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Are They Really Just Cosmetic? the Impact of Cosmetic Items on Fortnite's Gameplay and Game Design

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Cosmetic microtransactions, the act of paying for virtual items that customize certain parts of video games and virtual worlds such as skins that change the appearance of the avatar, are looked upon more favorably in the gaming community than performance-enhancing microtransactions, where one pays for virtual items that enhance the abilities of avatars or speed up the progression of the game. Video game industry spokespeople have adapted this rhetoric and emphasized that the microtransactions in their games are for cosmetic items only with no bearing on gameplay. However, the way players use cosmetic items in games and the way cosmetic items inspire certain game mechanics suggest that their function in games isn't purely ornamental. Using *Fortnite* as a case study, I argue that cosmetic items can influence gameplay and that the lucrative aspects of cosmetic microtransactions influence game design. Players use cosmetic items not only to be fashionable, but as tools to fashion their own metagames - games within, around, and outside of games. Game companies know that players care about cosmetic items and avatar customization, and they design their games to make cosmetic items as desirable as possible. Cosmetic microtransactions help us understand that visual design is one of the biggest influences on gameplay and the business of games.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

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Introduction: Cosmetic Microtransactions Vs. Performance-Enhancing Microtransactions

"Fashion is the armor to survive the reality of everyday life." – Bill Cunningham

Fortnite player LuanMiner flies over and tries to gun down Matador_078. The shots miss and Matador_078 gets ready to retaliate. Just before the rifle shot hits LuanMiner, they use the "Shaolin Sit-up" emote – a brief animation players can trigger in the middle of gameplay to express certain feelings or ideas to other players - to fall backward to the ground, dodging the shot. LuanMiner immediately returns fire and eliminates Matador_078. Esports news publication Esports Nation shared the moment on Twitter with the caption "These items are cosmetic only and grant no competitive advantage."[1]

The caption of the tweet references the justification commonly used by video game industry spokespeople when explaining the inclusion of cosmetic microtransactions in their games, and the included clip is meant to push back against the justification. Microtransactions are monetary exchanges between the player and the game publisher made within a video game usually for a small bonus for players to use in the game. Microtransactions can be confused with downloadable content, or game content not included in the base game that is downloaded into the game via an online connection. Microtransactions can be a way of accessing downloadable content; they are not the content itself. Microtransactions can be divided into two distinct forms: those made for items that enhance the abilities of a character in a game or make it more efficient for the player to progress through the game, and those made to change the visual design of

[1] Esports Nation, Twitter Post, January 2, 2019, 10:02 a.m., https://twitter.com/EsportsNation/status/1080494543085232129.

certain elements within the game for individual expression and decoration or for enhancing a game's communication tools.[2]

Over time, the video game community has demonized microtransactions for items that directly enhance the player's abilities or how efficiently they progress through the game – the rate at which they complete the game, level up, gain power, collect treasure, etc. Players argue that the existence of performance-enhancing microtransactions in a game indicates that the core gameplay was made to be more tedious and time-consuming to make the microtransactions more desirable.[3] They also argue that performance-enhancing microtransactions in multiplayer games can grant an easy route to competitive advantages, referring to microtransactions of this nature as "pay-to-win."[4] Because of this, industry spokespeople have adopted this rhetoric to make the microtransactions in their games look acceptable by stating that they're for purely cosmetic items with no bearing on gameplay. They emphasize that the microtransactions in their games aren't for things disliked by the gaming community like loot boxes or XP boosters and that they're just for customizing the player's avatar, as Game Director Jon Warner said about *Anthem*.[5]

However, this view of cosmetic items disguises the ways they do influence both gameplay and game design. While these items may not have an impact on the player's abilities or the progression of the game, it's hard to say their effect on games is purely ornamental if we define games in a way that doesn't begin and end with game rules. In this thesis, I argue that cosmetic items actually do influence gameplay, and the lucrative aspects of cosmetic items

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[2] Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun, "Cash Trade in Free-to-Play Online Games," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 3 (May 2011): 270, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010364981.
[3] Jim Sterling, "Shadow of More Dollars (The Jimquisition)" YouTube Video, 14:55, August 14, 2017, https://youtu.be/2TXWdyrqFP8.
[4] Tom Marks, "Opinion: Star Wars: Battlefront 2 Beta Raises Pay-To-Win Fears," *IGN,* last modified October 6, 2017, https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/10/07/opinion-star-wars-battlefront-2-beta-raises-pay-to-win-fears.
[5]Joe Juba, "Anthem's Microtransactions Are Cosmetic-Only," *Game Informer*, June 9, 2018, https://www.gameinformer.com/2018/06/09/anthems-microtransactions-are-cosmetic-only.

influence game design. Their influence on the player's experience with a game can change their interpretation of the gameplay and by extension their responses to it.[6] Cosmetic items hold all kinds of value to players. Players can use cosmetic items as tools to help immerse themselves in the experience of playing a game or even create their own games within the game. Not only can cosmetic items be rewards for skillful gameplay but collecting them and playing with them can be gameplay in and of itself. Producers and publishers in the video game industry are trying to downplay the affective and social power of cosmetic items so players are made unaware of the way game companies exploit cosmetic items for profit. Game companies know that cosmetic items are valuable to players and can change the way players approach and play with games, despite what they might tell people. It's why they create marketplaces for players to sell cosmetic items while they get a cut of the transactions like the Community Marketplace in Valve's digital games platform Steam.[7] It's why they lock away the most opulent and unique cosmetic items behind expensive paywalls or as the rarest prizes in loot boxes. My thesis explores how the value and function of cosmetic items influences the player's experience of playing a game and the creation of metagames – or games made about, within, and around a game – and how developers and publishers use that to their advantage. There are plenty of examples of how the business of video games and the design of the games themselves influence each other, but cosmetic microtransactions help us understand that visual design is one of the biggest influences on the design and business of games.

Records of the trade of virtual goods for real currency date back to 1999 when players of massively multiplayer online games *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* placed their virtual items on

[6] Christopher Moore, "Hats of affect: a study of affect, achievements and hats in Team Fortress 2," *Game Studies* 11, no. 1, (2011): 1-28, http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/moore.
[7] John Vrooman Haskell, "More than just skin(s) in the game: How one digital video game item is being used for unregulated gambling purposes online," *The Journal of High Technology Law* 18, no. 1 (July 2017): 141.

auction on eBay and similar sites.[8] Shortly after, game operators started selling virtual goods directly to players. Christopher Moore writes that prior to the introduction of hats - cosmetic items worn on the heads of the playable characters - into the popular first-person shooter (FPS) game *Team Fortress 2* (TF2) in May 2009, FPS games rarely featured customizable wardrobe options because developers wanted to "maximize standardization in the competitive gaming environment." However, adding hats to TF2 has subsequently attracted new players to the game and further retained veteran players.[9] Today, many competitive multiplayer shooters like *Fortnite* feature cosmetic customization as a core feature.

Microtransactions are one of the video gaming industry's most profitable sources of revenue. Activision Blizzard announced in its Q3 2020 financial report that it made $1.95 billion in overall revenue with $1.2 billion coming from microtransactions. The revenue from microtransactions was a 69% increase from the previous year's figures.[10] In February 2020, Electronic Arts reported that they made $2.835 billion over the last year from their microtransaction-fueled "live services" model where games receive regular updates over time – a 27% increase from the year before.[11] Microtransactions and DLC made up nearly 60% of Take-Two's revenue in the first quarter of 2019.[12] A report by games industry analysis company Newzoo says that the global gaming market revenue will be worth $159.3 billion by the end of

[8] Vili Lehdonvirta, "Real-money trade of virtual assets: new strategies for virtual world operators," in *Virtual Worlds*, ed. Mary Ipe (Hyderabad: Icfai University Press, 2008), 113.
[9] Moore, "Hats of Affect," n.a.
[10] Kshiteej Naik, "Activision Blizzard Made $1.2 Billion Revenue from Microtransactions in Third Quarter," *IGN India*, last modified November 2, 2020, https://in.ign.com/call-of-duty-modern-warfare/152196/news/activision-blizzard-made-12-billion-revenue-from-microtransactions-in-third-quarter.
[11] Eddie Makuch, "EA Made Almost $1 Billion On Microtransactions Last Quarter," *Gamespot*, last modified February 3, 2020, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/ea-made-almost-1-billion-on-microtransactions-last/1100-6473240/.
[12] Sherif Saed, "Nearly 60% of Take-Two's revenue in the first quarter came from microtransactions and DLC," last modified August 6, 2019, https://www.vg247.com/2019/08/06/take-two-q1-fy2020-60-percent-revenue-from-microtransactions/.

2020, and that the industry will exceed $200 billion in revenue in 2023.[13] According to a study by Ipsos commissioned by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), 49 percent of American game players have made a microtransaction in 2018.[14] Cosmetic items are also integral to the market of trading virtual items. Some games incorporate a digital infrastructure that allows players to trade cosmetic items with each other or just sell them to other players for real money. Some third-party websites allow users to use cosmetic items to place bets in lottery or casino-like games online. Players can "cash out" their winnings by making a request to the third-party website to have them transfer the won skins to their inventory. John Vrooman Haskell writes that in 2015, approximately $2.3 billion in CS:GO skins were used to place bets on eSports matches across the entire industry.[15]

Performance-enhancing microtransactions are for "functional items" - as scholars like Wang et al. and Marder et al. call them - that either let players earn rewards earlier than usual or boost the abilities of a character.[16] 2000's *Snow War* by Sulake (a Finnish game company best known for *Habbo*) has one of the earliest instances of performance-enhancing virtual items in games with players being able to buy bigger snowballs and thicker coats by sending premium SMS messages.[17] Ubisoft calls these kinds of microtransactions "timesavers" in both *Assassin's*

[13] Field Level Media, "Report: Gaming revenue to top $159B in 2020," Reuters, last modified May 11, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/esports-business-gaming-revenues/report-gaming-revenue-to-top-159b-in-2020-idUSFLM8jkJMl.
[14] "2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry," entertainment software association, last modified May 2019, https://www.theesa.com/esa-research/2019-essential-facts-about-the-computer-and-video-game-industry/.
[15] Haskell, "More than just skin(s) in the game," 143.
[16] Ben Marder et al., "The Avatar's new clothes: Understanding why players purchase non-functional items in free-to-play games," *Computers in Human Behavior* 91 (February 2019): 72; Hao Wang et al., "Effects of Game Design Features on Player-Avatar Relationships and Motivation for Buying Decorative Virtual Items," In *DiGRA '19 – Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix,* ed. n.d. (Kyoto, Japan: DiGRA, August 2019), 1.
[17] Vili Lehdonvirta, "Virtual item sales as a revenue model: identifying attributes that drive purchase decisions," *Electronic commerce research 9* (2009): 105.

Creed Origins and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, selling items that give a permanent boost in XP and in-game currency, a new map filter that reveals the locations of all the collectibles on the map, packs of materials for crafting new weapons, and more (see figure 1).[18] The idea is that by paying a little extra, you can speed up the progression of the game so you can earn new skills, weapons, and collectibles faster and reach new quests in the story sooner.

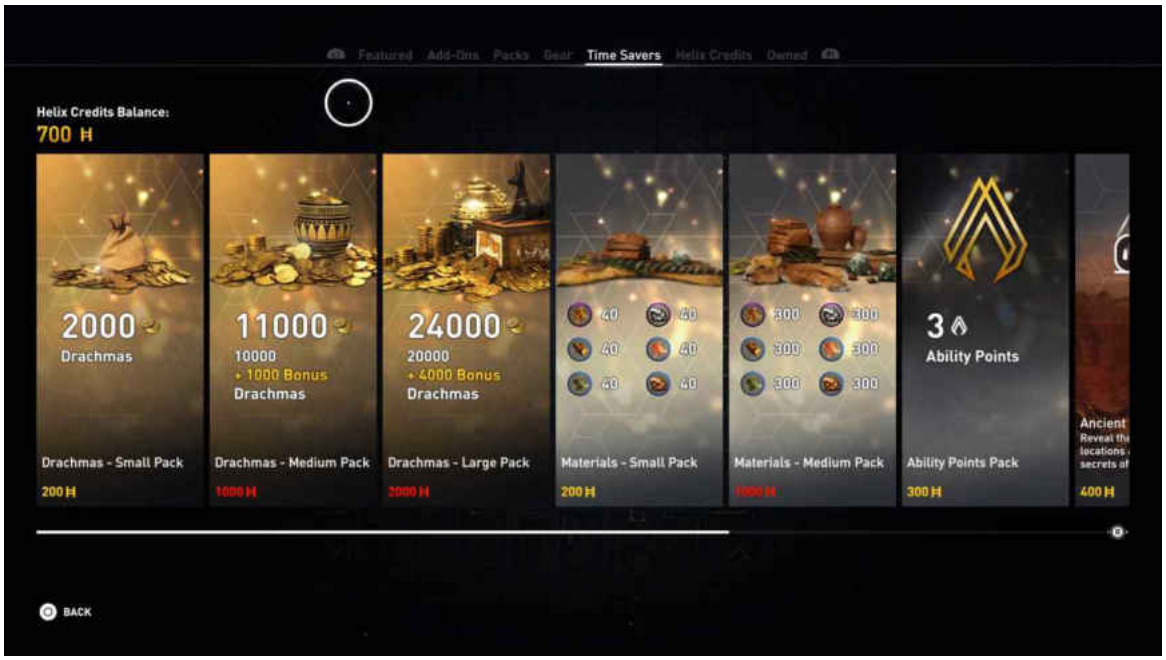

Figure 1: The "Time Savers" microtransactions in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. The player makes a microtransaction to get the premium currency of "Helix Credits" to buy the in-game currency of "Drachmas", packs of crafting materials used to upgrade gear, Ability Points to unlock abilities sooner, and the marking of hidden collectibles on the map.

