

How the video game "Fortnite" became baseball's most addictive pastime

By Gabe Lacques, USA Today, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.29.18

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Xander Bogaerts of the Boston Red Sox celebrates after hitting a double against the Tampa Bay Rays with the celebratory "Take the L" dance from the video game "Fortnite." Photo by Maddie Meyer/Getty Images

Along with running, throwing, fielding, hitting and hitting for power, there's another skill invaluable to baseball players beyond the five holy tools: Killing time.

From the days of train travel to the dawn of smartphones, the methods for managing downtime have evolved. And now, perhaps, the ultimate force has emerged to connect ballplayers of all stripes.

The game is "Fortnite." It is the open-world, co-op survival video game. And, it may eventually be a footnote within baseball's zeitgeist. Right now, however, it has a hold on the game that stretches from college dorms to the basements of minor league host families, to the clubhouses and private jets and luxury hotel rooms of the major leagues.

"I've never seen anything catch the public eye like this has," said Tampa Bay Rays first baseman C.J. Cron.

Certainly, the marriage of ballplayer and video game is nothing new. Over the past two decades, online multiplayer gaming has turned series like "FIFA," "Madden" and "MLB The Show" into competitions. Across town and around the world friends gather online to compete.

In "Fortnite," there exists an irresistible concoction of action and evolution, teamwork, and competition. There is also a connection and camaraderie that no game seems to match among its players.

"Just when I think I'm getting bored with it and I'm going to stop playing, I find that it keeps me going," said Philadelphia Phillies outfielder Nick Williams. "There are times I'm like, 'OK, this is my last game of the night.' And then I get second place and I'm like, 'No, no, I need to try again.'

"And then 12 games later, I'm like, 'All right, this has got to be my last game.'"

For the uninitiated: "Fortnite" can be played as a "solo," as a duo or in teams of four. Each game begins with 100 competitors in a "lobby." Each player is on a quest to acquire supplies and weapons to enhance their chances of survival.

Teammates communicate via headsets. They launch missions to scavenge for supplies amid a post-apocalyptic landscape. They build traps and ultimately ward off and destroy a legion of zombies, all the while shoring up a fort against the encroaching mob.

Developers at Epic Games keep "Fortnite" fresh with updates, retiring certain features and then reviving them. They consistency create the game's map but subtly tweak features within it. These are all reasons why professional baseball players keep coming back to the video game.

Minor Leagues, Major Boon

Hagerstown, Maryland, is just a 75-mile drive from Nationals Park in Washington, D.C. It is home to the Hagerstown Suns. They are a minor league baseball team.

Many of the players are thousands of miles from home. Some are in a foreign country, bonded only by the fact their big league dreams remain four daunting levels away.

For them, "Fortnite" serves as more than a distraction from interminable bus rides, ever-present rain delays, and budget motel rooms.

"If you let baseball consume you too long, it can get overwhelming," said Nick Banks. He is a 23-year-old outfielder for the Suns and a fourth-round Nationals draft pick in 2016. "The first thing I do after every game is go to my host family's house, in the basement, and start playing."

"My roommates will watch TV and be like, 'Dude, that's all you do.' But it takes your mind off baseball."

When a clubhouse attendant brought a PlayStation4 to the Suns clubhouse, the dynamic shifted. About 70 percent of the team turned into "Fortniters."

When a gamer scores a win, the shouts of excitement often lure trainers and coaches out to watch.



"The quiet guys who don't say much – if they do well in the video game, they get a little louder, their personality starts to come out," says Suns reliever A.J. Bogucki. "They're not sure how to act, but when they get excited, they might tell us a little bit more."

That includes a quartet of foreign-born players. Venezuelan Tomas Alastre is 19 years old. He is in his first year of full-season ball. Aldrem Corredor and Jeyner Baez are also from Venezuela. Along with Dominican Republic native Carlos Acevedo, they all have engaged in "Fortnite."

Chatting via "Fortnite" creates greater connection than a phone call or text among the players.

"When you're on the phone, you lose your train of thought of what else you might talk about, and then the conversation is over," said Bogucki. ("Fortnite") stretches across a few hours, and then you might remember to ask them something you forgot earlier.

"It's the extended period you play that allows you to have a better conversation than 10 minutes on the phone."

Big Night In

Major leaguers agree. In fact, there are burgeoning friendships throughout the big leagues among players who have only "met" in "Fortnite's" lobby.

"I've never met Brett Phillips in person," Rays infielder Matt Duffy said of the Milwaukee Brewers outfielder who recently played a game of "Fortnite" on the Miller Park big screen, "but I'd consider him a little bit of a buddy."

