

Fortnite as Digital Media: How a Video Game Became a Networked Entertainment Platform

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Abstract

This paper analyzes *Fortnite* as a case study in digital media transformation. Although *Fortnite* began as a video game, it has evolved into a networked cultural platform that combines gaming, social media, live events, advertising, surveillance systems, digital commerce, and participatory fan culture. Drawing from the presentation topics of *Fortnite*'s history, digital-media features, analog/digital forms, graphics, live events, backlash, and surveillance, this paper argues that *Fortnite* revolutionized gaming not only by popularizing the battle royale model, but also by becoming a flexible digital environment where entertainment, identity, commerce, and community converge. The game demonstrates Marshall McLuhan's idea that "the medium is the message": *Fortnite*'s real significance is not only the content inside the game, but the way its digital form changes how players socialize, consume media, experience advertising, and participate in culture.

Introduction

Fortnite, developed by Epic Games, is one of the most influential video games of the twenty-first century. The presentation identifies several reasons for this influence: *Fortnite* popularized the battle royale game mode, used a free-to-play model, encouraged cross-platform play, developed the battle pass and item-shop economy, hosted live events, collaborated with major entertainment brands, and created a globally networked player community.

While many people think of *Fortnite* simply as a game, it is better understood as a digital media ecosystem. Players do not merely play matches; they customize avatars, buy skins, watch concerts, follow streamers, debate updates on social media, report cheaters, and participate in branded events. In this sense, *Fortnite* is both a video game and a media platform. This paper argues that *Fortnite*'s importance comes from its ability to combine the features of digital media — manipulability, networkability, compressibility, density, and apparent impartiality — into one constantly changing entertainment world.

Brief History and Gaming Innovation

The original *Fortnite* was a cooperative survival game, *Fortnite: Save the World*, where players fought zombie-like enemies and built defensive structures. The presentation correctly notes that the battle royale version was inspired by *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* and transformed *Fortnite* into a much larger cultural phenomenon. Epic officially announced *Fortnite Battle Royale* as a mode coming Sept. 26, 2017, describing it as “100 players,” “one giant map,” a “battle bus,” and a mix of building skills with player-versus-player combat.

One of *Fortnite*'s biggest innovations was its free-to-play model. Instead of charging all players to enter, Epic monetized the game through cosmetics, V-Bucks, battle passes, and item-shop purchases. Epic's own store describes V-Bucks as an in-game currency used to purchase customization items and other *Fortnite* content. The battle pass gives players in-game rewards as they earn experience, and Epic's battle-pass page explains that players can purchase a pass with V-Bucks or through *Fortnite Crew*.

This model helped shift the gaming industry. Rather than selling only a finished game, *Fortnite* sells ongoing participation, identity, and status. Players return because the game changes through seasons, updates, events, skins, and collaborations.

Fortnite and the Five Features of Digital Media

The presentation organizes *Fortnite* around five digital-media features: manipulable, networkable, compressible, dense, and impartial. These ideas resemble broader new-media theory. Lev Manovich's principles of new media include concepts such as numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding, emphasizing that digital media can be algorithmically changed, recombined, and distributed.

First, *Fortnite* is **manipulable**. The game world can be updated by developers, while players can manipulate their own experience through skins, emotes, builds, edits, and creative modes. *Fortnite*-related content is also manipulable outside the game: clips become TikToks, memes, YouTube edits, and livestream highlights.

Second, *Fortnite* is **networkable**. Millions of players can connect globally through shared matches, parties, voice chat, and social media. The presentation emphasizes *Fortnite*'s global player base and social-media presence. Cross-platform play is also central to *Fortnite*'s appeal. Epic describes crossplay as the ability to play the same game with others across PC, PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo, and mobile ecosystems.

Third, *Fortnite* is **compressible**. A large digital world containing maps, skins, events, weapons, and animations can be downloaded, updated, streamed, clipped, and shared in smaller formats. *Fortnite* news and gameplay can be compressed into short-form content such as Reels, TikToks, or YouTube Shorts, helping the game circulate beyond the game itself.

Fourth, *Fortnite* is **dense**. The game contains many layers of media at once: gameplay, music, film references, brand collaborations, celebrity skins, story events, and user-generated content. The presentation lists special-character collaborations such as John Wick, Thanos, Iron Man,

MrBeast, Groot, and Spider-Man, showing how Fortnite absorbs outside entertainment properties into its own digital world.

Finally, *Fortnite* may appear **impartial** because victory depends heavily on skill, reaction time, building, aiming, strategy, and practice. However, this idea should be complicated. The game may be skill-based, but access to faster devices, stronger internet connections, cosmetics, social networks, and gaming time can still affect player experience. This would be a useful place to add stronger research.

The Medium Is the Message

Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" means that the form of a medium changes society not only through its content, but through the patterns of behavior it creates. The official McLuhan site explains that the medium shapes "the scale and form of human association and action."

Fortnite illustrates this concept clearly. The "message" of Fortnite is not only that players fight to be the last one standing. The deeper message is that digital entertainment is now social, networked, customizable, commercial, and live. Fortnite changes the meaning of a game by making it a place where users attend concerts, buy digital clothing, watch branded events, and perform identity through avatars. In this way, Fortnite is less like a traditional game and more like a digital public space.

Live Events, Advertising, and Platform Culture

The presentation highlights Fortnite's live events and advertising, including the Travis Scott "Astronomical" event and later large-scale concerts. Fortnite's official website describes the platform as a place to "explore games, concerts, live events and more," showing that Epic itself frames Fortnite as more than a single game.

