

Fortnite: More Than Just a Game? How a Networked Media Empire May be a Tool for Social Change

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Fortnite as a transformative force in digital media. While it started as a simple survival game, it's now a 'networked cultural platform' that mixes gaming, socializing, shopping, and even live concerts. By looking at its history, tech features, its role as a 'metaverse', and the controversies surrounding it, this paper argues that Fortnite is not merely a commercial product but a potential tool for social change. Using Marshall McLuhan's theory that 'the medium is the message,' I explore how Fortnite's structure allows for new forms of community building and embodied social practices currently being studied, to take a hold and be used to change society for good in the age of AI. Ultimately, the paper suggests that the platform's real significance lies in its ability to teach us how to reshape how society interacts, heals, and organizes in the age of AI.

Introduction

For most people in my generation, Fortnite is a household name. Since its launch in 2017, it has become one of the most influential pieces of media in the world. However, to see it only as a game where 100 players fight to be the last one standing is to miss the bigger picture. Fortnite is a massive digital ecosystem that has redefined how we socialize, consume culture, and express our identities (Epic Games 2017).

This paper explores the idea that Fortnite is more than just an entertainment empire; it is a networked platform with the potential to drive social change. By looking through the lens of media theorists like Lev Manovich and Marshall McLuhan, I will show how the five core features of digital media—manipulability, networkability, compressibility, density, and impartiality—make Fortnite a powerful tool for transformation. Specifically, I will discuss how the platform could be used for 'somatic abolitionism,' a practice of healing racialized trauma in the body (Menakem 2021). By shifting the focus from competition to community, we can see how Fortnite might actually help us build a better society.

History and Gaming Innovation

Fortnite's journey began as 'Save the World,' a cooperative survival game. However, the pivot to a free-to-play Battle Royale mode was what truly revolutionized the industry. By removing the financial barrier to entry, Epic Games created a space that was accessible to millions of people across different socioeconomic backgrounds (Epic Games 2017).

This accessibility is the first step toward social change. Unlike traditional media that requires expensive equipment or subscriptions, Fortnite's cross-platform technology allows someone on a high-end PC to play with someone on a budget smartphone. This 'Games as a Service' model means the platform is always evolving, allowing it to respond to real-world events and social movements in real-time.

Fortnite and the Principles of New Media

To understand why Fortnite can be a tool for change, we have to look at its digital DNA. Lev Manovich (2001) argues that digital media is defined by its ability to be programmed and manipulated. First, Fortnite is manipulable; players can build their own worlds in Creative Mode, giving them agency over their environment. Second, it is networkable, connecting people globally regardless of their physical location.

Third, it is compressible and dense, allowing it to absorb other forms of media like music, movies, and fashion into one space. This density makes it a 'metaverse' where different cultures can collide and learn from each other. Finally, while the game aims to be impartial, it highlights the 'digital divide' where internet speed and hardware quality still affect experience (Manovich 2001). Recognizing these inequalities within the game is the first step toward addressing them in the real world.

The Medium Is the Message

Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously claimed that 'the medium is the message,' meaning the form of a technology has a greater impact on society than the content it carries. In Fortnite, the 'message' is that our social lives are no longer tied to physical space. McLuhan described media as 'extensions of ourselves,' and in Fortnite, our avatars are extensions of our physical bodies.

If our digital selves are extensions of our physical selves, then what we do in the game matters for our real-world well-being. This is where the platform's potential for social good becomes clear. If the medium changes how we associate with one another, it can also change how we treat one another (Kadavy 2023).

Live Events and the Attention Economy

Fortnite's live events, like the 'Remix: The Finale' which drew 14.3 million concurrent players, show the power of collective experience. These events are not just concerts; they are moments where millions of people are focused on the same thing at the same time. This 'attention economy' can be used for more than just marketing. It can be used to raise awareness for social issues or to create a sense of global unity that is hard to achieve in the physical world.

Backlash: Ethics and the Responsibility of Platforms

However, for a platform to be a tool for social good, it must be ethical. The Federal Trade Commission (2023) settlement for \$520 million highlighted Epic Games' use of 'dark patterns' to trick users into making purchases. This backlash shows that as platforms become more powerful, they also face more scrutiny. For Fortnite to truly serve as a tool for change, it must move away from manipulative designs and toward transparent, user-centered ethics.

Social Innovation Research: Athletic Techniques Being Studied for Societal Transformation

The idea that individual high-performance techniques (like flow, breathwork, and visualization) can change the structure of society as a whole is a rapidly emerging field in academic and social innovation research. This approach moves beyond "individual wellness" toward "Systemic Resilience."

1. Collective Flow: The Blueprint for Optimal Collaboration

While individual flow is about peak performance, Collective Flow (or "Group Flow") is being studied as a model for how high-functioning teams can solve complex, systemic social problems.

- Societal Scaling: Research into "Collective Efficacy" (Philippe et al., 2026) suggests that when groups achieve collective flow, they develop a "calibration framework" that allows them to navigate structural challenges (like urban poverty or institutional stagnation) with the same precision as a professional soccer team.
- The Theory: If a society can foster environments of collective flow, it can overcome the "friction" of bureaucracy and political polarization, leading to more agile and responsive social structures.

2. Somatic Abolitionism: Athletic Training for Social Justice

One of the most profound examples of scaling athletic-style techniques to structural change is Somatic Abolitionism, pioneered by researchers like Resmaa Menakem.

- Mechanism: It treats systemic racism and social injustice not as just "ideas," but as trauma stored in the nervous system.
- Athletic Parallel: Just as a soccer player trains their nervous system to remain "settled" under the pressure of a penalty kick, Somatic Abolitionism uses breathwork and "body-settling" techniques to train citizens to remain present and regulated during difficult social and structural reforms.
- Structural Impact: By "settling" the collective nervous system, societies can engage in deeper structural change without the typical "fight-or-flight" reactions that lead to social collapse or violence.

3. Embodied Social Justice: The Body as a Site of Reform

Embodied Social Justice (Johnson, 2022) argues that macro-structural problems (like inequality) cannot be solved by "head-level" policy alone; they require embodied practices.

- Athletic Techniques: Visualization and mental rehearsal are used to "re-wire" the internal maps of what is possible in a society.
- Systemic Scaling: This research suggests that by scaling these high-performance mindsets to community leaders and policymakers, we can "embody" new social values, making them part of the "muscle memory" of our institutions rather than just words on a page.

Potential Uses of Video Games for Social Good

In my opinion, the most exciting potential for video games like Fortnite lies in its use for social change methods that can be backed by data, like 'somatic abolitionism.' Resmaa Menakem (2021) defines this as a practice of embodied anti-racism—healing the trauma that society inflicts on our bodies. Because Fortnite is an interactive, embodied experience, it can be a space where we practice new ways of being.

When we navigate the game world as an avatar, we are engaging in a form of 'body practice.' If these spaces were used to promote mindfulness, empathy, and healing, they could help players unlearn the stresses and biases of the real world. By using the 'networked' power of the platform, somatic abolitionism could scale from a small practice

to a global movement, using the game's mechanics to build a more resilient and connected culture.

Conclusion

Fortnite is no longer just a game; it is a networked media empire with the power to shape the future of our society. By understanding its technical features and its theoretical impact, we can see that it has the potential to be a tool for significant social change. Whether it is through the 'extensions of self' described by McLuhan or the embodied healing of somatic abolitionism, Fortnite offers a new way for us to connect and grow.

As we move further into the age of AI, the real excitement and challenge will be to ensure that powerful platforms made using the Fortnite empire as an example, are used to build a world that is more equitable, empathetic, and healed.

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