In a multiplayer game, performance-enhancing microtransactions can give players bonuses to make players' competitive play easier or more efficient by increasing the potency of their abilities and character statistics. Prior to an update, *Star Wars Battlefront II* included Star Cards in loot boxes – microtransactions that offer players a random assortment of virtual items of different rarities. Star Cards can be equipped to the playable character to add in-game boosts

[18] Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, PC, PS4, Xbox One, Ubisoft, 2017; Ubisoft Quebec, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, PC, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, Stadia, Ubisoft, 2018.

such as healing health after killing opponents, decreasing ability cooldowns, increasing attack power, and even adding character specific bonuses such as Boba Fett being immune to damage while firing rockets in midair.[19] Some players and games media writers have referred to microtransactions for functional items as "gameplay-affecting," but throughout this thesis I'm going to refer to the microtransactions and the items you get from them as "performance-enhancing" as other scholars like Juho Hamari and Vili Lehdonvirta have.[20] This is for two reasons: the phrase better reflects the specific function and appeal of these types of microtransactions and as I will argue the items from cosmetic microtransactions can influence how people play games so in that way cosmetic microtransactions can also be seen as gameplay-affecting.

As for the latter form of microtransactions, known as cosmetic microtransactions, they are for items that change the audiovisual design of certain elements of the game or for adding to social and communication tools. They include customization items known as "skins" that wrap around and completely change the appearance of the player's avatar – the digital representation of the player that allows them to interact with the world of the game - or their weapon.[21] They also include pets, mounts, decorations to one's in-game living space, and emotes. Scholars call these items "non-functional" because they don't have a utilitarian purpose; they don't increase your stats or abilities in the game.[22] In *Overwatch*, there's no difference in attack power, health,

[19] Tom Marks, "Opinion: Star Wars: Battlefront 2 Beta Raises Pay-To-Win Fears."
[20] Emma Kent, "2K confirms *Borderlands 3* has cosmetic-only purchases following microtransactions confusion," *Eurogamer*, last modified May 3, 2019, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2019-05-03-2k-confirms-borderlands-3-will-have-cosmetic-only-purchases-following-microtransactions-confusion; Juho Hamari and Vili Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing: How game mechanics create demand for virtual goods," *Int. Journal of Business Science and Applied Management 5,* no. 1, 2010: 22.
[21] T. L. Taylor, "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds," in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, ed. Ralph Schroeder (London: Springer-Verlag, 2002), 40.
[22] Marder et al., "The Avatar's new clothes," 72.

or any other stat between a Soldier 76 using the default skin with the jacket and armored boots and a Soldier 76 using the legendary "Grillmaster" skin with the Hawaiian shirt, apron, shorts, and socks with sandals (see figure 2). I'm referring to non-functional items as cosmetic items in my thesis because the term "cosmetic" describes the purpose and appeal of the items in a more specific way. In addition, some cosmetic items like emotes can have functional uses for communicating information to other players so they're not always "non-functional."

Figure 2: *Overwatch*'s Soldier 76 with the default skin (L) and the legendary "Grillmaster" skin (R). ("Soldier: 76/Cosmetics," Overwatch Wiki, accessed July 15, 2020, https://overwatch.gamepedia.com/Soldier:_76/Cosmetics.)

Players have come to especially loathe performance-enhancing microtransactions. Many argue that for single-player games, the presence of performance-enhancing microtransactions indicates that the developers intentionally designed the game to be less rewarding and more tedious to play in order to make the microtransactions more desirable by allowing players to skip the grind. Game critic Jim Sterling, when talking about the microtransactions in *Middle Earth: Shadow of War* which allow you to purchase XP boosters and a random assortment of orcs to recruit via loot boxes, argued that these microtransactions add an explicit value to the time saved which devalues the time you spend on the game. The microtransactions also indicate that the game's progression has been made slower so that people are more inclined to spend money on

the microtransactions to speed things up.[23] The other side of the issue surrounding performance-enhancing microtransactions concerns balancing in competitive multiplayer games. The idea is that just by spending money on a game, a player could gain an unfair competitive advantage over other players without even touching the game beforehand.

Fans of popular video games have come to view cosmetic microtransactions in a more favorable light than performance-enhancing ones because cosmetic microtransactions don't make any changes to one's abilities or the rate at which they acquire rewards. This is the argument presented in a 2018 study by Qutee, where 68.6 percent of the 1,307 respondents said that they did not object to cosmetic microtransactions while 22 percent said they disliked pay-to-win microtransactions. "As echoed by dozens of respondents, if microtransactions allow a player to make their character or property look better, without altering capabilities or gameplay, the overarching sentiment is that this presents no issue," the report said.[24] However, the study didn't ask respondents if they disliked cosmetic microtransactions or if they liked pay-to-win microtransactions. Only 5.8 percent said they don't purchase microtransactions at all, though the study also notes that only 1.3 percent said they were "fans" of microtransactions. While the study comes from a private company and doesn't appear to be peer-reviewed, it still makes it clear that a lot of players prefer cosmetic microtransactions over pay-to-win microtransactions. If a game only has cosmetic microtransactions, that should mean that the core gameplay and the sense of fair competition from it have not been compromised.

Game industry spokespeople have adapted this rhetoric concerning cosmetic microtransactions when talking about the microtransactions in their games. *Overwatch* Game

[23] Jim Sterling, "Shadow of More Dollars (The Jimquisition)."
[24] QuteeTeam, "Gaming Today: A report by Qutee into how players really feel about Gaming in 2018," *Qutee* (February 2018): 1, http://files.qutee.com/Qutee-Gaming-Today-Report.pdf.

Director Jeff Kaplan told *PC Games N* that they know that their players don't want any power increase *Overwatch's* systems, so they wanted it "to be purely cosmetic, so that was one of the core philosophies."[25] Warner shared a similar sentiment to Kaplan when he told *Game Informer* that generosity to the players is the "number one" pillar that his development studio Bioware sticks to and so the microtransactions are purely cosmetic instead of pay-to-win.[26] Bethesda Softworks Senior Vice President of Global Marketing and Communications Pete Hines reassured players that *Fallout 76's* microtransactions will be purely cosmetic, while encouraging the idea that microtransactions give players more freedom when it comes to customizing the experience.[27] When Electronic Arts removed the ability to pay for loot boxes in *Battlefront 2*, they emphasized that the loot boxes will only contain cosmetic items and in-game currency instead of Star Cards or anything else that impacts gameplay.[28]

A sizable portion of players find no problems with microtransactions so long as they're just cosmetic, and so game developers and publishers emphasize that their microtransactions are cosmetic only to appeal to those players. Some tell players that adding cosmetic-only microtransactions is rooted in their core philosophy of being generous to the players or giving the players as much freedom to customize their experience as possible (so long as you have the money). But cosmetic microtransactions are never "just cosmetic." Cosmetic items are an integral part of many games today, including some of the most popular ones. Developers and

[25]Richard Scott-Jones, "Overwatch's 2018 Uprising and Anniversary events, and why Kaplan thinks loot boxes work," *PCGamesN*. last modified December 14, 2017, https://www.pcgamesn.com/overwatch/overwatch-uprising-2018-next-event-one-trick-jeff-kaplan.
[26]Joe Juba, "Anthem's Microtransactions Are Cosmetic-Only."
[27]Matt Morgans. "Fallout 76 Microtransactions Won't be Pay-to-Win, Says Pete Hines," *VGR*, accessed April 7, 2020, https://www.vgr.com/fallout-76-microtransactions-hines/.
[28] "Revamped Progression Is Coming Soon: A major Star Wars Battlefront II update is cleared for take off," Star Wars Battlefront II, accessed August 15, 2020, https://www.ea.com/games/starwars/battlefront/star-wars-battlefront-2/news/progression-update.

publishers work hard to make those items as appealing as possible not only in how the items are designed visually but how they're implemented in the game. Cosmetic items can change the way people play games both from within the boundaries of a game and outside of it.

Literature Review

My secondary sources include studies about players' motivations for buying functional and non-functional items and how players use avatars as a vehicle for experiencing the game and expressing themselves in a virtual space. I will also draw upon studies on game design, especially as it relates to player behavior and video game monetization.

Joshua A.T. Fairfield identifies three defining characteristics that separate virtual items in games from other digital items such as MP3 files: rivalrousness, persistency, and interconnectedness. Rivalrousness means that the owner of the item controls it and others do not. Persistency means that the item does not fade from use; one can play a game on a different computer and still have access to all their virtual items so long as the items are tied to their account. Interconnectedness means that while one person may control a virtual item, others may be affected by it.[29] The interconnectivity of a virtual item, which includes cosmetic items, means that by their very nature and definition they are able to affect other players and their experience of the gameplay.

While many scholars have debated how to define games and what sets them apart from other mediums, I will be drawing on Thomas M. Malaby's theory that games are "domains of contrived contingency."[30] The rules or mechanics of a game are meant to calibrate many

[29] Joshua A.T. Fairfield, (2005), "Virtual property," *Boston University Law Review 85,* no. 4, 1053-1054.
[30] Thomas M. Malaby, "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 2 (April 2007): 96.

contingencies and create both predictable and unpredictable outcomes which are then the subject of interpretation by the player who generates culturally shared meanings.[31] Malaby says that games are an ongoing process that when played contain the potential for generating new practices and meanings.[32] Not only can games change as they are played, but that change can be done intentionally by players as they notice patterns and develop new ways to play the game.

"The essential point, then," said Malaby,

> is that games are grounded in (and constituted by) human practice and are therefore always in the process of becoming. This also means that they are not reducible to their rules. This is because any given singular moment in any given game may generate new practices or new meanings, which may in turn transform the way the game is played, either formally or practically.[33]

Malaby believed that prior definitions of games failed to adequately capture what made them powerful because they positioned games as nonproductive, consequence-free, and separate from everyday experience.[34] Malaby argues that games can "accommodate any number and kind of stakes and are not intrinsically consequence free or, therefore, separable from everyday experience" because of the way they generate unpredictable and interpretable outcomes.[35] Thinking about cosmetic items in games as purely ornamental follows the formalist and exceptionalist way of thinking about games that defines them solely through their rules. It ignores the way games can lead to the generation of new, emergent meanings that then inform

[31] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 106.
[32] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 102.
[33] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 103.
[34] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 96-97.
[35] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 98.

how the game is experienced, and cosmetic items can influence how those meanings are generated.

Related to Malaby's theory of contrived contingency is Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux' theory of metagaming. Metagaming describes the use and recontextualization of games for activities and behaviors that occur within, around and outside of the boundaries of the game. Making metagames is both a conscious and unconscious practice.[36] Metagames are environments for games, it contains the game and makes it possible at the same time.[37] There's no one single definition of a metagame, as it can be applied to a variety of behaviors and they constantly expand into new behaviors.[38] They include speedrunning where players try to complete a game as fast as possible often by exploiting glitches to skip entire sections of the game. "Difficult to design, impossible to predict, deeply collaborative, and always ephemeral, metagaming undermines the authority of videogames as authored objects, packaged products, intellectual property, and copyrighted code by transforming single-player software into materials for making metagames," said Boluk and Lemieux.[39] Players have used cosmetic items as tools for creating metagames. Placing bets with skins on the outcome of esports matches is a metagame played by the esports audience.[40] People selling gear to other players in a virtual economy is a metagame because it is a game around a game.[41] Both theories of contrived contingency and metagaming can be applied to show that cosmetics can have an influence on gameplay despite what players and industry spokespeople might say.

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[36] Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 5.
[37] Boluk and Lemieux, 14.
[38] Boluk and Lemieux, 17.
[39] Boluk and Lemieux, 25.
[40] Boluk and Lemieux, 16.
[41] Boluk and Lemieux, 20.

