parkin. He's at home on the south coast of England, and I'm in my basement about 200 miles west, talking to him through a headset at 1 a.m. We're trying to work out if we can get across Retail Row, one of the many set pieces on the *Fortnite* map. It's a crisscross of wide-open avenues surrounded by stores and cafés, which provide perfect sniping positions for other players. My wife comes down and asks us to be quiet. It feels like being a kid again.

Fortnite: Battle Royale is a game where 100 players land on an island, then have to fight until only one is left alive. It's been downloaded more than 125 million times since its launch, in September 2017, and is generating $250 million per month for Epic Games, the North Carolina–based company that made it. You'll know it from the media coverage that focuses on its "addictive" gameplay and the slew of articles warning about its "compulsion loop" and "dopamine trap."

And while the central premise really is compelling, what the alarmist coverage often misses is that *Fortnite* is not really a game about shooting people. It's a game about escape.

Through a variety of clever design decisions, Epic has constructed a true digital Third Place, a hangout where players are given a huge amount of autonomy to seek out the experiences they want. As a child of the late 1970s and early 1980s, it hit me a few weeks ago that *Fortnite* feels like a skatepark. Or if you prefer, a drag strip. Or a surfing beach. Or a roller disco. It has a central function that draws people in, but more important, it provides a safe place to hang out, experiment, and mess around. To be free.

You can explore the island and wander, jump, or climb your way through different experiences, from the spooky church towers of Haunted Hills to the labyrinthine tunnels under Shifty Shaft. There's a soccer pitch in the middle of Pleasant Park where you can play a match. Hidden within Wailing Woods is a mysterious hatch, and no one knows why it's there (although fan forums are overflowing with theories). Because of the way the storm forces you to keep moving, you're effectively writing your own road movie, trailing from one set-piece sequence to another. I have favorite routes I follow: I like to hike down from the drive-in movie theater in the northeast, along the river, past Loot

Lake (where there's a lovely modernist mansion on an island), and up the mountain in the center of the map. There, you get a beautiful view of the landscape, especially when the game's day cycle ends and twilight throws a purple haze over the view.

The game doesn't tell you to have these experiences, but it facilitates idle curiosity and the reward is the fun you have on the way. When my sons play video games, there's a little bit of trash talk, but they are mostly concentrating on the task at hand. When they're on *Fortnite*, the vibe is totally different. They play online in squads of friends, chatting and planning over headsets, and when it's time to stop playing, they tell us about the things they've seen and done; a daring raid, a calamitous accident.

Teens who play the game also feel this way. "I play with friends, as it enhances the experience and the amount of joy I get from the game," says player Max, 18. "It's a casual experience for us where we can sit back and occupy free time."

This isn't how competitive online games usually work. A typical shooter, like the *Call of Duty* series, is a highly directed experience. Every map is dense and claustrophobic and usually designed with three parallel channels that funnel players toward each other. *Call of Duty* is a machine of conflict; it's a slaughterhouse production line.

Fortnite, however, is set on a large island that looks like a nice place: It's dotted with estates, shopping centers, factories, and farms, and there's a lot of open rural space. There are butterflies fluttering about; the sun shines through the trees. You can form a squad of four people, playing cooperatively to stay alive. And because you spend most of your time exploring and ransacking homes to find useful items and weapons, you get "dead time" to mess around and chat; the conversation often drifts away from the game, so that *Fortnite* — like a skatepark — becomes as much a social space as a sporting venue. I've heard my sons talk about homework, comic books, and movies; they'll also set up complicated experiments and stunts. You can also choose to be grouped with strangers. Recently, I spent an enjoyable evening driving around the map in a golf buggy with a Spanish businessman and two Turkish brothers.

Credit: James Jarvis and Brandon Salt

"Folks are definitely using games as hangout spaces," says my friend Kat Brewster, a writer and academic researching play and the internet at the University of California, Irvine. "*Fortnite* specifically is so wonderful because it has so much character and flavor. It's so benign. I mean, yes, you're eliminating everyone around you, but that seems secondary to what makes *Fortnite* great. The comic book aesthetic of the game makes it feel safe, so it becomes a place where you can escape from your parents and be dangerous."

Fortnite isn't a game they play — it's a place they go.

For my sons and a lot of kids their age, *Fortnite* is not a game they play, it's a place they go — and, importantly, it's a place they go with friends and *not* with Mom and Dad. It's fulfilling the same development role as those illicit teen spaces from the 1970s and '80s — those dodgy youth clubs, arcades, and video stores that we discovered unchaperoned.

"Teens must learn to manage their own life and engage with autonomy. They seek guidance and advice from peers rather than parents," says cyber-psychologist Berni Good. "Sandbox games like *Fortnite* offer a great amount of autonomy, which is very appealing as young people transition to adults."

