

“Fortnite” and New Kids’ Sociabilities

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Abstract

In this paper, we’ll be researching the influence of digital games on contemporary kids’ sociabilities, based on the assumption that the online universe allows exchanges and social ties in a digital context, with potential evidence on the dynamics of face-to-face interaction. In this perspective, Fortnite videogame will be our case study, which since 2017 has been dominating the entertainment industry and has become a social phenomenon, attracting millions of players using several types of digital devices. Fortnite presents elements that infer a paradigm shift in the videogame industry, directly interfering in the playful world of kids and, consequently, in the way this audience socializes. The interactive and fictional narrative, the expression of freedom and multiplatform creativity, as well as the monetization model by microtransactions are some of the additional factors we will analyse, which reflection also starts from conceptualizations about sociability and a brief literature’s review on the aimed subject.

Keywords: Childhood; Adolescence; Sociabilities; Digital Games; Fortnite.

Introduction

The advance of new communication, information and entertainment technologies has led to emerging digital activities of new generations, whose daily routines have been radically transformed. Even before literacy, children learn to use technological devices with ease, allowing easy access to a previously unknown and unexplored world by this audience. One of the factors refers to the change on the scenario in which kids are exposed to mass media, that is, the contextual spectrum has expanded from the living room of their homes to everywhere:

Unlike any other point in time, young children are exposed to media content via multiple devices in multiple locations and in multiple formats, potentially leading to a new blooming, buzzing confusion. This technology explosion is shifting the use of

screen media from a centrally located television set in the family's living room to anywhere and everywhere a child might be (Barr & Linebarger, 2017, p.xii).

Young kids keep preferring toys of digital nature, so there is a progressive decrease of traditional recreational activities (Fantin, 2006) and sociability, understood as a process of interaction and social relationship between individuals (Férreol, 2007), is ruled by the virtuality of online digital communication devices. Lauricella et al. (cit. in Barr & Linebarger eds, 2017, p. 9) mention that we are starting to understand the effect, use and learning that children get from this new universe of apps:

We are beginning to understand the content available to young children via this new media platform, but the effects - both positive and negative - of exposure to and engagement with app content are far from known. Much more research is needed to understand how children use these apps, what they learn from them, and how the opportunity to create and design their own content influences development, learning, and creativity (Lauricella et al. Cit. In Barr & Linebarger eds, 2017, p. 9).

Huston (cit. In Barr & Linebarger eds, 2017, p. Viii) says that we are currently starting to get some interesting answers about that. According to research on psychology and social sciences' fields, for instance, several issues have been occurring, especially when there is excessive exposure to technologies. Concerns regarding sedentary lifestyle, technology dependence and learning difficulties in the school environment are some indicative factors of those issues. There are also the dangers of exposing privacy, the absence of direct physical contact, difficulties surrounding personal relationships and the development of experiences with the real world (Postman, 1999; Buckingham, 2006; Zanolta, 2007).

Until the 1990s, studies about relationships between media and the universe of kids and teenagers, predominantly focused on TV content and audiences. It included the influence on behaviors and a special focus on children protection, considering they are susceptible to media manipulation. In this perspective, Postman (1999) warned of the risks of television, due to an increasingly accelerated childhood towards the adult world and pointed to a "death of childhood".

These concerns, currently directed at online digital media infrastructures, present polarized views. On one hand, a pessimistic notion of the influence of technologies and, on the other hand, the enthusiastic idea of the "communications' revolution", which conceives new electronic media as liberating and empowering.

Tapscott (1998) says that the technological expertise of the internet generation, made kids master several mediums and devices over adults, for the first time in history. This would then be a more creative, critical, globally oriented and even smarter generation than parents or compared to baby-boomers, who boosted culture, social life and the consumer goods' markets of their time.