Moore, drawing from Massumi and Shouse, writes that when it comes to video games affect is excess abstracted, positioned outside or prior to consciousness. It's the body's way of preparing itself for the act of responding to something by building a quantitative intensity to the experience. Affective tone includes the colors, music, architecture, lighting, and voice acting that leaves an impression on people, but Moore notes that when it comes to games the intensity of the experience of playing moderated by the signification of the visual and auditory and its interpretation leads to the player committing to their response in the form of tactile actions performed to control the game and create an outcome. Thus, the game itself and its mechanics can be included in affective tone.[42] Cosmetic items, as items roped into the visual design of the game, can not only be included in the affective tone but can in combination with all the other elements of the game including the gameplay itself influence the affect of the player and their interpretation of it and thus influence their responses in the game.

T.L. Taylor writes that players bring vibrancy to virtual spaces by embodying themselves through their avatars. Avatars facilitate the creation of identity and social life; they are used to greet, to play, to signal group affiliation, to convey opinions or feelings, and to create closeness.[43] Often players will use avatars in ways that weren't intended by the creators of the game, such as using cosmetic options to create protests within the game like *Red Dead Online* players dressing up as clowns to protest the lack of updates.[44] "Avatars form one of the central points at which users intersect with a technological object and embody themselves, making the

[42] Moore, "Hats of affect."
[43] T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds," in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, ed. R. Schroeder (London: Springer-Verlag, 2002), 40-41.
[44] T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally," 45; Andy Chalk, "Red Dead Online players are dressing up as clowns to protest a lack of updates," *PC Gamer,* last modified July 14, 2020, https://www.pcgamer.com/red-dead-online-players-are-dressing-up-as-clowns-to-protest-a-lack-of-updates/.

virtual environment and the variety of phenomenon it fosters real," said Taylor.[45] The avatar creates the sense of presence felt in virtual worlds by being grounded in the practice of the body. "In multi-user worlds it is not just through the inclusion of a representation of self that presence is built. It is instead through the *use* of a body as *material* in the dynamic performance of identity and social life that users come to be 'made real' – that they come to experience immersion," said Taylor.[46] Thus many phenomena about how people interact with each other in the offline world can be applied to how they interact in the virtual world. This includes things like fashion, peer approval, protest, and other activities that can be facilitated and enhanced through cosmetic items.

Sabine Trepte and Leonard Reinecke write that previous research shows that players prefer similar avatars in terms of gender role, outward appearance, and biological sex.[47] However, players may choose to play as dissimilar avatars as a form of identity play - to act out possible selves and different personalities in the relative safety of virtual space. Players may also make and play as dissimilar avatars because it better fits the requirements of the game (e.g. they make the character more extroverted, fearless, and masculine for action games). Both similar and dissimilar avatars can contribute to media enjoyment.[48] Their quasi-experimental study found that game competitiveness and people's life satisfaction can influence avatar choice and identification. People made dissimilar avatars that better met the game's requirements for an action-oriented competitive game while they made similar avatars for noncompetitive games. Identification with the avatar was positively related to game enjoyment, but player/avatar

[45] T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally," 41.
[46] T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally," 42.
[47] Sabine Trepte and Leonard Reinecke, "Avatar Creation and Video Game Enjoyment: Effects of Life-Satisfaction, Game Competitiveness, and Identification with the Avatar," *Journal of Media Psychology* 22, no. 4, (January 2010): 171.
[48] Trepte and Reinecke, 172.

similarity was negatively related to enjoyment which means that identity play can be its own source of enjoyment in computer games.[49] Hao Wang et al. similarly agreed that player/avatar relationships can affect such things as game enjoyment, immersion, and virtual character identity and they found significant correlations between player/avatar relationships and players' motivation to purchase cosmetic items.[50] Dominic Kao and D. Fox Harrell found that players using role model avatars had higher performance in an educational game than players using a user selected avatar.[51]

Hao et al. applied multiple different kinds of purchase motivation referenced throughout studies on consumer culture to virtual items: functional, social, hedonic, and role-playing.[52] Functional shoppers focus on product and service utility – how useful the item is to the consumer, social shoppers focus on fitting in with peer groups, hedonic shoppers focus on the fun of the shopping experience itself, and role-playing shoppers focus on the recipients of their purchases – they imagine how their children or partners will like the clothing they pick out for them. They found that the motivations for purchasing virtual items were very similar, and reasons relating to avatar customization ranked the highest.[53] In a meta-analysis of 24 studies about purchase motivation for virtual items, Hamari and Lauri Keronen found that the factors understood to be positively associated with the purchase of virtual goods in video games and virtual worlds (in descending order of the strength of the association) as well as the most

[49] Trepte and Reinecke, 171.
[50] Hao Wang et al., "Effects of Game Design Features on Player-Avatar Relationships and Motivation for Buying Decorative Virtual Items," 18-19.
[51] Dominic Kao and D. Fox Harrell, "Exploring the Use of Role Model Avatars in Educational Games," Proceedings of the 2nd annual AIIDE Workshop on Experimental AI and Games (November 2015): 29-35.
[52] Hao Wang et al. "Effects of Game Design Features on Player-Avatar Relationships and Motivation for Buying Decorative Virtual Items," 3.
[53] Hao Wang et al., "Effects of Game Design Features on Player-Avatar Relationships and Motivation for Buying Decorative Virtual Items," 17.

investigated factors in the literature were attitude toward purchasing virtual goods, flow or immersion in the experience, perception of the amount of peers also using the service, social acceptability of purchasing virtual goods, the perceived value of the goods, how fun or enjoyable the service is, intention to use the service, and perceived ease of using the service.[54]

Wu and Hsu found that the authenticity – "the sense of genuineness that causes people to perceive people, things, rituals, and traditions as real" – of the gaming experience can be a significant predictor of players' intention to play a game and intention to purchase a virtual item.[55] Aesthetic design is a critical factor in increasing the emotional responses of players and making them willing to incorporate themselves in the world of the game, and when players perceive their game world to be authentic, they have an easier time finding a sense of existence in the game world. Citing Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Wu and Hsu argue that when people perceive their situations as real they attach greater importance to the connections between themselves and objects and elements within the game. Thus, a more authentic game world can lead to players feeling that their time spent in the world is more worthwhile and players feeling more comfortable being themselves in the world, which can then lead to them buying virtual items to help them better fill their role in the game and feel more in tune with the world of the game.[56]

Adam Ho argued that while the labor needed to create virtual items and the personal perspectives and preferences of players is important when discussing the value of virtual items,

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[54] Juho Hamari and Lauri Keronen, "Why do people buy virtual goods: A meta-analysis," *Computers in Human Behavior 71* (2017): 64.
[55] Shu-Ling Wu and Chiu-Ping Hsu, "Role of authenticity in massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs): Determinants of virtual item purchase intention," *Journal of Business Research* 92 (November 2018): 242, 246.
[56] Wu and Hsu, "Role of authenticity in massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs)," 245.

they tend to overlook how players are still restricted and affected by the game environment and the mechanics of the game.[57] The computer code dictating both functional and non-functional items can be updated by game developers; a sword can have its power increased or decreased and the assets – or the objects, textures, etc. that make up games – for items can be tweaked and replaced. Thus the value of a virtual items is linked to the design and rules of the game itself.[58]

The literature I consulted helps us see how cosmetics can be an integral part of many games. Games are sites and tools for generating new meanings and patterns of play, and cosmetics can influence that process. Cosmetics are a key component of how players facilitate their identity, social life, and sense of presence in virtual spaces through their avatars. Players make cosmetic microtransactions for a variety of reasons that line up with why people purchase clothing in the offline world, and how desirable a microtransactions can be is tied to the design of the game. Cosmetic items are a part of the affective appeal or tone of the game and therefore the experience of playing a game. All of this provides the bedrock for my argument that cosmetic items in games are far from "just cosmetic."

Methods

My thesis is a textual analysis of a popular game that heavily features cosmetic items in its monetization: *Fortnite*. I bring in theories and prior research on the subject as well as journalistic coverage of *Fortnite* and related games to round out the discussion. The first part of the thesis discusses the ways cosmetic items can influence gameplay and lead to the creation of new games. The second part focuses on how game developers craft the design of their games to

[57] Adam Ho, "The value of being powerful or beautiful in games – how game design affects the value of virtual items," *The Computer Games Journal* 3, (April 2014): 55.
[58] Ho, "The value of being powerful or beautiful in games," 59.

revolve around cosmetic microtransactions. I am interpreting microtransactions as part of the text of the game or metagame while examining how they work within the player's experience of the game, rather than studying the industrial practices of microtransactions.

Fortnite is a third-person shooter game for PC, Mac, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, iOS, and Android. *Fortnite*'s most well-known game mode is Battle Royale, where 100 players descend from the sky from a flying Battle Bus onto a huge map and try to eliminate each other with a variety of firearms and other weapons and tools found in the map until one player is left standing. You can also collect materials to build walls and platforms to block incoming fire or trap and get the high ground over opponents. As the match goes on, the map gets consumed by a storm that gradually damages players, forcing them together into smaller and smaller circles. There are different variations of matches within Battle Royale, such as team matches where teams of two or four players try to compete to be the last team standing. *Fortnite* also features a variety of cosmetic items you can use to customize your avatar or the tools they use in Battle Royale, including outfits that change your avatar's entire appearance, harvesting tools used to collect materials, gliders deployed after skydiving from the Battle Bus, pets that hang out on your character's back and can be petted, wraps that change the color of weapons or vehicles, and emotes that trigger short animations for your avatar like dances or gestures.

Fortnite makes an incredible amount of money thanks to its cosmetic microtransactions and its massive player base of 350 million registered users as of May 2020.[59] In April 2020

[59] FortniteGame, Twitter Post, May 6, 2020, 12:01 p.m., https://twitter.com/FortniteGame/status/1258079550321446912.

alone, *Fortnite* made $400 million in revenue according to *VentureBeat*.[60] *Fortnite*'s developer, Epic Games, reported $4.2 billion in revenue and $730 million in earnings in 2019, according to *VentureBeat*.[61] Analysts predict that revenue for the company in 2020 will be valued at $5 billion, with earnings of $1 billion.[62]

I am using *Fortnite* as a case study not just because it's one of the most popular games today but because it provides dozens of examples illustrating how cosmetic items can influence a player's experience with a game and how cosmetic items can influence game design. The phenomenon of players using cosmetic items to put on fashion shows in the game demonstrate not only how cosmetic items can create a metagame of looking as good as possible according to the rules of cool fashion but how cosmetic items can be tools for creating new gameplay styles beyond the initial core gameplay. The way cosmetic items are integrated into mechanics like the battle pass show us how cosmetic items can be effective rewards that can encourage optimal play. Stories from the offline world related to *Fortnite* can provide interesting implications about the value of cosmetic microtransactions and the metagames they create; there are reports of children bullying other kids because they only have the default outfit in *Fortnite* instead of one of the premium skins and some people are using the dance emotes from the game to bully people from marginalized groups.[63]

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[60] Dean Takahashi, "Epic Games seeking to sell stake for $750 million at $17 billion valuation," *VentureBeat*, last modified June 15, 2020, https://venturebeat.com/2020/06/15/epic-games-shareholders-seeking-to-sell-stake-for-750-million-at-17-billion-valuation/.

[61] Keep in mind that this money doesn't just come from *Fortnite*. Epic Games is also the creator of the Unreal Engine which many game developers use. The company also owns its own digital games storefront, the Epic Games Store. They've also made other games and own Psyonix, the developer of the popular esports game *Rocket League* which has its own cosmetic microtransactions.

[62] Takahashi, "Epic Games seeking to sell stake for $750 million at $17 billion valuation."

[63] Patricia Hernandez, "Fortnite is free, but kids are getting bullied into spending money," *Polygon*, last modified May 7, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/2019/5/7/18534431/fortnite-rare-default-skins-bullying-harassment; Wayne Marshall, "Social Dance in the Age of (Anti-)Social Media," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 4 (2019): 7-8.

Other sources I am using in my thesis include lectures by game developers at conferences talking about how they add value to the virtual items they put in their games, how fashion design can be incorporated into game design, and tactics they use to get people to spend money in the game. They give a first-hand account of how value is created for cosmetic items and how you can tailor a game's design to make them as profitable as possible, making them very valuable to my research. I reference journalistic coverage of how players interact with cosmetics in popular games, as they can alert me to phenomena that many players have experienced. I draw upon many studies about the motivations behind purchasing virtual items both functional and non-functional. That way I understand not only why players collectively spend billions and billions of dollars on them, but how those items can be made more desirable through the game's design and how they are marketed and presented. I also draw upon a number of studies about player avatars, how people use them, and how people use avatars to represent themselves in games to further understand how virtual items can enhance the experience of customizing and optimizing avatars. I also include some theories about game design to explain how cosmetics can not only influence gameplay but can be gameplay.

