

Connect Corner: Adventures in Fortnite^I

As COVID-19 spread rapidly this spring, families throughout the country faced school closures. Suddenly, children have quite a bit of free time. Many children told me they were filling that time with video games, and I even saw this unfolding in my own home, where my husband suggested it was time to invest in more video games to entertain our children. Much to his dismay, I disagreed. I do not enjoy video games and have always felt hesitant to let our children play them. It was easy for me to enumerate the reasons why I was hesitant, but he challenged me to identify potential positives. I realized I knew very little about video games and it was time to remedy that knowledge gap. I decided that the online game Fortnite deserved some attention. To help me along the way I recruited 3 child psychiatrists (2 from Generation X and one baby boomer) and an incoming child and adolescent psychiatry fellow (representing Millennials) to play. Below is the journey that followed.

Before playing, I struggled more than I expected to even download the software and get the game running. When I finally started playing, I found it boring and quickly lost interest—the same reaction I had as a teenager when many video games had become quite popular. During our brief game I reflected on the technical skills the current generation have so seamlessly developed as well as the dramatically different world in which they will live. During my next patient encounter with a teen, I shared that I had recently played Fortnite. She was clearly delighted, particularly by my description of how badly I played. I still don't like video games, but I must admit that the effort to engage in something my patients were interested in led to a more meaningful interaction with this particular teen patient. I was reminded of the importance of trying to understand the perspective of younger generations and acquired deeper appreciation for the skills they have in our increasingly digital world.

– Paula Wadell, MD, Generation X

Before Dr. Wadell invited me to play Fortnite, all I knew was that it was a shooter game (a game involving avatars engaging in combat with weapons) that many teens played for hours and hours. When I accepted the invitation, step 1 of my journey was to search the internet for “What is Fortnite?” My research revealed that it is a survival-shooter game where players fight off zombie-like creatures and build fortifications to protect stuff. But why the misspelling of the word “fortnight?” Another quick internet search yielded conflicting answers: one user reported that the game has nothing to do with fortnights and everything to do with building forts and surviving the night, while another noted that you actually do have to last 14 nights in “save-the-world” mode. I still don't know the meaning behind the name of the game for certain as I quickly got bored of reading. With this extensive review under my belt, I decided I was now sufficiently prepared to play.

My 6-year-old son wasn't so sure. When he saw me on the Fortnite website, he volunteered to explain what the game is about:

“So, um, first there's like a batman mod and when you start playing the first Fortnite, the regular one you're in, it's kind of like PUBG. Because in PUBG you take an airplane.”

To which I replied, “But how do you know what PUBG is?” (I knew that PUBG is a different shooter game.)

“Because I played it on grandpa's iPad. And Fortnite you kind of do the same thing but not in an airplane.”

When I told him about the looming game with my colleagues, he begged me relentlessly to play. Although he had never played Fortnite, he had once attended a family gathering where he watched another child play. I had previously been opposed to him playing any shooter game, particularly one labeled “teen,” but I gave

in, knowing that he'd be well supervised. As I struggled to correctly download the game on my laptop, he easily and independently downloaded it on our PlayStation.

During the actual gameplay, he patiently taught me which buttons to press and often had to come find me each time I became lost. While I accidentally picked up and examined my map in the midst of battle, he seamlessly slayed surrounding foes and revived me each time I was near death. It was a sobering experience to be so completely outdone by a 6-year-old. But boy, did we both have fun. My biggest revelation was that the game was really not as dangerous or offensive as I had imagined. My son was certainly not scarred by the experience. Rather, we found another way to connect, work as a team, and enjoy ourselves.

– Anne McBride, MD, Generation X

I really enjoyed playing Fortnite with everybody. I have a fair amount of experience playing video games as I play a few hours of video games every Monday night with some friends (one who is local and 2 that live too far away to hang out in person) and I think it's a great way to hang out, especially during a lockdown. Though I hadn't played Fortnite before, I had played a few hours of other battle-royale shooter games.

I found the actual gameplay of Fortnite to be fun and not too complicated. The cartoony graphics make it clear that the premise of everyone killing each other is make believe. To me, it felt more like a nerf gun battle than actual warfare, which is probably a good thing for all the kids who play. The user interface is not simple and it prevented those of us who hadn't played many video games from entering the game easily and joining with the team. Many parents will likely need their kids to teach them how to play. While the game itself is free, it constantly advertises upgrades to players, which is both annoying and probably bad for kids.

I enjoyed playing with Dr. McBride's young son and I could see Fortnite being a fun game to play with my own kids as well as a useful game to play with patients given I had the technological capacity. There are all sorts of

opportunities to work together, let each other down, heal each other, and experience loss or victory together that could be useful to talk about after playing. That being said, the competitive nature of the game, including getting shot and eliminated, would likely be too overwhelming for the more perfectionistic and anxious of my patients.

– Erik Youngdale, MD, Generation X

Though I probably won't play Fortnite again on my own, it was undeniably fun to play with the faculty and their children in a process of shared discovery. The variety of ages and video game experience really made for some memorable moments, including "VeryOldBob," the Baby Boomer of the group, being relegated to observer status after being unable to get the game running, Dr. Wadell getting stuck looking up at the sky (admittedly one of the better visual experiences rendered by my ancient graphics card), and Dr. McBride's son quickly surpassing all of us in skill level despite also never having played before. While a child is more likely to be playing with same-aged and similarly skilled peers, Fortnite is clearly fertile ground for kids to make fun memories with their friends while developing skills in teamwork, organization, communication, and dealing with success and failure.

There is an uncomfortable level of violence in Fortnite, but given all of the gore-filled games available to kids, the cartoonish weapons and combat of Fortnite are on the more harmless end of the range. My biggest qualm with the game, which both detracted from my enjoyment and concerns me for children playing, is the frenetic organization of the user interface (on PC). Opening Fortnite and navigating to actually joining a game was frankly a nightmare. There were several distracting, seemingly pointless screens with myriad opportunities to spend money on "upgrades." Once I finally made it to the main menu, I found a collection of various buttons and other clickable objects with unclear functions. The button to begin playing was undersized and tucked at the top of the screen. The whole thing felt overly designed to exploit the short attention spans and

addictive tendencies of vulnerable children. If played in moderation, I believe kids can get some of the benefits without suffering from the negatives, but parents need to be vigilant about how much time their children are spending playing this game.

– Shreesh Prasad, MD, a Millennial

References

1. Fortnite. Epic Games. <https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/download>

About the Authors

Paula Wadell, MD, is an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at UC Davis. She is the associate program director for the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellowship and the medical director for the UC Davis early psychosis programs.

Anne McBride, MD, is a child and adolescent and forensic psychiatrist at the University of California, Davis Medical Center. She is the program director for the child and adolescent psychiatry fellowship. Her interests include children's mental health and juvenile justice.

Erik Youngdale, MD, is a child and adolescent psychiatrist with the University of California, Davis Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in Sacramento.

Shreesh Prasad, MD, is a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at the University of California, Davis Medical Center, Sacramento. His interests include forensic psychiatry, early psychosis, neurodevelopmental disorders, and trauma.

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