Thus, there is an idea of a radical change in childhood activities, which, due to the interactivity and active control of their environment, favors their social, motor, cognitive and linguistic fast development than previous generations; configuring it, according to Tapscott (1998), not in the "end of childhood", but in a new world to play. Buckingham (2006), in turn, does not present such an optimistic point of view about the technological presence in kids' lives. But he also avoids exaggerated negativism about media influences. He states that "such debates in general do not allow more than a limited choice between great despair and hurried optimism" (p. 9).

From this perspective, considering that childhood is a "stage of life that has an important dimension of social construction" (Pinto, 1997, p. 33) and that "culture and representations - also in the form of electronic media - are the main arenas in which this construction is developed and sustained" (Buckingham, 2006, p. 10), we propose in this work a reflection on the role of electronic games in contemporary kids' sociability. For that purpose, Fortnite video game is our case study, which has been revealing significant success since 2017 and becoming part of the playful universe of millions of kids in different countries.

2. Video Games in the Sociocultural Context

Video games, directly linked to the entertainment industry, have become a spotlighted cultural media object in contemporary society. Like cinema, the games' industry consolidates itself as art and pop culture. A story that began in the 1960s, today has an important impact on culture, revealing itself to be a fruitful and promising sector for several related areas to communication, computer engineering, audiovisuals, among others. As presented by Cabral (1996), video games "offer those who manipulate them, the possibility of inserting themselves into a 'reality' that is richer in emotion than that which they will certainly find in their own experience, particularly when it does not correspond to your creative potential "(p. 93). Thus, electronic devices and games, increasingly improved to meet the objectives of this market, have dominated kids' attention, teenagers and even adults, also due to the everywhere factor, specifically the omnipresence of mobile devices. Additionally, as an artifact, electronic games have a communicative, operative, informative, appealing and persuasive dimension (Vasco Branco cit. In Zagalo, 2009, p. 11), therefore, allied to the omnipresence factor, it proves to be a powerful and influential instrument widely used by the mass media.

Zagalo (2015) highlights the transformations that occurred in the art of video games, which left the place of digital substitute for analog games and expanded their action from linearity and repetition to abstraction and generalization, by including narrative and stimulating creativity.

Video games depend on narrative for the simple reason that they want to convey ideas, moral values. The video game creator, unlike the analog game creator, does not dedicate himself to the creation of systems of rules to manipulate player's attention,

but rather seeks to convey ideas, express feelings, confer meanings (Zagalo, 2015, p. 66).

In this way, the narrative's meaning fulfills actions with sense in video games, which, due to the game characters and own experiences, stimulate not only the mastery of the game, but also develop a mental construction of the players' own world. Adicionaly, there is the broadening of the concept of playing, by including the idea of having fun, which comes up freely, spontaneously and without rigid predeterminations.

As mentioned by Planells de la Maza (2019), the expansion of the technical and creative possibilities of video games has allowed a wide playful conformation, which admits different variables defined, to a certain extent, by the players themselves.

In this respect, the wide open video game's nature makes it possible to bring the richness of analog games to the digital universe, however, while still presenting serious internal tensions to adapt the narrative in this context, needing to simulate changes in the fictional world so that the actions can make sense to the players.

Unlike cinema or literature, in which it is possible to mentally organize the role of all narrative elements and the space in which the facts develop, as Garcia (2018) recalls, the video game narrative is composed of living beings in constant change and adaptation and therefore obey the needs of the players. In this way, the "transmedial worlds" change according to the activities of the players and are, therefore, made for and by the user.

Unos jugadores que como comunidad alimentan su mundo narrativo para hacer más y más grande. Pero este mundo no podría ser transmedial si no utilizara diferentes medios para desarrollar ya no solo su narración, también para hacer crecer su universo narrativo. (Garcia, 2018, p. 10).

In this sense, that is also a scenario of convergence and participation in which consumers become "prosumers" - "followers who not only consume a certain story, but who also create their own content, from the original, to grow the narrative world that they love so much "(Garcia, 2018, p. 13). Therefore, communication via digital social networks and streaming channels have become a space for communicative fusion and proliferation of the strategies of video game developers. The necessary engagement for advertising and loyalty of the video games' audience is guaranteed by strategies of the producers and developers, based on transmedial actions, which involve the most varied means and personalities. Influencers, youtubers, instagramers, among others, have become references for this industry.