Chapter Descriptions

Having established the debate between performance-enhancing and cosmetic microtransactions and my thesis statement that cosmetic microtransactions can influence gameplay, we can move on to the first part of the thesis. Chapter 1, "'What We Wearing, Boys?' The Impact of Cosmetic Items on Gameplay and Beyond in *Fortnite*," focuses on how cosmetic items can impact the player's experience with games. The ways players use cosmetic items in games challenge assumptions that they're purely decorative. While cosmetic items don't change the rules of the game or the parameters of one's abilities in the game, they can still change how

people play games. Cosmetic items can inspire the creation of metagames. Players can use cosmetic items to create their own games and use them to enhance roleplay and communication. I will also examine the impact cosmetic items can have on the balance of multiplayer matches. While pay-to-win microtransactions can provide immediate advantages to players for a price, cosmetic ones could provide their own advantages too. I will discuss how cosmetic microtransactions can be used to signify skill and establish a sense of dominance in multiplayer matches. Finally, I will examine how players use cosmetics for the purposes of communication and how that function is tied to the tension and release of the gameplay. Players use cosmetic items and other elements of visual design in games as tools to interact with games and create new meanings and patterns of play. Not only can cosmetic items influence play, but they can become their own play in and of themselves.

Having discussed how cosmetic items can influence how players create metagames, I will then examine how game developers design their games to encourage players to buy cosmetic items in chapter 2, **"**Under the Skin: How the Lucrative Aspects of Cosmetic Items Influence Game Design." Game companies work to normalize the idea that cosmetic microtransactions don't impact gameplay. Game companies know that cosmetic items hold value to players and thus employ many systems to make them as desirable, and therefore profitable, as possible. Cosmetic items can be integrated into various systems in the game to keep players playing and potentially paying because they make for an appealing reward. Players can tailor their gameplay to acquiring cosmetic items as soon as possible. The demand for certain cosmetic items is often created by restricting access to them, such as making items available in a shop that rotates on a daily basis as *Fortnite* does. Other ways of creating demand include simply making the items look cool or making them appeal to specific identities and cultures. Finally, I will examine how

Epic Games creates a “haves” and “have-nots” environment among players by creating hierarchies of coolness among the premium cosmetic items. The thesis will end with a brief conclusion, summarizing the main arguments about cosmetic microtransactions as well as suggesting ideas for future research.

Chapter 1 – "What We Wearing, Boys?" The Impact of Cosmetic Items on Gameplay and Beyond in *Fortnite*

A group of three *Fortnite* players clad in samurai armor line up in front of YouTuber Lachlan before fighting in pitched combat. But instead of using guns or pickaxes like any *Fortnite* player would, they use their fists and legs. The trio duck and weave between each other's punches, kicks, and flips like a high-octane kung fu movie. One leaps into the air to deliver a ground pound, knocking down the other two fighters and forcing them to retreat. "You can tell they practiced so much on that," says Lachlan as he dubs the trio the winner of the first qualifier round. The samurai are performing for Lachlan's fashion show which he created within *Fortnite*'s Creative mode (see figure 3).

Figure 3: A group performs a skit about three fighting samurai for a Fortnite fashion show hosted by YouTuber Lachlan. (Lachlan, "I Hosted A $20,000 Fortnite Fashion Show," YouTube video, 30:29, April 1, 2020, https://youtu.be/ltXmwbjYI1c)

While *Fortnite's* main attraction is Battle Royale, players can create their own content and levels on their own Creative Islands in Creative mode. In Creative mode, players fly around

the island and place objects to create a level. Players can then invite friends or the public to play in the island. While players use the same controls to navigate the world as they do in Battle Royale, the gameplay on an island doesn't have to be a Battle Royale. They can make any kind of game they want so long as it's within the limits of the mode and the Battle Royale controls. Entering and driving vehicles is a standard feature in Battle Royale, but in Creative mode you can dedicate an entire island to racing in vehicles. Creative mode is Epic Games giving its players the tools to create their own metagames – in this case games within games.

Lachlan's island contains a fully modeled theater where he tasks teams of three to use combinations of cosmetic items offered within *Fortnite* to perform a skit. The performers in the samurai skit were wearing skins from the in-game premium skin shop as well as emotes - brief, scripted animations that players can activate in the middle of gameplay - that were triggered at just the right time to make it look like they were fighting one another (otherwise they would just shadow box). Other skits from the show included one where survivors in an apocalypse catch and cure a zombie, one where aliens visit the moon, and another where the team built entire pirate ships using the in-game building tools and then staged an epic seafaring battle.[64]

Lachlan isn't the only person to create a fashion show in *Fortnite*. Epic Games recently featured a fashion show game by users Bunni_ and KKSlider (see figure 4) in their Creative Showcase, a playlist of popular games made by the community in creative mode. Players take turns showing off their cosmetic items with the goal of getting the most votes from other players after 4 rounds. Unofficial creative mode map search websites Dropnite and Fortnite Creative HQ list 22 and 20 maps for fashion shows respectively when one searches for "fashion show". A

[64] Lachlan, "I Hosted A $20,000 Fortnite Fashion Show," YouTube video, 30:29, April 1, 2020, https://youtu.be/ltXmwbjYI1c.

casual search on YouTube for "*Fortnite* fashion show" will bring up dozens, possibly hundreds of videos of people hosting their own fashion shows. Some have different themes, such as using cosmetic items from *Fortnite*'s various media crossover events with Marvel, DC Comics and others; some offer hundreds or even thousands in cash prizes (Lachlan's fashion show offered $20,000 in prizes); and they come from YouTube channels big and small. Players can also show off their cosmetics outside of fashion shows by posting screenshots on social media. There's a Subreddit called Fortnite Fashion with 70,800 members where players post screenshots of their avatars and list the cosmetic items they have on while other players rate their builds with Reddit's voting system and suggest improvements in the comment section. They also give each other advice on what items to buy in the rotating daily section of the item shop.[65]

Figure 4: Players perform while others vote in Bunni_ and KKSlider's Fortnite Fashion Show.

[65] "Fortnite Fashion: Show your favorite combos!" Reddit, accessed November 28, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteFashion/.

A sizable portion of players prefer microtransactions for cosmetic items over functional items in games. They argue that functional items threaten to undermine the sense of balance necessary for fair competition in multiplayer games as well as the flow of progression in single-player games. They view cosmetic microtransactions as better than performance-enhancing ones because in their eyes they don't affect gameplay. Game industry spokespeople emphasize that the microtransactions in their games are for purely cosmetic items to appeal to those players. When talking about the loot box controversy surrounding *Overwatch,* Game Director Jeff Kaplan told *PC Games N* that "…we know what players like and don't like, and as players we don't want any sort of power increase in our system. We wanted the system to be purely cosmetic, so that was one of the core philosophies."[66] *Anthem* Game Director Jon Warner takes a similar approach to Kaplan in claiming that cosmetic microtransactions were part of their core design philosophy. Warner told *Game Informer* "We have a couple pillars that we stick to, and generosity to our players is number one on that list… no loot crates. No pay-to-win. Strictly cosmetic."[67] Bethesda Softworks Senior Vice President of Global Marketing and Communications Pete Hines' statement about the cosmetic microtransactions in *Fallout 76* is notable in how it encourages the idea that players aren't forced to spend money on microtransactions because they provide no in-game advantages over other players. It's also notable in how it was said before Bethesda added performance-enhancing microtransactions to *Fallout 76*.

> "If you don't want to spend money in the Atomic shop for cosmetic stuff," said Hines, "you don't have to. We give you a shitload of Atoms [the in-game currency] just for

[66]Scott-Jones, "Overwatch's 2018 Uprising and Anniversary events, and why Kaplan thinks loot boxes work."
[67]Juba, "Anthem's Microtransactions Are Cosmetic-Only."

> playing the game. Folks that want to spend money on whatever the hell it is because they don't have enough Atoms, they can, but it's not, 'I'm now better playing against other players because I spent money.' It's not pay-to-win. And it's not loot crates."[68]

When Electronic Arts removed the ability to pay for loot boxes in *Battlefront 2*, they emphasized that the loot boxes will only contain cosmetic items and in-game currency instead of Star Cards or anything else that impacts gameplay.[69] *Fortnite* directly tells players underneath the selection of virtual items for sale in the in-game item shop that "these cosmetic items grant no competitive advantage."

Game industry spokespeople appeal to players who prefer cosmetic microtransactions by saying that they're giving players what they want and that it's a part of their core values of being generous to players. They reassure them that the microtransactions have no impact on gameplay and that they grant no competitive advantage. However, the way that players can use cosmetic items in games challenges assumptions that they're purely ornamental. This chapter will investigate how players use cosmetic items in *Fortnite* and how using cosmetic items can affect their gameplay, not just in fashion shows in Creative mode but in Battle Royale and beyond. While cosmetic items don't change the rules of the game or the parameters of one's abilities in the game, they can still change the gameplay by changing the metagames - games played within, about, around, and even without games. Cosmetic items become tools for players to augment their experiences within the game and create their own fun that goes beyond the limits of the game. The items may even be gameplay in and of themselves.

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[68]Morgans, "Fallout 76 Microtransactions Won't be Pay-to-Win, Says Pete Hines."
[69] "Revamped Progression Is Coming Soon: A major Star Wars Battlefront II update is cleared for take off," Star Wars Battlefront II.

Setting the Stage (Or Catwalk?): When Fashion Design Meets Game Design

People argue that games, as well as play in general, are separate from everyday reality. The idea of a "magic circle" can be traced back to Johan Huizinga, who argued that play is "not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own."[70] But as Malaby argued in *Beyond Play*, any game with stakes cannot be seen as separate from everyday life. "…it is not the status of a game as a game that renders it set apart from everyday life; any game can have important consequences not only materially but also socially and culturally (in terms of one's social network or cultural standing)."[71] In fact, some game players attach more significance to the virtual world than so-called real life, perhaps because their livelihood is tied to professionally playing games or they have an addiction to video games.[72] As Malaby argues, a game or virtual world is an extension of life – a "multiform domain" you can go to like any other space on Earth. Games, just like life, are compelling because they constantly present unpredictability that challenge people to act.[73] Players can meet many of those challenges with cosmetic items.

Lehdonvirta says that in Marxist theory, the use-value of an item is the item's functional attributes that help the user fulfill their goal related to a fundamental human need.[74] Performance-enhancing virtual items like XP boosters and stronger gear have a clear use-value as they directly enhance the player's performance and let them achieve their goals of completion and competition in a game more efficiently. The use-value of a cosmetic item is less obvious, but

[70] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2014), 8.
[71] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 98.
[72] Edward Castranova and Gert G. Wagner, "Virtual life satisfaction," *Kylos International Review for Social Sciences, 64,* no. 3, (2011): 313-328; Halley M. Pontes and Mark D. Griffiths, "The assessment of internet gaming disorder in clinical research," *Clinical Research and Regulatory Affairs, 31,* no. 2-4*,* (2014): 35-48.
[73] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 109.
[74] Lehdonvirta "Virtual item sales as a revenue model," 102.

it makes enough of a difference that many players value it over the arguably more useful functional items. *In World of Warcraft,* players can enhance the power of their weapons with enchantments. Lehdonvirta writes that despite the "Minor Beastslayer" enchantment providing only a minimal boost to performance compared to other enchantments, it's still one of the most popular enchantments because it gives the enchanted weapon a red glow. "It's not useful, but it's cool," according to a player.[75] Lehdonvirta notes how choosing form over function is common in the physical world as well.[76] The use-value of cosmetic items is their stylishness which helps players fulfil their needs of belongingness and esteem. The pursuit of meeting those needs through cosmetic items changes the way players approach and play games. However, customers can use goods in diverse and unexpected ways that go beyond their use- and exchange-value.[77]

Cosmetic items in the digital realm of games have much of the same appeal as fashion in the physical world. Michel Foucault spoke of what he called "technologies of the self," which let people change their bodies and ways of being in order to obtain states of "happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[78] In other words, humans are always looking for ways to customize their experience of humanity, and they use certain technologies to do that. One such technology, as sociologist Joanne Entwistle discusses, is fashion, which lets us individualize ourselves while at the same time connect us within groups and communities.[79]

In a Game Developers Conference 2019 panel, Kitfox Games Community Developer Victoria Tran said that fashion, which she defines as "a distinctive and often constant trend in the