For Phillies outfielder Aaron Altherr, "Fortnite" is a game he plays all the time.

"That's literally all I do in the hotel. I'm not one of the guys who goes and walks around much. I'm a big room service and video games guy. That's the way I do it," Altherr said.

Altherr estimates his longest "Fortnite" session was around 10 hours. It was during spring training when the long days and quiet nights of Clearwater, Florida, truly seem interminable.

"You play," he said. "Get some food. Play again."

Eickhoff said spring training was a key moment for the Phillies and "Fortnite," as players emerged from winter to realize that, yes, everybody was playing it – or at least half the roster, he estimates.

It was inevitable game and profession would intersect. In the season's opening series, Boston Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts performed "Fortnite's" "Take the L" celebratory dance after reaching base. A few weeks later, teammate David Price deflected concerns that carpal tunnel in his throwing wrist came from excessive gaming, mostly "Fortnite" (doctors agreed).

As McCarthy's Kansas City Royals launch a painful rebuild, he realizes there are few constants in baseball. He's grateful one of them goes wherever any of his friends may land.

"Everyone's from everywhere," he said. "Relationships come and go. Since being with the Royals, I can't even count how many guys have been traded or are no longer playing.

"But we still have Xbox and PlayStation."

Quiz

1 Read the section "Minor Leagues, Major Boon."

Select the paragraph from the section that suggests some baseball players use "Fortnite" to relax and to escape from daily pressures.

- (A) "If you let baseball consume you too long, it can get overwhelming," said Nick Banks. He is a 23-year-old outfielder for the Suns and a fourth-round Nationals draft pick in 2016. "The first thing I do after every game is go to my host family's house, in the basement, and start playing."
- (B) "The quiet guys who don't say much – if they do well in the video game, they get a little louder, their personality starts to come out," says Suns reliever A.J. Bogucki. "They're not sure how to act, but when they get excited, they might tell us a little bit more."
- (C) That includes a quartet of foreign-born players. Venezuelan Tomas Alastre is 19 years old. He is in his first year of full-season ball. Aldrem Corredor and Jeyner Baez are also from Venezuela. Along with Dominican Republic native Carlos Acevedo, they all have engaged in "Fortnite."
- (D) "When you're on the phone, you lose your train of thought of what else you might talk about, and then the conversation is over," said Bogucki. ("Fortnite") stretches across a few hours, and then you might remember to ask them something you forgot earlier.

2 Which sentence from the article supports the idea that baseball players have even incorporated "Fortnite" into their professional baseball games?

- (A) "Just when I think I'm getting bored with it and I'm going to stop playing, I find that it keeps me going," said Philadelphia Phillies outfielder Nick Williams.
- (B) Eickhoff said spring training was a key moment for the Phillies and "Fortnite," as players emerged from winter to realize that, yes, everybody was playing it – or at least half the roster, he estimates.
- (C) In the season's opening series, Boston Red Sox shortstop Xander Bogaerts performed "Fortnite's" "Take the L" celebratory dance after reaching base.
- (D) A few weeks later, teammate David Price deflected concerns that carpal tunnel in his throwing wrist came from excessive gaming, mostly "Fortnite" (doctors agreed).

3 Read the following passage introducing "Fortnite."

The game is "Fortnite." It is the open-world, co-op survival video game. And, it may eventually be a footnote within baseball's zeitgeist. Right now, however, it has a hold on the game that stretches from college dorms to the basements of minor league host families, to the clubhouses and private jets and luxury hotel rooms of the major leagues.

What does the author MOST LIKELY want the reader to think about "Fortnite" based on this introductory passage?

- (A) The author wants the reader to think that "Fortnite" is a game that is played only by rich people who can afford to pay for it.
- (B) The author wants the reader to think that "Fortnite" is a survival game that has similar rules to the game of baseball.
- (C) The author wants the reader to think that "Fortnite" is mostly for young people in college and only a few adults like to play it.
- (D) The author wants the reader to think that "Fortnite" is a popular game for baseball players that reaches all the levels of baseball.

4 What is MOST likely the reason the author included the information about Brett Phillips and Matt Duffy?

- (A) to show two players who have been able to keep in touch after one of them was traded to another team
- (B) to illustrate that it is common for major league baseball players to play on big screens in the ballpark
- (C) to highlight a major league baseball friendship that began online and only because they played "Fortnite"
- (D) to show that "Fortnite" helps people who come from different countries to feel accepted by their teammates