It is also important to highlight the business model of the video game sector called free-to-play (f2p), which consists of allowing free access to the game and later propose the purchase of special items, characters or properties, sometimes to enhance player's performance, with an attractive cost to encourage purchase and

guarantee profits. This billing model with microtransactions, driven by digital social networks and mobile technologies has become an example of success in the gaming consumer market.

Planells de la Maza (2013) points out that f2p breaks with certain previous consumption logic, encouraging free access to the game, but limiting the complete experience to the fictional playful world by paying for the various elements of the video game. This system, which differs according to the modality, has a huge commercial and playful impact, since it allows a theoretically free game, but supported by the product's fans, who choose which games will survive and which ones won't. Considering this new commercial model, "true digital literacy focused on video games, emotions and honest consumption models" is essential (Planells de la Maza, 2013, p. 727).

3. Sociabilities in the Fortnite Play World

Baechler (1995, p. 65-66) defines sociability as a modality of the social universe that is defined by the "human capacity to establish networks, through which the units of activities, individual or collective, circulate the information that express their interests, tastes, passions, opinions". According to the french sociologist, the occurrence of sociability in social life, as well as their sociological objects, have great diversity and can be identified in established relationships between individuals. These relationships can be born due to generated networks, by more or less solid and exclusive ties (kinship, neighborhood, class, etc.) and through deliberate networks, that is, networks in which social agents find themselves by choice, pleasure, common interests (salons, circles, clubs, etc.).

From this perspective, the concept of sociability is directly linked to the various forms of social interaction, from the most elementary "face to face" (Gofman, 1992), shared in the same space-time context, to "mediated interaction" (Thompson, 1995), in which agents can be located in different contexts of space and time, whose interactions are being developed through communication's technological devices.

The expression of sociability occurs according to the social group, the intensity of the relationships, the type of structure or concrete conjunctures. As Thompson (1995) points out, due to media's development, interactive situations have been multiplied and becoming more complex, in many cases, defined by the hybridity of their elements.

This context created new forms of interaction and allowed new action forms with different properties and consequences. The development of the internet, in turn, "not only constitutes a new mean of communication, but it is also a new mean of production and interaction, valid for both public and private activity" (Sotomayor, 2006, p. 2).

In this virtual world spectrum, in which video games move comfortably, a true phenomenon in the entertainment industry has stood out since 2017. It is called Fortnite - an online electronic game that has become a worldwide fever among kids, has gained more than 125 million players in less than a year and was the main responsible for the historical revenue of Epic Games (North-American developer of electronic games and software), which ended the year 2018 with three billion dollars of net profit (Silva , 2018). In 2019, Fortnite stood out as one of the most popular video games, consolidating itself in the competitive landscape through several marketing strategies and partnerships with world renowned brands and companies.

Created in 2011, Fortnite redefined the video games' scene because it pioneered the creation of real multiplatform experiences. In 2017, it was released "Save the World" mode (available for Microsoft Windows, macOS, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One) and "Battle Royale" mode (available on the same platforms in addition to the Nintendo Switch, iOS and Android devices). This second mode of the game is pointed out as the reason for the resonant success. "Battle Royale Multiplayer Fortnite is the most popular game in the world, with more than 250 million players" (Marr, 2019, p. 1). In 2020, Epic Games revealed the surpassing of 350 million players.

The fact is that Fortnite has entered the kid's universe in an impactful way. There are those who say that it is not just a game, but "it is a way of being and asserting oneself" (Vasconcelos, 2018). It is possible to play in teams, with conversation between players and sharing sounds and images, which provides interaction and fun between friends without the need to leave the space of their own homes. It is also possible to play with strangers who are connected all over the world, which can be a facilitator for expanding relationships and learning other languages. However, this type of interaction is not absent from certain risks like cyber-bullying and violation of moral principles, which parents must be aware of.