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[75] Lehdonvirta, "Virtual item sales as a revenue model," 106.
[76] Lehdonvirta, "Virtual item sales as a revenue model," 103.
[77] Vili Lehdonvirta, Terhi-Anna Wilska, and Mikael Johnson, (2009) "Virtual Consumerism: Case *Habbo Hotel*," *Information, Communication and Society 12*, no. 7, 1064.
[78] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," Lectures at University of Vermont Oct. 1982, in *Technologies of the Self*, 16-49 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
[79] Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

style in which people present themselves," can be seen as its own complex language with different contexts and moods. Good fashion in games can contribute to the world building or the character design because it says something about the world or the characters. Wearing certain kinds of clothes is a deliberate choice that people make, and thus tells us a lot about their identities and background. It can call back to the era that game is set in. It can tell us where a character is from, what happened in their past, what they are doing now, and if they are a hero or a villain.[80] Clothing needs a connection to culture or identity to make a connection with us. Lehdonvirta, Terhi-Anna Wilska, and Mikael Johnson note that customers can be seen as "communicators who use symbolic meanings in commodities to express status, class, group membership, difference or self-identity," and that the mixing of consumptions styles such as clothing styles resembles artistic expression.[81] "Self-expression, aesthetic considerations and even artistic aspirations are revealed in users' virtual consumption choices," according to them.[82] The ability of clothing to communicate ideas is especially relevant in the design of player avatars. Cosmetics can be an effective way of quickly communicating something about your personality or interests, which could have a hand in helping players find like-minded people. Whether you want to battle in *Fortnite* as a hooded specter or a humanoid banana, your choice of skin says something about you. As T. L. Taylor argues, avatars act as an outlet for constant personal expression, which plays a central role in becoming an individual and making the body real. "Identity remains one of the most evocative uses of an avatar. Ultimately, digital bodies tell

[80] Victoria Tran, "Why Fashion in (Most) Games Sucks and Why You Should Care," Lecture, Game Developer Conference 2019 from Informa, San Francisco, CA, March 2019.
[81] Lehdonvirta, Wilska, and Johnson, "Virtual Consumerism," 1064-5.
[82] Lehdonvirta, Wilska, and Johnson, "Virtual Consumerism," 1073.

the world something about yourself. They are a public signal of who you are. They also shape and help make real how users internally experience their selves," says T. L. Taylor.[83]

What does it mean for a virtual item to be stylish or cool? Citing previous literature defining what cool means, Anders Bruun et al. make a distinction between inner and outer cool. Inner cool is about the perceived personality or character traits that people assign to people or objects. Outer cool covers the physical appearance of a person or object. Inner and outer cool are connected to and enhance one another.[84] People often define cool by defining what is not cool. As Lehdonvirta says, "style can be considered a positional attribute: if everything is cool, then nothing is cool."[85] According to Bruun, Raptis, Kjeldskov, and Skov, cool means different things to different people because the meanings or "rules" of cool is decided, defined, and constantly reshaped within groups of peers. Our perception of cool is shaped through our participation in these groups and how meaning is shared by members of the group. The dynamic construction and constant negotiation of what is cool or not ties the group together and showcases their distinctiveness from other groups.[86]

An object can only be cool if it is perceived as such in a given social context. To paraphrase Raptis, Kieldskov, and Skov with my own example, red looks cool when we observe it as a glow around a virtual weapon but that does not mean all red objects will be perceived as cool. Cool can be minimalistic and elegant, but it can also be flamboyant and flashy. The high price of certain clothes can make them cool due to their exclusivity, but cheap clothes like

[83] T. L. Taylor, "Living Digitally," 51.
[84] Anders Bruun et al., "Measuring the coolness of interactive products: the COOL questionnaire," *Behavior and Information Technology 35*, no. 3, 2016: 235.
[85] Lehdonvirta, "Virtual item sales as a revenue model," 107.
[86] Bruun, Raptis, Kjeldskov, and Skov, "Measuring the coolness of interactive products: the COOL questionnaire," 236.

something in the punk or grunge aesthetic can be cool due to their air of authenticity and rebelliousness. The latest technology can be cool due to their minimal design and their cutting-edge nature, but retro technology can also be cool due to it signaling group affiliation and going against the dominant culture.[87]

Notably, you can find *Fortnite* skins in all these cool styles (see McCarthy for examples of what skins in *Fortnite* can be considered cool).[88] The game has sleek, minimalistic, confidence-oozing skins like cybernetic bodysuits, samurai armor, and mythological heroes like Sun Wukong, but there are also silly skins that are none the less cool thanks to their authenticity and uniqueness like the fish person skins and the character mascot outfits. The skins are also divided into different tiers of rarity in the shop. Now you don't randomly acquire skins in the game via something like loot boxes so the rarity of the skins doesn't reflect how hard they are to get. The higher rarity skins are more intricately designed and thus more desirable and expensive. There are even some skins you can personalize with your own colors and designs like the superhero skins, so someone can design the outfit to make it look cool for them. Wearing a cool skin is simply fun and pleasurable; people get to feel like they're a part of the group they most identify with and they get to express themselves in the way that gives them the most joy and/or peer approval. Not only can you play the game itself for fun, but you can have fun discovering new styles and finding the right look for you.

Tran discusses how fashion can introduce a new form of play with expression and aesthetic power rather than the play of domination and force seen in most games. Many players'

[87] Dimitrios Raptis, Jesper Kjeldskov, and Mikael Skov, "Understanding 'Cool' in Human-Computer Interaction Research and Design," paper presented at OzCHI'13, Adelaide, Australia, November 25 – 29, 2013.
[88] Caty McCarthy, "Fortnite Skins Ranked – The 35 Best Fortnite Skins," *USGamer,* March 12, 2019, https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-35-best-fortnite-battle-royale-skins-season-8.

primary motivation for playing games is fantasy, and so fashion can fulfill that desire many players crave by providing them options to help tell the story of their character through the fashion choices they make. "Fashion is excitement found through exploration and self-discovery. It finds power in aesthetic appeal and fantasy and it's a whole new style of play worth doing well," says Tran. The personal expression can have individual and communal effects on the game. It lets players feel connected to the character or role they play as and express who they are or what they want to be even if they're not playing as themselves. "The strength you feel in video games makes you want to embody the heroes you see, whether that's online or offline, and fashion is one of the best ways to do that," says Tran.[89]

(Virtual) Life's a Party: Immersion and Embodiment in *Fortnite*

Avatars are central to both immersion – the sense of being in the virtual world of games, almost as if you've crossed over the border from the offline to the online - and the construction of community in virtual space. According to T. L. Taylor, avatars "are mediators between personal identity and social life. As a respondent in one of my previous studies put it, they are the 'material to work with' when you are in a virtual world… As with offline life, bodies come to serve as mediation points between the individual and the world (both social and material)."[90] She writes that the avatar is grounded in the practice of the body which creates the sense of presence one feels in virtual worlds, and presence is the foundation of immersion. Presence begins at the image of the avatar players see on their screens. As the player engages in games and activities the avatar signals to the user their continued participation in the space, which reinforces the sense of presence. "Much like offline life, our sense of self, other, and space is

[89] Victoria Tran, "Why Fashion in (Most) Games Sucks and Why You Should Care."
[90] T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2006), 110.

constantly reinscribing itself as structures and relationships change."[91] The practice of presence is a social activity. "It is through placing one's avatar in the social setting, having a self mirrored, as well as mirroring back, that one's presence becomes grounded."[92]

If the avatar is the raw material one uses to ground their sense of presence in the virtual world and come to feel immersed in it, then cosmetic items helps turn the iron of the avatar into steel. Cosmetic items can enhance the avatar's ability to ground the sense of presence players feel in the virtual world by giving them more ways to experience the virtual world and signal their participation within it. This is reflected in research that suggest that people prefer avatars that look similar to them; having the avatar be a reflection of the user helps the user better ground themselves in the experience and come to see themselves existing in the world.[93] User IOnlyUseYing on the Fortnite Fashion Subreddit says she prefers to use the female skins in *Fortnite* because being a woman she feels more "natural" using them since they're generally slimmer than the male skins.[94] However, many choose to play as a dissimilar avatar to embody a role that is different from how they are in the offline world.[95]

In August 2020 Epic Games introduced a new mode to *Fortnite* called Party Royale, a combat- and building-free mode where players are dropped into a much smaller map than Battle Royale filled with minigames to play and a main stage that can display music videos and virtual light shows. Epic Games invited prominent music artists like deadmau5, Dillon Francis, Steve Aoki and even the worldwide sensation BTS to host live events at the main stage. In the case of

[91] T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally," 42.
[92] T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally," 44.
[93] Trepte and Reinecke, "Avatar Creation and Video Game Enjoyment," 171.
[94] IOnlyUseYing, November 6, 2020, comment on Fennimore, "Do cosmetic items affect gameplay?" https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteFashion/comments/jphxgp/do_cosmetic_items_affect_gameplay/.
[95] Trepte and Reinecke, "Avatar Creation and Video Game Enjoyment," 171.

BTS, Party Royale was home to the world premiere of their "Dynamite" Music Video Choreography Version which they played on a virtual screen at the back of the main stage for a limited time (see figure 5).

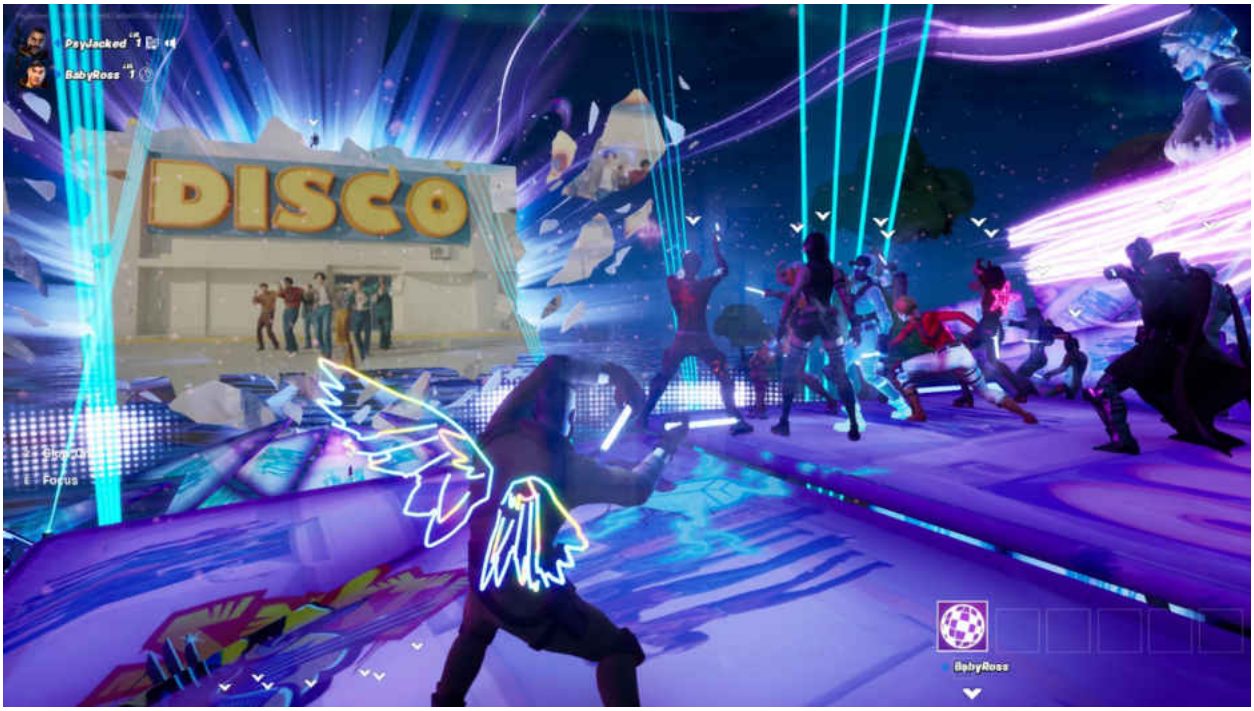

Figure 5: Me dancing along with other players during BTS' world premiere of their "Dynamite" Music Video Choreography Version in *Fortnite* Party Royale. The "Neon Wings" back bling I have equipped are reactive – they change color to the music.

Epic Games offers cosmetic items that seem custom built for Party Royale; some items have reactive patterns that move and change color to the beat of the music playing in the mode. During the BTS event, Epic Games were selling emotes based on dances seen in the music video in the in-game shop. Even if you don't own the emote, you can still do the dance; there's a function in *Fortnite* where you can go up to a player performing an emote, press a button, and then perform the same emote even if you don't own it or have it equipped. Everyone can dance the exact same way BTS does in their performance in *Fortnite*. By having specific uses for the gameplay of Party Royale, the cosmetic items help people ground themselves in the experience of a Party Royale and help establish the sense of presence.