One major example is the Nov. 30, 2024 "Remix: The Finale" event. The presentation states that Fortnite reached 14,343,880 concurrent players during the event featuring Juice WRLD, Eminem, Snoop Dogg, and Ice Spice. Outside reporting confirms that the event drew about 14.3 million concurrent players, plus millions more who streamed it online.

These events blur the line between game, concert, advertisement, and social platform. Fortnite's live events are not just entertainment; they create attention economies. Players gather at the same time, brands gain exposure, artists reach audiences, and Epic strengthens Fortnite's role as a cultural hub.

Backlash: Addiction, Toxicity, and Consumer Concerns

The presentation also discusses backlash against Fortnite, including concerns about addictiveness, toxicity, social-media disputes, negative influence, and controversial collaborations. These concerns reflect larger debates about digital media.

The World Health Organization defines gaming disorder in ICD-11 as gaming behavior marked by impaired control, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities, and continuation despite negative consequences. This does not mean every frequent Fortnite player has a disorder, but it gives a clinical framework for discussing why some parents and researchers worry about excessive gaming.

Fortnite has also faced legal and consumer-protection criticism. The Federal Trade Commission reached a major settlement with Epic Games over allegations involving unwanted purchases and children's privacy, with reports describing a \$520 million total settlement, including \$245 million for consumer refunds and \$275 million related to children's privacy violations. This source would strengthen the paper because it connects the presentation's backlash section to real regulatory action.

Surveillance and Anti-Cheat Systems

The presentation notes that Fortnite uses surveillance methods to prevent cheating and that players can report suspected cheaters. This raises an important contradiction in digital media: players want fairness, but fairness often requires monitoring. Anti-cheat systems, player reporting, moderation, and account tracking are forms of surveillance built into the game.

This section needs more direct sourcing. A stronger final paper should add Epic Games documentation on reporting players, anti-cheat policies, privacy policies, and perhaps scholarship on surveillance in online games. The core argument, however, is clear: Fortnite shows that digital media platforms do not simply entertain users; they also observe, regulate, and discipline user behavior.

Graphics and Visual Evolution

The presentation argues that Fortnite's graphics have improved over time, from grass details to sky lighting, showing how digital media can evolve quickly. Fortnite's visual style is especially important because it does not aim for pure realism. Instead, it uses a colorful, cartoon-like style that makes violent competition feel playful and accessible. This style also makes crossover characters easier to integrate because superheroes, musicians, athletes, and cartoon figures can coexist in the same world without seeming completely out of place.

Fortnite's graphics are therefore not just decoration. They are part of the platform's identity. The bright, flexible style supports brand partnerships, social sharing, and constant updates.

Conclusion

Fortnite revolutionized the video game industry by transforming a game into a digital media platform. It popularized battle royale gameplay, helped normalize free-to-play monetization, used V-Bucks and battle passes to create ongoing revenue, expanded cross-platform play, hosted massive live events, and merged gaming with advertising, music, film, social media, and surveillance. The presentation's central ideas — history, digital transformation, analog/digital forms, graphics, live events, backlash, and surveillance — all point to the same conclusion: Fortnite is not just a game people play. It is a medium through which people socialize, consume culture, express identity, and participate in digital capitalism.

McLuhan's theory helps explain why Fortnite matters. The content of Fortnite may be battle royale matches, skins, concerts, and collaborations, but the medium itself changes behavior by making entertainment interactive, networked, commercial, and constantly updateable. Fortnite's true message is that modern digital media is no longer separated into games, movies, music, advertisements, and social platforms. In Fortnite, they all happen at once.

Works Cited / Sources Used

- Uploaded Fortnite presentation files.
- Epic Games / Fortnite official announcement of Fortnite Battle Royale.
- Epic Games official Fortnite / V-Bucks / Battle Pass pages.
- Epic Games Store article on cross-platform and crossplay gaming.
- WHO information on gaming disorder.
- FTC-related reporting on Epic Games settlement.
- McLuhan / "medium is the message" sources.
- Manovich new-media principles sources.
- Reporting on Remix: The Finale player count.

Sources to add to make it stronger

To make this a stronger academic paper, I would add:

Area	Source type to add	Why it would help
Digital media theory	Lev Manovich, <i>The Language of New Media</i>	Stronger original source for digital-media features.

Media theory	Marshall McLuhan, <i>Understanding Media</i>	Original source for “the medium is the message.”
Game studies	Peer-reviewed article on Fortnite as platform, metaverse, or attention economy	Would make the argument more scholarly.
Addiction / youth effects	Peer-reviewed studies on adolescent gaming habits, not just WHO	Would avoid overclaiming that Fortnite itself causes harm.
Toxicity / cyberbullying	Research on voice chat, online harassment, and gaming communities	Would support the backlash section.
Surveillance	Epic Games privacy policy, anti-cheat documentation, and academic work on platform surveillance	Would strengthen the surveillance argument.
Monetization	FTC official Epic Games settlement page, plus scholarship on loot boxes/microtransactions	Would make the consumer-protection section stronger.
Live events	Epic Games official posts about Travis Scott, Remix Finale, or event metrics	Would support the live-events section with primary sources.
Graphics / VFX	Unreal Engine documentation or Epic technical blogs	Would make the graphics section more specific and technical.

I also recommend removing or softening the claim that Fortnite was “the first” to offer cross-play unless you can find a precise source. It is safer to write that Fortnite **helped popularize and normalize cross-platform play**.