Serrano (2018) highlights the game's aesthetics and design as one of the main keys to its success, as Fortnite combines the colorful and naive style of the cartoon with the fast pace of the survival game (one against a hundred), also with the possibility to build protective structures, that encourage creativity and quick thinking while in battle.

The narrative of Fortnite's "Battle Royale" is another key factor, as it is often unpredictable and surprising. Epic Games uses environmental narrative, which tells stories based on visual and sound details, equivalent to the staging of cinema and theater, in which the context speaks for itself. There is no clear story, no narrator or definite characters, however, with each new season different items are added in a logical sequence, with a new theme, shrouded in mysteries and with connections to the real world. For instance, the actual season is based on **Marvel superheroes characters**.

The change from one season to the next one is always marked by impactful events, which makes millions of players enter the game, with a set date and time, to witness together the great event that changes the game's world in real time. Fortnite is part of the free-to-play model (also called GaaS - game as a service), but what differs it from other free video games is the complete access to the fictional playing world without the need for payment and "none of the elements that are included in purchases brings competitive advantage over other players" (Serrano, 2018, p. 10).

However, Fortnite was designed to provide users a virtual adventure experience that involves several aspects of real life, such as clothing and objects' possession, actions such as dances that, in addition to acting in a playful sense, confer status, because they are only conquered by the "winners" or by those who paid to have such elements.

In this sense, dancing rare moves, having the coolest accessories of the season, having many "kills" and "wins", using epic and legendary "skins", etc., are prominent elements in this game in which self-affirmation is, indeed, part of the "rules". These codes reach the physical world through verbal and non-verbal language, rising to new forms of sociability, inclusion (or exclusion), and to the definition of identities among kids.

Epic Games also knew how to keep the attention of a new generation that has grown up with the Internet and is used to boasting on social media networks like Facebook and Instagram. Skins and emotes may be purely cosmetic and optional items, but they are the foundation of Fortnite's success. Epic Games was able to keep up with the trends, launching funny dance emotes and creating "noise" around the game with each new Season. (Loureiro, 2018, n/p).

Repercussions promoted by influencers, youtubers and streamers are fundamental to the success of Fortnite, which is also spread by famous athletes and artists. Ordinary players themselves carry out free advertising by creating, for instance, channels on the YouTube or Twitch video platforms, exclusively to share their plays. The content creation, coupled with frequent updates of paid items, build expectations of what will come next and assures the maintenance of the players' interest.

A carried out study by the National Research Group (NRG) of United States of America in March 2019, refers that Fortnite goes far beyond the profile of a video game, configuring itself in a new social media for the teen audience (10 to 17 years old), from which the video game fulfills an average of 25% of free time. With a sample of 1500 consumers, that research revealed that Fortnite has become more than an electronic game, being often referred to as a "third place" for making new friends and creating social bonds.

Although the Battle Royale mode is highly competitive in nature, many young Fortnite players use the game as a place to socialize with others and to express their authentic selves, purchasing "skins" to customize the look of their in-game avatars, performing

dance modes and engaging in an increasingly immersive virtual world. (NRG, 2019, p. 5).

The survey also shows that Fortnite "steals" time from all leisure activities, significantly changing the way consumers spend their free time (21% of total free time among weekly players of all ages). Aiming for an exclusive combination of benefits from games, social media and streaming platforms, Fortnite is seen as the video game that offers consumers a different experience: "Consumers say its the best place 'to be my authentic self and to connect to what everyone is talking about, making me feel like I'm not alone'" (NRG, 2019, p. 9).

Fortnite is thus identified by users as having a positive impact on their lives, because unlike traditional social platforms, indicated as causing isolation and loneliness, the video game offers interactivity capable of creating a sense of community, feeling of action and control, in a virtual experience that contributes to forgetting real life problems.

