

Custom features are what earn the big bucks in "Fortnite" video game

By USA Today, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.24.18

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A man takes a selfie with a Fortnite Loot Llama in a red telephone box on Neal Street in Covent Garden, London. Photo by: David Mirzoeff/PA Images via Getty Images

Buying custom features is not required, but it's all part of the game for "Fortnite" players.

Brendan Hickey wanted his character in the online game to stand out, so he bought features for it. His character can now eat popcorn, dribble a basketball or swing a pickax. Does any of this help the 22-year-old jump to the next level or have an advantage in fighting his opponents in one of the world's most popular online games? Nope.

Hickey estimates he has spent \$140 to \$160 on "Fortnite" purchases since October. He says they set him apart and help him bond with friends who play.

"It's the first time we've all been excited to get on and play Xbox together," said Hickey, a recent University of Connecticut graduate. He says his friends are getting ready to spread around the country. Playing the game is a bonding experience, similar to "getting a bite to eat with the guys," he says.

Hickey has company. The game's 125 million players have made "Fortnite" the highest-earning free-to-play game. All kinds of people, from athletes and celebrities to school-age kids, hop onto the game's brightly colored maps each day, battling to last longer than each match's 99 other opponents. Many spend money to customize their characters.

"Fortnite" Rakes It In

In May, the game generated \$318 million in earnings for North Carolina-based Epic Games, according to SuperData Research. It beat out other games such as Electronic Arts' "FIFA 18" and Activision's "Call of Duty: WWII," which charge for downloads and in-game purchases. "Fortnite" earnings in May topped "Pokémon Go" at its peak. Between January and May, "Fortnite" pulled in more than \$1 billion, the research group estimates.

That's because when gamers start the game, they are bringing their real-world wallets with them.

The outfits and getups let players show their personality to friends and online competitors. In a study of 1,000 "Fortnite" players by LendEDU, nearly 69 percent made in-game purchases, averaging \$84.67 each.

"It's almost like younger players are treating 'Fortnite' skins like action figures," said Carter Rogers of SuperData. "It has really become a part of the culture to have the latest skin, the latest fashion." Skins can be outfits or whole looks.

Players buying things like outfits or hip dance moves shows a new trend in online gaming. In the past, gaming companies have sold in-game features, which allowed players to reach higher levels or unlock characters. However, these shortcuts brought criticism.

Last year's "Star Wars: Battlefront II" game from Electronic Arts angered gamers. It promoted paying to unlock characters like Luke Skywalker instead of unlocking them as the game progressed.

Dance Moves Are Highlighted At Sporting Events

With "Fortnite," players don't improve at fighting their opponents by getting a new outfit or better weapons. That has only increased the appeal of the game.

"Fortnite" is already a national craze, particularly with teens and tweens. Schools and teachers have complained that students are sneaking to play it in class.

Players can buy dance moves. Some are copied from rap artists and have become such a hit they're showing up at sporting events.

At the recent baseball All-Star Game, several players spoke of their love of the video game. A Fox ad showed some doing their favorite dances. During the World Cup Final between France and Croatia, France's Antoine Griezmann celebrated his goal by doing a dance from "Fortnite."

For some players, buying a skin is a way to show appreciation to Epic Games for making the game free.

Buying Skins Gives Players Street Cred

Shana Wilcox, who posts her "Fortnite" activities on YouTube under the username "SharkysHood," has spent only \$30 on the game. The 33-year-old from Jacksonville, Florida, was never a big player of shooting games, yet has enjoyed playing "Fortnite."

She bought an Easter-bunny skin, partly because it was "really cute" and partly from appreciation for the game.

"I have so much fun playing, that it was like, 'OK, the least I can do is buy a skin that I really, really want.'"

Having a skin can also show that you are not a rookie, or "noob" in the game.

Buying outfits, dances and axes can cost \$5 for a starting bundle to \$20 for a skin.

Players say their spending is worthwhile.

A Family Connection

"I pay \$15 a month for Netflix, \$10 a month for Hulu and I play more 'Fortnite' than I do either Netflix or Hulu," says Hickey, the recent college graduate. He sometimes wears the skin of a plant-based supervillain named Flytrap.

Cody Sipe, from Chesapeake, Virginia, is an investigator for a company that does background checks for the government. He uses "Fortnite" to connect with his younger brothers.

Sipe, 24, and his brothers are scattered across the U.S. One is in military training in California and the other soon will go to college in Florida.

They connect over being on the same team and "who has the cooler-looking outfits," Sipe says.

One favorite is a "Top Gun"-like outfit similar to the jumpsuit worn by Tom Cruise in the 1986 movie.

"I had a moment of weakness" and wanted to look like Cruise, Sipe said with a laugh. He bought the outfit.

Quiz

1 Read the list of sentences from the article.

1. *Buying custom features is not required, but it's all part of the game for "Fortnite" players.*
2. *"It has really become a part of the culture to have the latest skin, the latest fashion."*
3. *"Fortnite" is already a national craze, particularly with teens and tweens.*
4. *Having a skin can also show that you are not a rookie, or "noob" in the game.*

Which two sentences, taken together, provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that some players consider custom features in "Fortnite" to be a status symbol?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4

2 Which section of the article BEST explains how some aspects of "Fortnite" have become a part of popular culture outside of the game?

- (A) "Fortnite Rakes It In"
- (B) "Dance Moves Are Highlighted At Sporting Events"
- (C) "Buying Skins Gives Players Street Cred"
- (D) "A Family Connection"

- 3 Which of the following answer choices describes two CENTRAL ideas of the article?
- (A) "Fortnite" players enjoy purchasing custom features, like skins and dance moves, for their characters; this has allowed the free-to-play game to generate significant earnings.
 - (B) "Fortnite" players are required to purchase custom features, like skins and dance moves, for their characters; other games allow players to make purchases to advance to the next level.
 - (C) "Fortnite" players enjoy connecting with friends and family while playing the game; this means they do not have to spend money traveling or going out to eat together.
 - (D) "Fortnite" players are not able to connect with friends and family while playing the game; however, teachers are concerned that students are focusing on the game instead of their schoolwork.
- 4 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) "Fortnite" has become a national craze, and it is likely affecting teens' and tweens' academic performance in school.
 - (B) Some "Fortnite" players, such as 33-year-old Shana Wilcox, post their gaming activities on YouTube under a username.
 - (C) The virtual items available for sale in "Fortnite" are optional and do not affect how well a player performs in the game.
 - (D) "Fortnite" features brightly colored maps where players of all ages attempt to outlast 99 opponents to win a match.

Answer Key

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