Through their avatars, people are directly affecting the environment of the game through their presence. As Taylor argues, "In multi-user worlds it is not just through the inclusion of a representation of self that presence is built. It is instead through the *use* of a body as *material* in the dynamic performance of identity and social life that users come to be 'made real' – that they come to experience immersion."[96] It's not just in Party Royale where embodiment happens, either. Everywhere in the game players can feel embodied in the action with the help of cosmetics. Certain cosmetics have counters on them that go up as the player eliminates other players. Some weapon skins light up when the player fires their weapon. These cosmetic items aren't necessary to enjoy the game, of course, but they only help immerse the players in the experience Epic Games has crafted for them. It's a clear example of how cosmetics can enhance the experience of playing a game.

Playing Dress-Up with Games: Fashion in *Fortnite* Creative Mode and Beyond

While the competitive aspect of *Fortnite* is strong, as Journalist Keith Stuart writes the experience of playing the game has grown to be a space for its player base of children and teenagers to hang out and experiment, whether it's discovering things in the map and speculating about their significance in forums or just shooting the breeze during periods of low action. In other words, socialization is a metagame that people play in *Fortnite* and they're encouraged to play it through the design of the game. "The game doesn't tell you to have these experiences, but it facilitates idle curiosity and the reward is the fun you have on the way," says Stuart. The huge, open map creates periods of down time between skirmishes allowing squad mates to converse with one another, the cartoon aesthetic creates the appearance of a safe space to have fun, and

[96] T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally," 42.

many of the cosmetics are based on contemporary youth subculture with the dance emotes drawing from trendy dances (many of which are taken uncredited from black artists) making it feel familiar and therefore safe to the game's child and teenage player base.[97] Since the launch of Battle Royale, Epic Games has added creative mode and Party Royale to further facilitate the use of *Fortnite* as a social space.

A number of players like Lachlan have dedicated their Creative mode islands to hosting fashion shows. As players engage in the activity of being in a fashion show, their avatar signals their participation in the show which reinforces their presence within the game world. This presence allows the contestants and judges to affect and respond to each other. But it doesn't end in the virtual. The fact that there can be cash prizes connected to these shows demonstrates that the use of cosmetics in games can have genuine consequences on one's life in the real world as well as the digital world. Being good enough at these competitions can be beneficial to your life in the offline world. Fashion shows in *Fortnite* are possible because of the players that get together and use the raw materials of the game to create their own games. There's no blog post on the *Fornite* website or hint written in the loading screens telling you how to make a fashion show in the game. People have done that for themselves thanks to the metagame – to the creation of a game within the game - and it wouldn't be possible without the existence of cosmetic items.

Fortnite fashion shows are also a good demonstration of how cosmetic items can not only enhance gameplay but can be gameplay in its own right. Malaby defines many kinds of contingencies that help determine the outcome of games. Performance contingency is the

[97] Keith Stuart, "Fortnite Is so Much More Than a Game," *Medium*, last modified August 17, 2018, https://gen.medium.com/fortnite-is-so-much-more-than-a-game-3ca829f389f4; It seems like Epic Games is starting to give credit for the dances it turns into emotes. The "news" page in the game (as well as the game's social media channels) recently advertised the "Smeeze" dance and gave credit to its creator, chonkster_. However, when you view the emote in the item shop, the creator isn't mentioned.

unpredictability that comes with a participant's execution of an action; players can succeed or fail depending on their skill. Social contingency is the unpredictability that comes with not knowing what another player is thinking.[98] When participating as a contestant in these fashion shows, players are under both performative and social contingency. They need to decide on the most stylish combination of cosmetics using their skills in figuring out what looks the best fashion-wise. Players can never be completely sure what the judges will think of their appearance or performance, so they need to accommodate for that uncertainty and make sure they dress according to what would look the coolest to impress the judges. There's also performance contingency when skits are involved in the shows; the players have to use their skills in using the movement options and emotes at the right time to embody their characters and put on a convincing performance. Malaby also describes semiotic contingency, or the unpredictability that comes with attempts to interpret the game's outcomes.[99] There's unpredictability in how judges or other players will decide which outfits look the coolest, which generates new meanings on what cosmetic items can be considered fashionable.

The examples of the *Fortnite* fashion shows demonstrate that players can use cosmetic items to create new kinds of gameplay that go beyond the core gameplay. Playing games like *Fortnite* can be about more than chasing after impressive kill/death ratios. While the shooting combat of Battle Royale can satisfy needs of competition and destruction, the gameplay of choosing and wearing cosmetic items can satisfy needs of fantasy, design, and socialization whether the player is in a fashion show, posting their cosmetic item combos online, or just using emotes to goof around with their friends. This leads to a more well-rounded experience of the

[98] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 108.
[99] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 108.

game overall that has attracted a wide variety of players, if *Fortnite*'s gargantuan player base is any indication. While cosmetics feature heavily in these fashion shows as well as Party Royale, the cosmetics of *Fortnite* can also be applied to Battle Royale. While the focus is clearly on competition and destruction, socialization is still a big component of Battle Royale.

Players make a metagame out of selecting outfits and looking as good as possible with the cosmetic items they have. Players strategize over what cosmetic items to buy in the in-game store – a game both within and outside of the game. An interpretative phenomenological analysis by Jack Cleghorn and Mark D. Griffiths investigating the motivations for purchasing virtual items found that it was important to participants that someone else could see an item they've obtained, and thus those items take on a meaning of expression and success. Buying virtual items has the potential to appeal to social status and increase the gamer's standing in the virtual world among peers. As one participant of Cleghorn and Griffiths (2015) put it, "you see people with that stuff and think 'oh wow, they look cool' and I want it as well and want that same first impression and social status so it's kind of copying because that's how they made you feel when you first saw them wearing that or showing their pet off and you think I want to have that effect on other people."[100] Players also have to decide if paying for a virtual item in a game is a worthy investment by taking into account factors such as how long one will play the game the item is sold in, how attached they are to the item vs. others, if it's function has a good value, and if they can even afford it in the first place. As one participant said, "I always do the calculation, if it's a virtual asset it's always going to be a luxury purchase. Can I justify this to myself?"[101]

[100] Jack Cleghorn and Mark D. Griffiths, "Why do gamers buy 'virtual assets'? An insight in to the psychology behind purchase behavior," *Digital Education Review 27*, https://doi.org/10.1344/der.2015.27.85-104, 91.
[101] Cleghorn and Griffiths, "Why do gamers buy 'virtual assets'?" 96.

Players playing this metagame are being rewarded for spending on virtual items by the boost in self-esteem as a result of looking cool, especially if they look cooler than the other players.[102] Remember that cool is decided within groups of peers in a given social context. *Fortnite* skins might not be your definition of cool, but the skins are cool enough to *Fortnite* players that it matters which one they wear. The dynamic construction of what skins are cool or not reinforces group togetherness and helps emphasize their distinctiveness from other players. oklopfer, a moderator on the FortniteFashion Subreddit, says that he's on the subreddit because he enjoys sharing his cosmetic combinations with others. "I get the enjoyment of being proud of my creations when they come out super good, I get to appreciate all of the stuff I have collected, and I get to share them with people here in artistic ways who will admire them just as much as I did," oklopfer said.[103] Players picking the most attractive items for their avatar isn't unique to *Fortnite* either; a study by Rosa Mikeal Martey and Mia Consalvo found that users in *Second Life* generally created avatars that complemented the societal norms of other users. Avatars in *Second Life* that were dressed in the right clothes – especially female-coded avatars with accessories and revealing clothing – were perceived as more likeable by other users and were more likely to fit in.[104]

While one could argue that the motivations to stand out and look cool in a game is all in good fun, it has the potential to breed envy and toxicity. In May 2019, *Polygon* published a report about students at a private middle school who begged their parents to buy them the premium outfits in *Fortnite* because none of the other students would play with them since they

[102] Cleghorn and Griffiths, "Why do gamers buy 'virtual assets'?" 95.
[103] oklopfer, November 6, 2020, comment on Fennimore, "Do cosmetic items affect gameplay?" https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteFashion/comments/jphxgp/do_cosmetic_items_affect_gameplay/.
[104] Rosa Mikeal Martey and Mia Consalvo, "Performing the looking-glass self: Avatar appearance and group identity in Second Life," *Popular Communication 9*, no. 3, (2011): 165-180, 10.1080/15405702.2011.583830.

didn't have any premium outfits.[105] Players strategize on what cosmetics to buy to maximize the approval of their peers in *Fortnite*. They work around the performative, social, and semiotic contingencies of looking good just like they would at a fashion show. For many players, there are genuine stakes to looking good that go beyond a cash prize. Everyone wants to feel accepted by others and wearing fashionable virtual items can help one feel accepted by expressing their status, class, group membership, and other markers of identity through their virtual clothes just like they would in the real world. The needs of peer approval can be achieved in other ways, of course, but that doesn't take away the capacity for cosmetic items to satisfy those needs. As a social space as well as a competitive environment, *Fortnite* becomes a site for people to express themselves through their virtual outfits and meet their needs of belonging.

Dress for Success: How Cosmetic Items Can Give Players Competitive Advantages in *Fortnite*

Visual design goes hand in hand with game design. Moore writes that character design helps convey strategic and tactical information to the player, such as the how the different classes of TF2 all feature distinct body shapes, postures, and sizes to give them all distinct silhouettes. That way players know immediately what their opponent's class is as well as their abilities, speed, weapon range, strengths, and weaknesses.[106] While I couldn't find studies examining the effect of cosmetic items on game performance, there are a couple of studies examining the effects of being on a red-coded team vs. a blue-coded team. Andrei Llie, Silvian Loan, Leon Zagrean, and Mihai Moldovan, noting that contestants wearing red uniforms in the 2004 Olympic Games were more likely to win against opponents in blue uniforms, examined the

[105] Patricia Hernandez, "Fortnite is free, but kids are getting bullied into spending money."
[106] Moore, "Hats of Affect," n.a.

outcomes of 1,347 matches in *Unreal Tournament 2004* and found that the red team won 54.9% of matches against the blue team. "It is likely that 'seeing red' may trigger a powerful psychological distractor signal in human aggressive competition that can affect the outcome of sports and virtual contests alike," according to them.[107] In other worlds, red is associated with aggression and dominance that thus wearing red can improve the performance of contestants on a subconscious level.[108] As cosmetic items are a part of the visual design of the game, they can be a part of the game design as well. If one does not account for how the design of cosmetic items can potentially impact the design of the game, then there could be consequences.[109] There have been stories of players claiming that certain skins and other cosmetic items give players an unfair advantage.

On June 26, 2019, Epic Games introduced the "Toy Soldier Set" in the item shop. The set included a "Plastic Patroller" skin that made the avatar resemble a green toy soldier. Players found that the green color of the skin blended in very well with the grass and foliage of the game map, letting players easily hide from and ambush other players (see figure 6).[110] After players complained that the Plastic Patroller skin was pay-to-win, Epic Games updated the skin with smears of mud, a more weathered appearance, and a brighter outline to help it stand out from the grass. They also offered a refund to players who bought the skin before the changes were made.[111]

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[107] Andrei Llie, Silvia Loan, Leon Zagrean, and Mihai Moldovan, (2008) "Better to Be Red than Blue in Virtual Competition," *CyberPsychology and Behavior 11,* no. 3, 375.
[108] Some developers have taken these findings into account when designing their games. For instance, in Overwatch, your teammates are highlighted in blue and your opponents are highlighted in red.
[109] For instance, based on the studies on red teams vs. blue teams, it's possible in theory that red-colored skins in *Fortnite* can increase performance.
[110] Bhernardo Viana, "Fortnite players joke about Toy Soldiers skins being pay-to-win," Dot Esports, June 27, 2019, https://dotesports.com/fortnite/news/fortnite-players-joke-about-toy-soldiers-skins-being-pay-to-win.
[111] "V10.10 Patch Notes," Epic Games, August 14, 2019, https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/patch-notes/v10-10-patch-notes.

Figure 6: An image by user camicam95 on the FortNiteBR Subreddit demonstrating how the Plastic Patroller skin can blend into the grass and foliage of *Fortnite*'s map (camicam95, "These are for cosmetics only and grant no competitive advantage," Reddit, accessed October 30, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/FortNiteBR/comments/c63jz0/these_are_for_cosmetics_only_and_grant_no/).