It is important to mention that Fortnite is part of a group of phenomena defined and provided by the globalization of the economy and culture, but its uses are inserted in specific cultural contexts, with variables according to the age group, gender, social capital among other factors that define unequal access to technologies. However, this scenario has revealed the emergence of new ways of integration of childhood in socio-cultural life all over the world, notably marked by the distance from public spaces and traditional ways of participating in culture, as discussed by Fantin (2006).

Permeated by the products of the media industries, the world builds an arena of very important meanings for the formation processes. This arena escapes the spatiotemporal limits of face-to-face interaction and creates new forms of interaction between people and, consequently, people with culture, nature and the world. This also changes children's play, which is increasingly linked to the media (Fantin, 2006, p. 14).

Therefore, we consider it necessary to understand the context in which childhood and adolescence are inserted to reflect on the new forms of emerging sociability. When mediated by new technologies or online electronic games, to which this communication specifically refers, there are individualization and socialization movements confined to relationships without physical contact. On the other hand, a context of action, communication, experience and learning is perceived through the interaction with technologies, but also through the playful relationship with other children in virtual spaces. Thus, as presented by Cabral (1996), we are focused "to reject the idea that technology stimulates non-social or antisocial behaviors, we understand that it is another type of relationship and sociability, from a distance, what lies ahead" (p.93).

5. Final Considerations

The communicational and media context that we are living today leaves no question about the development of new forms of sociability, guided by living together in cyberspace. From this perspective, Sotomayor (2006) points to a social model that is organized around elective communities of interest or “specialized communities”, better known as “sociability networks with a variable geometry and composition, according to the interests of social agents and according to the size of the network” (p.5).

When we focus on the universe of online electronic games in general and on Fortnite in particular, we perceive an environment whose reality is rich in emotions and creative potentialities, setting up an attractive playful context, especially for kids. In this way, it is an alternative place of new and free spaces for adventure and virtual sharing, which acts in the creation of new forms of sociability and the construction of identities.

Fortnite is certainly not the only video game to feature today with an important integration among its audience. But, as we already mentioned, this video game provided a redefinition of the scenario of its industry, through the creation and fusion of several elements (complex construction and strategy mechanisms), acting on several fronts to attract, engage and keep players. In this sense, we infer that the observation of the elements that make up Fortnite, its integration in the audience and especially its use by the players, is important to understand the new sociability model that is being built, especially by kids.

It is relevant to note that this other type of sociability that occurs outside the geographical limits of traditional communities does not exclude, but coexists with, face-to-face interactions. In this sense, despite the technical mediation, the ephemerality and the anonymity possibility in communications, it is likely to establish affinity bonds that can result in solid relationships, which can go from online to offline (Silva, 2007).

These social networks are flexible, because their models of social interaction are built and reconstructed by the individuals themselves, through technologies. On the other hand, ways of social support in this configuration have a greater tendency to fragility, considering the low demanding level regarding the commitment of its members (Sotomayor, 2006).

When reflecting on the virtual as a new imaginary territory for kids, Pasín (2009, p. 5) argues that “cyberspace is also a magnificent receptacle from which youth can develop interactions based on common affinities, tastes or passions”. Thus, the spatial distance is not an obstacle to the building of more solid bonds, nor to the development of new communities.

Plus, the current context offers several creative and democratic opportunities and has the potential for kids' protagonism, since through access to the means of communication and cultural expression they can reflect their views and perspectives (Buckingham, 2006).

However, we are also in agreement when Buckingham (2006) emphasizes that interventions in terms of social, educational and cultural policies are necessary in order to include kids themselves in the process of social and cultural change, giving them a more independent agency, taking them not just as passive recipients and not denying their active role in creating their own culture.

More than presenting answers, the present reflection tried to ask about what kind of kids' sociability is favored by online electronic games, with emphasis on Fortnite. In this sense, we exposed different perspectives for new analytical developments or empirical research, aiming to understand the meaning of the actions of the inserted agents in the referred social context. Such an undertaking is, indeed, a challenge that requires the use of methods that include observations in different environments (online and offline) of sociability related to video games. However, research in this area is necessary and fundamental for the understanding of our culture so strongly impacted by digital technologies.

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