

"I want to look like Tom Cruise": How free game "Fortnite" makes so much money

By Eli Blumenthal, USA Today on 08.24.18

Word Count **1,206**

Level **MAX**



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

For Brendan Hickey, purchasing custom features for his character in the online game "Fortnite" was about standing out.

He can now do the electro shuffle. Eat popcorn, dribble a basketball or swing a "plunja" pickax. Does any of this help the 22-year-old jump to the next level, get more lives or give him an advantage in fighting his opponents in one of the world's most popular online games? Nope.

The \$140 to \$160 he estimates shelling out on "Fortnite" purchases since October simply sets him apart when he's in the game and helps him bond with friends that also play the online contest.

"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 who says his friends are getting ready to disperse around the country. "It's the same as going out ... getting a bite to eat with the guys."

He has company. Its 125 million players have made "Fortnite" the highest-grossing free-to-play game. Everyone from athletes and celebrities to school-age kids drop onto the game's brightly colored maps each day, battling to outlast each match's 99 other opponents, with many spending money to customize their characters.

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

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

Buying skins or cosmetics, these outfits and getups let players show their personality and allegiance with 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, a principal analyst at SuperData. "It has really become a part of the culture to have the latest skin, the latest fashion."

The cash windfall from players buying custom outfits like a basketball jersey or a hip dance move is the most successful example of a new trend in online gaming. In the past, gaming publishers have sold in-game features, sales that allowed players to reach higher levels or unlock characters. But these shortcuts brought controversy.

Last year's "Star Wars: Battlefront II" game from Electronic Arts drew the anger of gamers for a system that incentivized paying to unlock characters like Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker over unlocking them more naturally through the game's progression.

With "Fortnite," players don't get better at vanquishing their opponents by acquiring a new outfit or getting better weapons, something that has only heightened the allure of the game.

It's already on the way to a national obsession, particularly with teens and tweens. The popularity of "Fortnite" has caused schools and teachers to complain students are sneaking it in class and playing on their phones. Epic Games added a warning to the game's loading screen cautioning students to set the screens aside.

Asher Kim, a 14-year-old who lives in Georgia, estimates he plays roughly 36 hours a week "unless I'm grounded."

What's the attraction? It's addictive, competitive and "like 'The Hunger Games' except with guns."

Dance moves or "emotes" that players can purchase, some of which are copied from rap artists, have become such a hit they're showing up during major sporting events.

At Tuesday's MLB All-Star Game, several players spoke of their love of the video game, with a Fox promo showing a few re-enacting some of their favorite dances. During last Sunday's World Cup Final between France and Croatia, France's Antoine Griezmann celebrated his goal by doing the "Take the L" dance, a move that has been popularized by "Fortnite."

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

Shana Wilcox, who posts her "Fortnite" exploits on YouTube under the username "SharkysHood," has only spent \$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's only purchased one skin, an Easter-bunny suit known as the "Bunny Brawler," in part because it was "really cute" and in part from the enjoyment the game has given her.

"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.'"

To frequent players of the game, having a skin can also be seen as a virtual sign that you are not a rookie, or "noob" in the game.

Preston William Otterson, a 24-year-old radio host from Lakeville, Minnesota, has been playing "Fortnite" for close to six months, lured into the game by its free aspect.

At first, he didn't spend anything. But after getting called out online by his friends for being a "no skin" – an insult to players who are just using the game's free, standard avatars – he decided to put some money into it.

"I have spent probably around \$80, which is more than I've ever spent on a video game," Otterson says, spending the cash to purchase outfits, dances and axes. These can cost \$5 for an entry-level bundle to \$20 for a skin.

And given the enjoyment they've gotten from the game, players say buying a feature like wings or a glider is worth it.

"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, who sometimes sports the skin of a plant-based supervillain named Flytrap. Once he rationalized it like that, it "wasn't too much money to spend."

Cody Sipe, a special investigator for a company that does background checks for the government, uses "Fortnite" to connect with his younger brothers.

From Chesapeake, Virginia, Sipe, 24, and his brothers are scattered across the U.S., one of whom is in military training in California with the other about to go off to college in Florida.

"We're all guys, we don't really call each other on the phone very often," Sipe says. "We bond over either being on the same team or joking about who has the worst stats (in the game) ... who has the cooler-looking outfits and stuff like that."

Like other online games, players can chat and communicate using a headset plugged into their controllers. Though not all sessions are talkative.

"Sometimes we'll sit on there for an hour and only share, like, 10 words because we are busy playing a game," Sipe says.

As for his purchases, Sipe says he'll drop a few bucks on a skin or outfit if he thinks it looks cool. One of his favorites: as part of a \$5 bundle, he bought a "Wingman" skin, a "Top Gun"-like outfit similar to the jumpsuit sported by Tom Cruise in the popular 1986 movie.

"I had a moment of weakness where I was like, 'Hell yeah, I want to look like Tom Cruise in 'Top Gun'" so I bought it," Sipe says with a laugh.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following claims does the author support the LEAST in this article?
- (A) In-game purchases have generated a significant amount of revenue for "Fortnite."
 - (B) School-age gamers need to regulate when and how much they play "Fortnite."
 - (C) The different skins for "Fortnite" characters provide a way for players to connect or be unique.
 - (D) "Fortnite" players justify spending money on custom features because they enjoy the game.

- 2 Read the following paragraph from the article.

At first, he didn't spend anything. But after getting called out online by his friends for being a "no skin" – an insult to players who are just using the game's free, standard avatars – he decided to put some money into it.

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this paragraph?

- (A) Players tend to refrain from buying extras until they are familiar with the game.
- (B) Players who only use the standard avatars are hard to recognize.
- (C) Players have more advantages in the game once they purchase skins.
- (D) Players may face peer pressure to spend money on custom features.

3 Read the following statements.

1. *Players appreciate "Fortnite's" custom features and the fact they are not essential or advantageous to the outcome of the game.*
2. *"Fortnite" has become extremely popular to a wide range of gamers, who connect and compete through the online game.*
3. *Players say they buy "Fortnite's" custom features to support the game and ensure that it is able to keep up with production costs.*
4. *"Fortnite" was analyzed by LendEDU and SuperData, which found that players spend an average of \$84.67 each on the game.*

Which two statements accurately represent the article's CENTRAL ideas?

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

4 Read the following two details from the article.

Its 125 million players have made "Fortnite" the highest-grossing free-to-play game.

In May, the game generated \$318 million in revenue for North Carolina-based Epic Games, according to SuperData Research, beating out other stalwart console games such as Electronic Arts' "FIFA 18" and Activision's "Call of Duty: WWII," which charge for downloads and in-game purchases.

Select the option that explains how these details develop a CENTRAL idea of the article.

- (A) The first detail makes a claim about "Fortnite's" popularity, and the second detail contradicts it by pointing out the popularity of other games.
- (B) The first detail makes a claim about the earnings "Fortnite" has amassed, and the second detail provides specific evidence to support it.
- (C) The first detail explains the cause of "Fortnite's" decision to introduce custom features, and the second detail explains their effect.
- (D) The first detail explains the cause of players' obsession with "Fortnite," and the second detail shows how this affected other games.

Answer Key

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