While the Plastic Patroller skin is an extreme example, it's not the only skin or even the only cosmetic item that could give an advantage to players. Around the same time the Toy Soldier Set was released, Epic Games added a "Deep Dab" emote where players pose while squatting low to the ground. The Deep Dab emote allowed players to dodge shots and dip beneath cover before popping up quickly for a shot, so Epic Games added a delay before players are able to shoot after starting the emote to prevent players from exploiting it.[112] Players I've talked to on Reddit say that the military outfit skins in general are great for grassy areas, and if the map has been updated to include snowy areas then white skins like the "Whiteout" skin could be used to camouflage the player. While the hitboxes – the area on a character model a player

[112] Patricia Hernandez, "Fortnite had to nerf its deep dab, and players are sad about it," *Polygon*, July 17, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/2019/7/17/20697677/fortnite-deep-dab-emote-nerf-patch-notes.

needs to hit to deal damage and lower health – of every player are the same, users on Reddit argue that some skins can confuse players on where exactly the hitbox is. For instance, the skins that turn avatars into female-coded characters are slimmer than their male counterparts, making them appear to be smaller targets than they are. I've found it a little tricky to hit the heads of opponents – which increases the damage of shots – if they're using skins such as the "Peely" skin (the banana person skin) where the body is just one big shape and there's no neck. For the player using female skins, less of the screen is taken up which improves visibility.

In choosing skins for optimal play, players might deliberately choose not to wear certain skins. The players I spoke to on Reddit say that people might choose not to wear a skin with a glow effect or that light up when doing certain actions because that makes you highly visible especially during night in the game. They might also not choose a skin that's especially bulky or tall because it's easier for people to spot you in the field or over cover. According to Musabirov et al., some players call microtransactions for highly visible cosmetic items "pay-to-lose" indicating that buying and using the items put the owner at a disadvantage on the battlefield.[113] Choosing to forgo showy cosmetic items is another example of how the metagame can dictate what skins people choose to wear. The point is that even if one were to design skins with competitive balancing in mind, players will still make a metagame out of choosing the skins that would be the most optimal for competitive play. They'll find a way to use skins to play mindgames with their opponents. While this may undermine the sense of fair competition necessary for a multiplayer game and make the player feel pressured to choose certain cosmetic items over others, it can also introduce an interesting layer of strategic depth to play that

[113] Ilya Musabirov et al., "Deconstructing Cosmetic Virtual Goods Experiences in Dota 2," paper presented at *CHI 2017,* Denver, CO, USA, May 06-11, 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025893.

wouldn't be there otherwise. Either way, these examples of cosmetic items affecting the balance of multiplayer games show that cosmetic microtransactions aren't always fairer than ones that directly improve a player's abilities.

"Take the L": Signifying Skill with Cosmetics in Fortnite Battle Royale

Getting good at playing Battle Royale is a pillar of the *Fortnite* community; wins are especially impressive when one is competing against 99 other players, after all. People like Ninja and DrDisRespect have made a living for themselves not only by livestreaming their gameplay of *Fortnite* but by being very good at the game. As is with any competitive game, winning is immensely satisfying thanks to the social function it provides. Huizinga writes that winning a game is tied to showing oneself superior to the others in the game not just in the context of the game but in general. Not only do the winners earn superiority, but honor and esteem that can be applied to the group to which the victors belong. As Huizinga says, "The primary thing is the desire to excel others, to be the first and to be honored for that."[114] Raptis et al. says that performing difficult tasks must appear trivial and effortless to look cool.[115] Thus, playing well is associated with looking good. It's another way of looking cool: showing off highly skilled gameplay while making it look effortless. While cosmetic items are mostly associated with gameplay of fantasy, design and socialization, they can help facilitate the competitive aspect of multiplayer games.

Cosmetics can be a reward for skillful gameplay and can symbolize a player's skill. In games like TF2, some cosmetics are earned by completing achievements, set tasks for players to fulfill that are often tied to their player account on whatever platform they're playing the game

[114] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 50.
[115] Raptis et al., "Understanding 'Cool'."

on. As Moore notes, achievements become part of the management of online personas. Achievements chronicle a very specific skill that the player has succeeded in that demonstrates their abilities in a more specific and easily understandable way than the more general and reductionist way of quantifying overall skill via the high score. That skill can in turn be shown off by wearing a cosmetic item.[116] In *Fortnite,* many cosmetic items can be purchased from the in-game store by spending V-Bucks which are exchanged for real currency. Some cosmetics, however can only be earned by completing certain challenges (some of which are only available for a limited time) or from the battle pass, access to a string of rewards that are unlocked as players level up by earning XP from challenges or certain activities with players earning more rewards if they pay for the premium pass.[117] Because players have to work for some cosmetics by using their skill in the game, they become signifiers of victory – proof that the player is skilled at the game and worthy of that sense of superiority and honor. In the *Fortnite* community, these skins are known as "sweaty" which indicates that the person using them is very skilled (though they could also be referred to as "try hard" if they're used by players who are too obsessed with winning games in *Fortnite*). Some skins can be "sweaty" because they are used by prominent people in the *Fortnite* community like the "Crystal" skin which is the primary skin of Kyle "Bugha" Giersdorf who won the solo competition at the first Fortnite World Cup.[118]

An example of cosmetic items as signifiers of superiority is a popular legendary skin called "The Reaper," which was inspired by the assassin-for-hire character John Wick and could

[116] Moore, "Hats of Affect," n.a.
[117] You can buy to level up in the battle pass' tiers, however, which might undermine the idea that you earned the cosmetics from the pass through skill alone. Though for the battle pass for chapter 2, season 4, once you reach tier 100 you unlock a new set of tiers up to 220, and you can't buy your way through those upper tiers. The chapter 2, season 4 battle pass also has challenges you need to complete to unlock certain rewards.
[118] Rishabh B., "Fortnite: 5 Sweaty skins that will get people running in the opposite direction," sportskeeda, August 29, 2020, https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/fortnite-5-sweaty-skins-will-get-people-running-opposite-direction.

only be obtained by reaching the highest tier of 100 in the Chapter 1, Season 3 battle pass from February 2018 to April 2018.[119] *Polygon* claims that the Reaper skin has become "a shorthand for highly skilled players who can take everyone down, like the real John Wick." The publication also writes that some owners of the Reaper skin felt cheated when Epic Games introduced an official John Wick skin for sale in the in-game shop to promote the film *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum,* as it made the Reaper skin feel "more like a knock-off parody than it did before, even if it's technically a rare and well-respected cosmetic item" as *Polygon* says. However, some players still take pride in owning the original skin as, according to *Polygon*, it "tells a story, and that story is, 'I was there, and you weren't.'"[120] As the Reaper skin illustrates, it's not just the "cool factor" of the cosmetics that signal superiority but the effort it takes to get them. Not all players are skilled enough to get those items, giving them an air of exclusivity as well. Having the ubiquitous default skin that players wear upon first downloading and logging into the game signifies that they are a new player and therefore less skilled and impressive than more experienced players. In fact, *Polygon* claims that "default" has become something of a slur among players.[121]

Choosing to wear a sweaty skin can also be part of a metagame. User palistin on the FortniteFashion Subreddit told me that a player can use a sweaty skin to intimidate other players so they don't have to fight them. "Basically, if you see someone with a 'sweaty' skin, they're basically wearing it to assert dominance and show their skill level. People wear them to 'scare' other players," says palistin. On the other hand, players might intentionally seek out others with a sweaty skin to try and kill them before they kill them. One participant in a study by Jialei Jiang

[119] "The Reaper," Fortnite Wiki, accessed October 21, 2020, https://fortnite.fandom.com/wiki/The_Reaper.
[120] Patricia Hernandez, "Fortnite's official John Wick skin has made things kinda awkward," *Polygon*, May 17, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/2019/5/17/18629686/fortnite-john-wick-the-reaper-rare-skins.
[121] Hernandez, "Fortnite is free, but kids are getting bullied into spending money."

said he had no desire to reach the 100th tier necessary to get the Reaper skin because he felt that it "just makes you more of a target in the game anyways."[122] I can also see skilled players choosing to wear the default skin so that other players underestimate their skill.

But some cosmetic items have a functional purpose that go a step further from signifying your competitive skill in the game: communication. In *Fortnite*, there are a couple of cosmetic items that are less so items as they are executable actions: emotes along with emoticons, icons that can be summoned in the middle of gameplay to communicate ideas quickly and efficiently just like emojis; sprays, which are like emoticons only the icons are plastered on the geometry of the map instead of being made to float in the hand; and toys like various sports balls and more which players can play with individually or with other people. You can use emotes, emoticons, and sprays for communication with teammates. For instance, you can use the "Nope" spray, a pink no symbol, over a building entrance to indicate that there's a trap inside. Now emotes, emoticons, sprays, and toys can be considered functional items as they can be used to change the course of the gameplay, but their primary purpose and status as a virtual item is cosmetic. Aside from the examples of the Plastic Patroller skin and the Deep Dab emote as well as the example I illustrated in the beginning of this thesis, emotes and other virtual items like it don't really help in battle. In fact, using an emote leaves one vulnerable to attack. The primary reason to use these types of virtual items is to communicate an idea visually - or to create games within the game specifically in the case of toys - which makes them more cosmetic than performance-enhancing. One wouldn't be wrong for suggesting that emotes can influence the gameplay, however. Communicating your mood and status as a player can enrich the experience of playing a game.

[122] Jialei Jiang, (2020) "'I Never Know What to Expect": Aleatory Identity Play in *Fortnite* and Its Implications for Multimodal Composition," *Computers and Composition 55*, 10.

In fact, the nonverbal communication of certain ideas is a central part of the experience of playing a multiplayer game to the point where they can be incorporated into the core gameplay loop of tension and release that keeps us playing. Moore wrote about how nonverbal communication in games like TF2 are dependent on the affective tone and contribute greatly to the sense of tension and release that drives the gameplay. When a player gets killed in TF2, camera control is taken away from the player and it zooms in on the player who killed them and freezes. Players can take a screenshot of this moment if they so choose. The player who killed the other can anticipate this moment and activate a taunting emote at that moment right when the freezeframe hits. "The freezecam and taunt combination reorients the impersonal interactions of virtual combat during the break in the immediate tensions of the frenetic game play," according to Moore.[123] Think of it as an evolution of the fatalities in *Mortal Kombat*; the idea is that the player is using the functions of the game to rub their victory in their opponent's face. While dying resets the tension of the gameplay, a new one is created as players poise to get revenge on whoever killed them.

In *Fortnite*, a tension is created when two or more players find each other and one of them starts shooting. The tension is resolved when there's only one standing. When a player is eliminated, the screen lingers on the surrounding area before switching to spectator mode where they can watch other players in the match starting with the player that eliminated them. During this time, the player that eliminated the other can us and emote, emoticon, or spray while the eliminated player watches. The game also lingers for a while after a player gets a Victory Royale – when they're the last one standing – before the match ends, giving them ample time to celebrate with an emote. In Squads mode when a player is alone and separated from their team

[123] Moore, "Hats of Affect," n.a.

and they get knocked out by players of another squad, the other team can use emoticons or emotes to taunt the downed player before finishing them off. The most common emotes you see are various dances, and players use them after eliminating another player for the social equivalent of blowing a raspberry.

Save for in a few temporary events like the Halloween event "Fortnitemares" or the Team Rumble mode, players can't reenter a game of Battle Royale and get revenge on the person that eliminated them.[124] However, being eliminated still resets the tension one experiences in the game. The uncertainty of winning is over because they lost. A new tension is created when a player enters a new match. The tension of winning or losing is resolved and reset for the player that made the killing blow too, because they won. Being caught in that release of tension is exhilarating, and so the player uses a dance emote to signify that feeling. Those watching the player in spectator mode or during a livestream can get caught up in that feeling too because they know exactly how that player feels when they dance after a victory. Then there's also this element of "styling" on people, asserting your dominance over a player and mocking them through movement. The element of styling through emotes is especially apparent in the popular "Take the L" emote, where the avatar uses their finger and thumb to make the shape of an "L" (for "loser") on their forehead while kicking their legs to the side. The emote has even bled over to use in the physical world with a Boston-area elementary school banning students from mimicking the dance as an anti-bullying measure.[125] Using emotes is a gratifying attraction done with the mechanics and tools of the game that reinforces the core gameplay loop that makes players come back again and again.

[124] Even in modes that let people respawn, there's no mechanics involving nemeses and revenge like in TF2.
[125] Julie Loncich, "School bans 'Take the L' Fortnite dance," *WCVB,* last modified October 3, 2018, https://www.wcvb.com/article/school-bans-take-the-l-fortnite-dance/23587554#.

