TECH

How Fortnite Triggered an Unwinnable War Between Parents and Their Boys

The last-man-standing videogame has grabbed onto American boyhood, pushing aside other pastimes and hobbies and transforming family dynamics

By Betsy Morris
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SAN FRANCISCO—Toby Ghassemieh is an inquisitive 12-year-old boy with a pet gecko named Coco and the makings of an ant colony in a bedroom cupboard. He built a forge in his backyard with plaster of Paris to melt aluminum into ingots. He wants to be a physicist when he grows up.

All that is on hold, though. What he cares about most is the videogame Fortnite. Same for his buddies Matthew Seiden, Max Howe, Jaren Erville and Reed Leidlein, who all live in or near the city's Richmond neighborhood.

These seventh-grade pals used to spend their after-school hours together, either at somebody's house or nearby Rochambeau Park. Now, they spend most of their free time apart, sequestered in their respective homes playing Fortnite and chatting through headsets instead of in person.

Not long ago, boys this age would be agitating for a trip to the movies or the skate park, someplace to hang out together. Not now.

"We see each other eight hours a day at school," Toby said. Going to the park, Matthew said, is boring compared with Fortnite.

In less than 18 months, "Fortnite: Battle Royale," a last-man-standing shooting contest, has grabbed onto American boyhood, joining, or pushing aside, soccer, baseball, even a share of mischief. Girls find it far less appealing.

It may be only a fad, but it is a particularly popular and time-consuming one. Fortnite has 200 million registered players, 60% more than it had in June, publisher Epic Games Inc. said last month.

The value of Fortnite's maker, North Carolina-based Epic, has swelled to nearly $15 billion from less than $1 billion in less than six years, The Wall Street Journal reported in October.

Fortnite is not only reshaping how boys spend their time, but how they communicate—it acts essentially like an open phone line. The videogame is free and can be played almost everywhere on game consoles, desktop computers, laptops or smartphones.

It can also tear at family relationships in a way that few, if any, videogames have done before.

> Jaren's mother, Victoria Erville, said her son "is hooked." Matthew's mother, Dionne Woods said, "I hate Fortnite. I just hate it."

Prying a boy from the game is itself a battle. "It's the bane of every parent I know," said Michelle Steigerwald, Reed's mother, a family law attorney.

Toby's mother, Shannon Wolfe, posted a plea on the neighborhood network Nextdoor: "Help!!! Does anyone know of a support group for parents struggling with Fortnite?"

The responses reflected the sharp divide between those who believe Fortnite threatens to stunt healthy physical, social and emotional development—and those who think it is fine, even beneficial.

"Seriously?"

"LOL, such a good game."

Others were like, So what's new? Parents have always been scared by new crazes.

"Just the latest fad. What was it when you were growing up that parents thought was destroying youth? Comic books? Walkmen?"

One fan suggested Ms. Wolfe watch her son play: "You might be surprised the amount of quick mental calculations he's doing in his head. It's like chess times 10."

For many parents, the problem isn't just Fortnite. It is the fear that technology, from smartphones to videogames, has gotten too skilled at seizing their children's brains.

Like with many videogames, the more people play Fortnite, the more data is generated about what captivates players the most and what drives players to quit. The constant stream of information boosts the ability of game designers to use machine learning to amplify player engagement.

As games get smarter, parents feel outmatched. "It's not a fair fight," said Dr. Richard Freed, child and adolescent psychologist and author of "Wired Child: Reclaiming Childhood in a Digital Age."

Fortnite feels to some like an uninvited visitor, one that refuses to leave.

Howls, shrieks

Toby lives in a cheery household that juggles two soccer schedules, his and nine-year-old sister Serena's. They have a dog named Louis. His father, Kayvaan Ghassemieh, is a product management director at Salesforce.com. His mother is a recruiter who likes to read and knit.

Their townhome is bright blue, tucked into a neighborhood of young families. Inside, a wall is filled with books. Their backyard has a trampoline.

Toby Ghassemieh engaged in a game of Fortnite. PHOTO: JUSTIN MAXON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Toby is allowed Fortnite only on weekends. On Saturdays and Sundays, the yard is quiet. The howls and shrieks come from the basement where Toby wields a submachine gun to kill off rivals.

For Ms. Wolfe, the sounds from the basement remind her of all the other ways—her instinct screams, better ways—her son could be spending his time. The list in her head is long: experiments, books, jumping on the trampoline or exploring the internet, which is where he learned about ants.

Her own childhood in Seattle, raised by a bookseller father and an engineer-artist mother, fostered a curiosity about the world she hopes to instill in her children. “That’s what’s so disappointing” about Fortnite’s arrival, she said.

Parents have long used favorite childhood activities to help teach moderation and self-restraint: Be home by dark; no TV until your homework is done. The struggle at Toby’s house illustrates the deficiency of those methods.

Toby Ghassemieh is “typically a nice kid,” his mother said. PHOTO: JUSTIN MAXON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Toby is “typically a nice kid,” his mother said. He is sweet, articulate, creative, precocious and headstrong—the kind of child who can be a handful but whose passion and curiosity could well drive him to greatness.