Consciously or not, *Fortnite* plays with a lot of the systems and signifiers of youth subcultures, especially specific clothing and slang. Just as skaters in 1980s Los Angeles developed their own style, language, and signals, *Fortnite* offers a range of emotes, gestures, and dances, accessible via the joypad, which have become part of the game's lore. If you're a parent, you may have heard of the Floss, the Electro Shuffle, and Orange Justice, even if you have no idea what they are. But like the language and apparel of the iconic surfer dude, these emotes are slipping into the mainstream: Sports stars are now using *Fortnite* dances as goal celebrations; pop stars and vloggers are performing them on YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Fortnite also understands the importance of status signaling in teen groups — the way wearing certain brands and outfits shows that you're a style leader. True, *Fortnite* is not alone in providing a range of "skins" and items so players are able to customize their character's appearance. But *Fortnite* locks most of its desirable goods away, and they can only be accessed by completing challenges and leveling up. In this way, these seemingly superfluous items become important signifiers.

Photo by Frederic J. Brown/AFP/Getty

People who don't play *Fortnite*, or video games in general, often say it's sad that modern teens aren't going to skateparks and roller discos and that they're getting these formative experiences online instead. In some ways, I guess it is, but kids aren't necessarily to blame here. Teenagers are caught in a crappy sociocultural Catch-22: Adults are worried their kids are spending too much time on smartphones and consoles, but at the same time they're constantly policing and restricting access to physical environments.

Lia Karsten, PhD, an associate professor in urban geographies at the University of Amsterdam, coined the term "backseat generation" to describe the phenomenon of teens who are constantly ferried from one adult-condoned, highly organized activity to the next. A couple days ago, I was chatting with the psychologist Frank Gaskill, who specializes in autism, children, and technology and is also a huge *Fortnite* fan.

"When I was 12 or 13," Gaskill says, "I was out on my bike all day long. I was going to the mall, hanging out with friends, going to the arcade, getting into trouble, and figuring out the world for myself. Kids aren't allowed to do those things anymore. I was with a group of parents recently, and this one mom was complaining that her daughter keeps turning off the location feature on her phone so she can't be found. I said, 'Your kid is 13. Why do you need to track her?' She said, 'I want to know where she is,' and I was like, 'Yes, but *why*?'"

We're also seeing limits on where teenagers can congregate in the physical world. Loitering laws and enforced curfews are criminalizing the concept of the hangout, while the increasing privatization of public parks and plazas means teenagers are unable to claim and inhabit spaces without being moved on by private security personnel.

What's really interesting about *Fortnite* is how it subtly synthesizes many of the things teens look for in urban spaces. In his seminal 1977 work, *Growing Up in Cities*, author and urban planner Kevin Lynch studied teens in four cities around the world to understand what attracted them to certain hangouts. Among the key features were a sense of safety and free movement, a cohesive and stable community, and nearby green areas for exploration, playfulness, and organized competition.

These are all aspects of the *Fortnite* experience. When my sons do well, they'll record and upload the footage so their friends can see it; the game's building element — which allows you to construct your own defensive forts — is a chance for skilled players to show off architectural genius. My younger son tells a long, highly involved story about how he once sniped a player in a moving buggy from 200 yards away. He saved the footage onto my PlayStation to talk us through it. I'll *sometimes* think, "Should I be worried about this?" But the visuals are so bright and bloodless, and most of the time the other players are dressed as gingerbread men, or tomatoes, or cheerleaders. It feels less like military violence than recalling a round of laser tag.

This also makes *Fortnite* fun to watch — and like the skatepark, it's as much about spectatorship as it is about taking part. The game has its real-life skate heroes in the form of YouTubers like Ninja and Lachlan, who show off their best moments to an audience of millions. But it's fun sometimes, just to hide within the game and watch others battle, and this easy flow between participating and spectating has helped make the *Fortnite* world feel more friendly than the usual online multiplayer experience.

This is illustrated in one fascinating feature: When you're killed in *Fortnite*, your in-game camera starts following the person who got you—you become a spectator to their progress. "It's weird because in most games when someone kills you, you're pissed off," Gaskill says. "But in this game, you end up seeing the person and you follow them, and you start rooting for them. It becomes a positive experience. I've been gaming since the 1970s and I've never seen a phenomenon like this."

Simon and I didn't make it through Retail Row alive — we went down like a clown school Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. He was taken down within seconds, and then I rolled uselessly along in the shopping trolley for a few feet until someone dressed in an enormous burger head blasted me to the curb. It was so dumb, and funny, and freeing.

My sons are playing *Fortnite* downstairs right now, and I can hear them laughing hysterically. It might not be a skatepark, but I think that's okay. I just remind myself how good it felt as a kid to have my own space to explore, and create, and escape into.

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Gaming Fortnite Youth Teens Great Escape

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