Parenting the Fortnite Addict

By Lisa Damour April 30, 2018

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Every so often a game comes along that conquers the hearts, minds and thumbs of gamers everywhere. Fortnite: Battle Royale is the latest victor in this category. According to a report last week from the market research firm SuperData, the game generated $223 million in March, and it begins a new season — with a new theme and a few other changes — on May 1.

Like a cross between Minecraft and the Hunger Games, Fortnite drops 100 competitors on an island and requires them to scavenge for weapons and other resources, build defensive structures and vanquish opponents in a quest to become the last player standing. The game itself is free and playable on game systems, computers and mobile phones alike, but players pay for accessories and costumes for their characters.

Not surprisingly, middle and high schools are finding themselves at odds with students who surreptitiously play the game throughout the day. The game is also popular with adults, including Major League Baseball players, who compellingly bring an element of the game into real life through victory dances on the field based on dances from the game. For parents bewildered by the sense that the game has swallowed their children, especially since the mobile phone version was released in late March, here’s some information that may help.

**It’s a Social Experience ...**

While Fortnite can be played solo, it is often a social experience as friends can team up in pairs or fours. If they’re not together physically, they communicate — over FaceTime, a headset linked to a game system, or the like — to coordinate strategy, alert teammates to threats, root for one another and trade banter.

Young people use the game to connect in a variety of ways. Owen Purcell, age 11, of Shaker Heights, Ohio, is known for his fort-building prowess, so he is often recruited onto teams formed by his older brothers and their high school and college-aged friends. When he’s not lending his talents to the older set, Owen collaborates with selected friends his own age: “It’s more fun with your friends, but it depends on the friends. It’s only fun with real friends who you really want to be with.”

Fortnite does, to be sure, involve firearms, and is recommended for ages 13 and up. But its graphics are free of blood and gore. And though adults may worry that shooting games cultivate aggression, C. Shawn Green, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who researches video games, notes that, “there’s really no evidence that playing a violent video game would take someone who has absolutely no violent tendencies and suddenly make them violent.”

Research does, however, confirm that action video games cultivate the spatial skills needed in advanced mathematics and engineering.

And there’s another wrinkle that may appeal to kids and parents alike: At least one college has announced it is offering scholarship money to skilled Fortnite players.

**... But It Is Built to Be Addictive**

Fortnite incorporates much of what game designers know about how to ensure a captive audience. Some of what hooks players is obvious: it has quality graphics, a sense of humor and advances rapidly. But it also includes stealth habit-forming features, such as an element of luck that keeps players coming back for more. As with gambling, it’s hard to walk away if you believe that good fortune is always just around the corner.

When players learn how to survive longer into the game, they may likewise be drawn in by the powerful “near miss” phenomenon. Instead of feeling as if they’ve lost, players may feel as if they nearly won. “It’s like an adrenaline rush if you almost win,” says Miles Weiskopf, age 14, of University Heights, Ohio, “you feel like ‘I gotta play again.’”

And the heavily social aspect of Fortnite serves to make the game even more compelling. As Laurence Steinberg, a professor of psychology at Temple University and a leading expert on adolescence explains, “Whatever kids do, they enjoy it more when they’re with other kids.”

**Setting Limits in a Positive Way**

Given the game’s gripping power, young people may need help limiting their involvement with it. So how should parents step in? Instead of being against playing Fortnite, some adults position themselves as being for other important activities, such as completing homework, being physically active, participating in family life and getting enough sleep. As Dr. Green notes, “there is value to setting limits to how much a young person can do one thing because it’s useful for kids to have a variety of experiences and to engage in lots of different intellectual activities.”

There’s another reason parents might want to insist that all screen time (game playing included) comes after other priorities have been addressed: because there are many ways to engage with Fortnite beyond actually playing it. Enthusiasts may devote hours to watching streaming videos of highly skilled gamers, studying highlight reels posted on YouTube and tracking the game’s strong social media presence and following among celebrities like Drake.

Parents might reduce some friction at home by talking with their family gamer about how best to keep Fortnite in check. Davida Pines of Waban, Mass., and her 14-year-old son, Noah, found that a hard stop didn’t work because, as Noah explained to his mother, “pulling out with no warning is like leaving a soccer game or another team sport just when the team might need you most.”

They now agree on a rough period of time for playing. At a certain point, Dr. Pines alerts Noah that he’s on his last game, knowing that a single game can take less than a minute for a gamer ambushed by an adversary who quickly finds a rifle, or not more than 20 minutes for the competitor who wins.

The game itself may even provide a carrot adults can use to their advantage. Though Fortnite is free, participants have the option of purchasing costumes known as “skins” to customize the look of their combatant. Parents of players who are jonesing for a skin might consider offering to buy one as a reward for a period of good compliance with the household technology rules.

Adults who are catching up to Fortnite shouldn’t hesitate to ask young people about the game. I have found that many teenagers love to talk about it with anyone who’s willing. And while learning about the details of this latest craze may not be at the top of every parent’s agenda, learning more about why the game captivates one’s kid just might be.

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Directions: *After reading “Parenting the Fortnite Addict”, respond to the following questions. Use your notes on author’s purpose to guide you. Reminder:* ***ALL*** *written responses* ***REQUIRE*** *text citation. USE (C / TE / EX).*

1. **Reread paragraph 3. What quote from the paragraph best conveys Damour’s motive for writing the article?**

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2. **Which sentence from the text best exemplifies Damour’s use of addressing a counterclaim?**

 a. “Young people use the game to connect in a variety of ways.”

 b. “…the game generated $223 million in March…”

 c. “Fortnite incorporates much of what game designers know about how to ensure a captive audience.”

 d. “Though adults may worry shooting games cultivate aggression… Green notes ‘there’s really no evidence that playing a violent video game…suddenly makes them violent.’”

**3. Paragraphs 4 and 5 are used by Damour to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

 a. explain an argument.

 b. address a counterclaim made by a different author.

 c. reveal benefits of videogames many people don’t think of.

 d. tell a story about Major League Baseball players love of Fortnite.

**4. Overall, Damour’s position on Fortnite can be classified as \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

 a. completely against it.

 b. completely for it.

 c. against it, but there are things to consider.

 d. for it, but there are things to consider.

**5. Find a quote from the text that would be a perfect counterclaim to the following statement: “Video games have no value and are incapable of helping a child academically.”**

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