Turn off Fortnite, and he can scream, yell and call his parents names. Toby gets so angry that his parents impose “cooling off” periods of as long as two weeks. His mother said he becomes less aggressive during those times. The calming effect wears off after Fortnite returns.

Toby’s mother has tried to reason with him. She has also threatened boarding school. “We’re not emotionally equipped to live like this,” she tells him. “This is too intense for the other people living here.”

Mr. Ghassemieh, Toby’s father, is a former gamer who works in the tech industry. He believes a game like Fortnite can help children learn analytical skills. Yet, he is bothered by how all the stimulation affects Toby.

“Join the family for dinner? ‘What? I was just in a gunfight and you want me to sit down and have a nice meal?’” Mr. Ghassemieh said.

Toby has a different point of view: Everybody else’s families can handle Fortnite, he said. Why can’t his?

The Town School for Boys, an independent school not far from where Toby and his friends live, hosted a recent presentation on Fortnite. About 200 parents showed up for the event that featured Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that advocates for safe media use by children.

“Some kids could use this as a pipeline to college,” said Jeff Haynes, of Common Sense Media. He explained that talented videogamers can win scholarships, and virtuosos can win million-dollar prizes.

The message wasn’t what many parents had come to hear. One woman drew applause when she raised her hand to interject: “This has been almost a celebration of Fortnite. I’m waiting for the part that would be useful to us.”

As people filed out early, one parent asked, “What advice do you have for us families who want less Fortnite in their life?”

Human experiment

The attractive magic of Fortnite is an artful mix of game design with a persuasive technology designed to shape the behavior of users. It has, in effect, cracked the code of mass-market gaming.

Reed Leidlein playing Fortnite at home in Mill Valley, Calif. PHOTO: JUSTIN MAXON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Players experience random and unpredictable rewards, similar to the anticipation that keeps players at slot machines chasing winning combinations. These variable, intermittent rewards are what behaviorist B.F. Skinner found more effective in shaping the habit-forming behavior of pigeons than a predictable pattern of rewards.

"When you follow a reward system that's not fixed, it messes up our brains eventually," said Ofir Turel an associate professor at California State University, Fullerton, who researches the effects of social media and gaming.

With games like Fortnite, Dr. Turel said, "We're all pigeons in a big human experiment."

Fortnite has been the most watched game on Amazon.com 's Twitch network since March, according to research firm Newzoo BV. In November, people spent more than 108.9 million hours watching other people play Fortnite, the firm said. Toby and his friends are among those who regularly watch via YouTube and Twitch.

Fortnite makes money by selling to players, everything from costumes called "skins," dances, called "emotes," for their avatars to perform and other virtual embellishments priced at $2 to $20 each. Players buy them with virtual currency called V-Bucks, which are sold in packages from $9.99 to $99.99.

Since its launch in July 2017, Fortnite has made more than $2 billion from sales of virtual goods, according to an estimate by industry tracker SuperData.

"Epic doesn't comment much on the design of Fortnite these days," the company said in an email.

The game began as a bleak apocalyptic "work together or die alone" concept seven years ago, said Epic designer Peter Ellis, during a talk to game designers at a conference in March.

But Epic wanted a game that "people would engage with for hundreds of hours if not years," he said. So Mr. Ellis's team ramped up the color and brightness of Fortnite to make it look more like a Pixar movie. Pixar's parent, Walt Disney Co. , owns a stake in Epic.

They were aiming for a T rating, approved for teenagers, so they removed dismembered body parts, Mr. Ellis said. The Entertainment Software Rating Board, a nonprofit established in 1994, issues ratings for games and apps that range from E for everyone to A for adults only.

The resulting version is an animated killing game that manages to be hair-raising without visible blood spilled.

Dr. Freed, the psychologist, said the study of addictive technologies has identified some 200 persuasive design tricks. Fortnite has so many of those elements combined, he said, that it is the talk among his peers. “Something is really different about it,” he said.

He said its intentional design helps explain why parents have such trouble fighting the game’s pull on their children. As parents try to teach moderation and limits, Fortnite seeks a player’s full engagement for as long as possible.

Cut off

Until mid-September, Max Howe’s game console was the first place he went when he got home from school. He wasn’t allowed to play Fortnite on weeknights, but he could use the console to see if any friends were online, he said, “if I felt like talking or needed help with homework.”

Max Howe found workarounds after his parents took away his game console. PHOTO: JUSTIN MAXON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

On weekends, Elizabeth Howe, Max’s mother, began finding him on the game early in the morning. She had to prod him to do homework. He isn’t as excited by academics as his older brother, a star student now at New York University. Max wants to grow up to be a game designer.

When a teacher called in September to warn his parents that his straight-A grades were slipping. his father, an internist, took away his game console and banished Fortnite until his grades improved. “Yes, there was shock and upset,” his mother said. “But Max knows there’s nothing to say.”

Ms. Howe, who manages her family’s real estate, didn’t realize how profound a change was in store. Over time, she noticed that Max was becoming cut off from his friends.

He found workarounds for the loss of his game console, playing Fortnite on a personal computer instead. On the PC, though, his friends using consoles couldn’t hear him. That meant he couldn’t team up, share weapons or chat with them.

Max couldn’t call or text either, since none of his friends communicate on their smartphones that way anymore. “It was like a grounding,” his mother said, “but of course, he’s not physically

grounded."

"I miss the old feel," Max said. He got his console back sooner than he thought and not because his grades improved. He was assigned a group homework project with students who had decided to collaborate over their game consoles.

His mother realized that Fortnite had become so embedded in the boys' lives that Max couldn't even do his homework without it.

'Headshots'

At Matthew's house, Fortnite is making life uncomfortable. His father, Jay Seiden, a senior director at real-estate brokerage Cushman & Wakefield, doesn't understand why Matthew isn't outside playing or exploring the nearby parklands and beaches, said Ms. Woods, Matthew's mother. As a boy, Mr. Seiden would ride his bike or play in creeks, catching frogs and snakes.

Matthew Seiden during a Fortnite session at home in San Francisco. PHOTO: JUSTIN MAXON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Often, Mr. Seiden forces Matthew off Fornite after 90 minutes and sends him outside. Then, his mom said, she sees him riding up and down California Street on his scooter looking for friends.

She imagines they are all inside playing Fortnite. Matthew's mother grew up in Chevy Chase, Md., and was an avid gamer, staying awake for hours after her parents were asleep playing Ms. Pac-Man, Donkey Kong and Frogger. She still rode her bike, got homework done and earned a law degree.

That is why she is more lenient than Matthew's father. Friday nights are Matthew's favorite time of the week. He gets macaroni and cheese for dinner and Fortnite until bed. Ms. Woods sets time limits, she said, but "I probably let him play too much. I'd rather not fight about it."

She worries if she ought to be tougher. She doesn't like the "bratty attitude" that Fortnite brings out in Matthew, normally a sweet, compliant boy.

Research on the impact of videogames is inconclusive. On one hand, it found videogames can boost visual acuity, processing speed and decision making. Studies also link gaming to poor behavior and lower school performance. A recent study of U.S. eighth and 10th-graders found that 30 or more hours a week of videogaming can be a risk factor for increased substance use.

Gaming affects the production of dopamine, a neurotransmitter tied to the brain's reward system and linked by researchers to addiction. Mental-health experts say the constant rewards that games provide, such as virtual goodies, can lead some players toward compulsive behavior.

A boy playing Fortnite in Germany this year. PHOTO: FRANK MAY/DPA/ZUMA PRESS

More psychologists now believe that persuasive technology embedded in videogames is disrupting traditional ways of diagnosing and treating family conflicts.

When a child acts out, a psychologist usually looks for a problem between parent and child. It could be explosive or inconsistent parenting or not enough time spent together, said Dr. Meghan Owenz, a clinical psychologist. There could be depression or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder in the child.

Technology introduces a new variable. “You might have a really great, smart kid, and a really great, attentive parent and there’s really just something wrong with the technology between them,” she said, one designed to take up time and attention.

One way to find out, she said, is to take away the technology for a month and see how the relationships adjust. That is especially true in light of new research linking frequent use of technology by teenagers to ADHD symptoms.

On a recent Saturday, Matthew logged on to Fortnite and a storm was coming, encircling the players and pushing them toward the inevitable fight to the finish. “Oh, my God,” Matthew said, getting worked up.

“This place is usually better,” he said, meaning available supplies of guns, ammunition, bandages or health drinks to wounds. Such supplies usually appear randomly in loot boxes or vending machines.

He didn’t have much time left before a vending machine appeared, raising his hopes. But it yielded nothing to help him in the approaching gunfight.

Guns are critical to survival. His friend Reed is lethal with a bolt-action sniper rifle, Toby said, but “I like a hunting rifle with a scope. It does a little bit more damage.” Shotguns are good at close range, he said, especially for “headshots,” which count for more points.

With 11 fighters left, Matthew barrels ahead. He let off a volley from his assault rifle. “Got him,” he yelled.

Just as he began to gather his victim’s loot, a loud crack sounds and something hits him. “Ahhhh,” he shouted. “I died.”

Almost immediately, he starts a new game.

In and around the Richmond neighborhood of Matthew, Toby, Max and their friends, the mothers are in constant touch. They keep an eye on grades and watch for aggressive behavior or fading interest in non-Fortnite activities. They keep the boys busy in organized sports.

Toby’s parents have a new Fortnite plan. They give Toby two warnings before his time is up—at 30 minutes and 10 minutes. Then they turn off the Wi-Fi and close their bedroom door, ignoring Toby as he stomps upstairs from the basement and slams his door.

As the holidays approached, neighborhood parents were already looking ahead to summer plans, camps and programs that will keep their boys offline.

Corrections & Amplifications
YouTube users this year spent 6.2 billion hours through Dec. 19 on Apple IOS and Android apps. An earlier version of a graphic incorrectly showed 6.2 million. (December 21, 2018)

—Sarah E. Needleman contributed to this article.

Matthew Seiden gets ready to play basketball at a gym in San Francisco. PHOTO: JUSTIN MAXON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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