But there's a dark side to using emotes in this way. Wayne Marshall notes how young white men have used *Fortnite* dance emotes to bully and humiliate LGBTQ people, people of color, and women as well as "haze" other young white men on online video platforms TikTok and YouTube. They would take footage of a person describing their experience with depression, anxiety, gender dysphoria, suicide, or some other sensitive topic, place it on one side of their video, and then place footage of themselves performing a *Fortnite* dance on the other side of the video. Here they're using the dance Emote as a taunt just like they would in the game, only instead of celebrating a win while rubbing that win in the other players' face they're using it to try to invalidate and make fun of what their victim is saying and reinforce white patriarchy and heteronormativity in the physical world. As Marshall says, using the dance Emotes in this way also divorces them from the social dance cultures led by women, people of color, and LGBTQ people in which they originated. This doubly hurts when the dances have already been divorced from those artists when Epic Games included them in *Fortnite* without crediting them. As Marshall argues, "By obscuring if not overwriting the distinct cultural spaces and social values that have fostered such dances, *Fortnite*'s brazen commodification and rebranding of these sources undermines the transgressive possibilities of young people reaching across the lines of distance and difference to dance together."[126]

Conclusion

As the examples of the *Fortnite* fashion shows, the Party Royale concerts, using emotes after eliminating players, and using emotes to bully people on online platforms illustrate, games are never truly consequence-free or completely separable from real life. As Malaby argues,

[126] Wayne Marshall, "Social Dance in the Age of (Anti-)Social Media," 7-8.

defining games as domains of contrived contingency "places game contexts and other arenas of human experience ontologically on a par with each other. Everyday experience and game arenas, each filled with uncertainties, can inform each other through metaphor… but they can also both be the site for real stakes and real consequences."[127] The use of cosmetics in *Fortnite* can have genuine consequences on one's social experience online and offline. This is because cosmetics hold messages and meanings for many kinds of people, and people can use the items to satisfy needs of autonomy (how they choose to dress their virtual selves), competence (how they complete achievements for cosmetic items) and relatedness (how cosmetic items contribute to the social aspect of games) and establish their sense of presence and immersion in the game.[128]

Depending on how players look at them and how they play with them, cosmetic items can affect their gameplay despite what many players and industry spokespeople say. Cosmetics can lead to innovative ways of playing games because they can be used as tools for creating metagames, and the consequences can be fun or destructive depending on how they're used. They can help the player embody themselves in the virtual world and live in the moment of the game. They can celebrate victory and put people down. They can help people feel more connected to their peers, or just hopefully prevent them from being bullied. They can simply make people feel cool. Either way, they satisfy a variety of needs that might not be touched as much by competitive play, though they also have a place in the flow and experience of multiplayer competitions. If one chooses to forgo buying cosmetic items, they're potentially missing out on a significant portion of the experience of playing *Fortnite*. As Sterling said, buying and using cosmetic items doesn't necessarily make players better at the game (I've spent

[127] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 109.
[128] Richard M. Ryan, C. Scott Rigby, and Andrew Przybylski, "The motivational pull of video games: A self determination theory approach," *Motivation and Emotion 30* (2006): 344-360.

$68 on cosmetic items in *Fortnite* to date and I certainly don't play any better myself), but it can make them more satisfied and enthusiastic players.[129] They might feel more included among peers and more immersed in the game. As oklopfer says, "depending on which skin I'm using, my self-esteem changes, which inadvertently affects my gameplay. If I'm using what I consider a great combo [combination of cosmetic items], I often feel really good about it and feel I play better as I'm getting more enjoyment from my creation."[130] Just as standing out in the physical world has important consequences, standing out in the digital world of games can have consequences and so people tailor their cosmetics as well as their gameplay to accordingly. While cosmetic microtransactions may not change the game mechanics, they can still change the player's experience with the game and how they play the game. In other words, they're not just cosmetic.

[129] Jim Sterling, "Games That Embarrass the 'AAA' Industry," YouTube video, 22:49, October 7, 2019, https://youtu.be/u8RjIs0IZ7E.
[130] oklopfer, November 6, 2020, comment on Fennimore, "Do cosmetic items affect gameplay?" https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteFashion/comments/jphxgp/do_cosmetic_items_affect_gameplay/.

Chapter 2: Under the Skin: How the Lucrative Aspects of Cosmetic Items Influence Game Design

While writing this thesis, I wanted to know what happens after a player gets eliminated in *Fortnite*. I booted up the game with the intention of getting killed. I instead got Victory Royale. I had never been a fan of the game beforehand, but I've been playing it constantly now that I know I'm halfway decent at it. I also managed to spend $48 on the game without even realizing it, and then spend another $20 even after I realized it. I wanted to know the feeling of playing with a premium skin and going through the battle pass. Plus, I just loved the cosmetic items I saw in the item shop. The big thing driving me to spend was the way the item shop rotated items in and out of purchase, meaning that I could be waiting at least a month before I see it again. I knew the Bunnywolf skin would look perfect with the Neon Wings back bling I got for free and that not a lot of other skins would do the job, so I got the skin before it left the shop rotation. I'm one of the lucky ones, however. There are reports of people spending anywhere from thousands to tens of thousands on a single game.[131]

In "The Addictive Cost of Predatory Videogame Monetization," game critic and former games journalist Jim Sterling says it's easy to suggest that people who overspend on games should just be smarter with their money. But as they argue, a person can't just switch off an addiction to gambling or shopping even if they know the behavior is harmful. They also say that addiction can be a symptom of or response to other problems with mental health. They then share a testimonial from an anonymous source whose predisposition to addiction means they can't play any game with microtransactions. The person spent a portion of their life constantly

[131] Robert Purchese, "'I've seen people literally spend $15,000 on *Mass Effect* multiplayer cards,'" *Eurogamer*, October 23, 2017, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-10-23-manveer-heir-bioware-mass-effect-ea-monetisation.

high and wasting all their money on drugs, but they managed to get sober with the help of their fiancée. One thing they learned from rehab was to find a healthy replacement for drugs, so they turned to video games. However, they started spending a dangerous amount of money on loot boxes in *Overwatch*. Thanks to rehab they quickly identified that this was a problem and they stopped playing. Despite that, they must turn away from games as soon as microtransactions are added. "The idea of popping in a few bucks to make life 'easier' is so tempting and I keep falling for it," they said. Their fiancée took away both their debit card and their PayPal details to restrain their spending on games.

"The place where I once found distraction and salvation is now preying upon my addictive nature and impulse spending problems. It hurts, it really does," the source told Sterling. "It's this weird mentality of 'It's only here for a limited time, and if I don't get it now I may never get it again and not complete my collection.' Hitting that 'buy now' button, seeing the rewards pop up, the spinning of the dice or slot wheels ticking past the rare loot. The 'just one more' rationale. It completely overrules any common sense like: 'You *need* this money to pay the rent, or your medical bills, or *food*.'"[132]

In the last chapter, we discussed the ways cosmetic items can influence the player's experience of a game. This chapter will investigate how cosmetic items can influence game design – how game developers craft the gaming experience. The discourse of how cosmetics items have no impact on gameplay game industry spokespeople push not only contradicts the way players experience games, but the way game developers use cosmetic items. They know

[132] Jim Sterling, "The Addictive Cost of Predatory Videogame Monetization (The Jimquisition)," YouTube video, 34:12, July 1, 2019, https://youtu.be/7S-DGTBZU14.

how desirable cosmetic items are, so they work to make them a core part of the experience of playing a game to make their games as lucrative as possible.

Why Game Industry Spokespeople Tell You That Cosmetic Items Don't Affect Gameplay

For years, game designers and scholars have tried to set a definition of gameplay. Computer Scientist and game designer Carlo Fabricatore defines gameplay as "the set of activities that can be performed by the player during the ludic [game] experience, and by other entities belonging to the virtual world, as a response to player's actions and/or as autonomous courses of action that contribute to the liveliness of the virtual world."[133] Janne Paavilainen defines gameplay as the dynamic interplay between the player and the game mechanics, covering aspects like goals, challenge, progress, and rewards.[134] Paavilainen also makes a distinction between gameplay and "game play," a verb referring to "the activity of playing a game."[135] Some game industry spokespeople have relied on a certain way of defining gameplay to maintain that cosmetic microtransactions don't affect gameplay.

Many definitions of games revolve around the rules that the game sets. Game designer Greg Costikyan says that all games have goals. Not every game has to have explicit goals, but they ought to have a diversity of goals that the player can pick and choose between.[136] A game must also have some sort of struggle as players achieve the goals. "We want games to challenge us. We want to work at them. They aren't any fun if they're too simple, too easy, if we zip

[133] Carlo Fabricatore, (2007) "Gameplay and game mechanics design: a key to quality in videogames," OECD-CERI Expert Meeting on Videogames and Education, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.1125.4167.
[134] Janne Paavilainen, (2020), "Defining Playability of Games: Functionality, Usability, and Gameplay," In Academic MindTrek 2020, January 29-30, Tampere, Finland, ACM, New York, NY, USA, https://doi.org/10.1145/3377290.3377309, 6.
[135] Paavilainen, "Defining Playability of Games," 2.
[136] Greg Costikyan, 2002, "I Have No Words and I Must Design: Toward A Critical Vocabulary for Games," in *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference* (Tampere, Finland: Tampere University Press, 2002), 14.

through them and get to the end screen without being challenged. We don't feel any sense of accomplishment, of mastery, of victory if it comes too easily… A game requires players to struggle interactively toward a goal."[137]

With this thinking in mind, one can see performance-enhancing microtransactions like XP boosters or items that increase power as undermining the struggle that's apparently so crucial to not only the enjoyment of games but the very essence of the experience. Cosmetic microtransactions in this regard are better because they don't affect the player's struggle; it just makes the player look cool while they struggle. If we define gameplay entirely based on how players achieve goals set by the game, then it might be accurate to say that cosmetic items don't affect gameplay. They don't change the player's capacity to fulfill their tasks in the game. They don't make it easier or more efficient to journey to the final area of the game and defeat the final boss to save the kingdom and rescue the princess.

However, many scholars recognize that games can't be defined by their rules. Many take the player's agency into account when defining games and gameplay. According to Boluk and Lemieux' theory of metagaming, goals in a game are entirely player-determined. Every player uses a game for their own activities and behaviors within, around and outside the game, creating their own objectives in the process and using games for their own purposes. Malaby similarly sees games as "grounded in human practice and as fundamentally processual."[138] As he says, games cannot be reduced to their rules because they are always in a process of becoming. Any moment of playing a game can generate new practices or meanings that change how people play the game.[139] "Rather than appealing to an abstract blueprint of what any given game is, a

[137] Costikyan, "I Have No Words and I Must Design," 17.
[138] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 96.
[139] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 103.

processual approach to games recognizes as a first principle that games are, like many social processes, dynamic and recursive, largely reproducing their form through time but always containing the possibility of emergent change," says Malaby.[140] If we always followed the rules of the game, then we wouldn't have speedrunning, blind-folded playthroughs, or creative mode in *Fortnite*. The rules of a game as well as its goals and structure are still important to the experience, but as Malaby points out the rules in games are not like the rules of bureaucracy which reduce unpredictability.[141] The rules create contrived contingencies which lead to both predictable and unpredictable outcomes that the player then interprets.[142] Therefore, the player still largely determines the experience of playing a game. Even Costikyan agrees that "a game, as it is played, is a collaboration between the developers and the players, a journey of mutual discovery, a democratic art form in which the shape of the game is created by the artist, but the experience of the game is created by the player."[143]

Game mechanics can be integral to the experience but still technically be separate from gameplay. The score in *Super Mario Bros*. isn't directly involved in the gameplay of overcoming platforming challenges as the player completes levels. However, the score can still influence how players play the game by making them more cognizant of their performance. That makes players do actions in the game that give them a higher score like collecting more coins or completing levels as fast as possible for the end of level time bonus. Aside from instances like the Plastic Patroller skin and the Deep Dab emote, cosmetic items aren't inherently involved in the

[140] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 104.
[141] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 105.
[142] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 106.
[143] Costikyan, "I Have No Words and I Must Design," 32.

gameplay of outlasting other players in a match of Battle Royale. However, they can influence everything else surrounding the gameplay.

While cosmetic items don't fulfill the goal of improving the avatar, they can fulfill a variety of goals players set for themselves. These goals can include wanting to have a cool appearance for personal satisfaction and/or approval from one's peers. Cosmetic items can inspire the player to play in specific ways such as completing tasks to earn cosmetic items. Cosmetic items show that there's more to experiencing a game than rules and fail states. Games can accommodate a variety of meanings and fulfil a variety of desires depending on how the player uses them. We can view gameplay as an ever-evolving concept based on the meanings that develop over time as the player interacts with the game or as a result of players creating their own activities using the games themselves as tools. With that thinking in mind, cosmetic items could change gameplay by changing how the player interprets the experience of playing the game or by giving players more tools to create their own activities within or outside of the game.

So if the idea that cosmetic items don't affect gameplay isn't entirely accurate, why do game industry spokespeople keep perpetuating that idea? Well, by repeating the idea, they can normalize it. Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction of reality (SCR) suggests that meaning is unfixed, and people use communication to socially construct reality. The theory is composed of reality and knowledge; reality is a phenomenon that exists independent of us and knowledge is our capacity to acknowledge that phenomena are real and possess specific characteristics.[144] Specific collections of reality and knowledge pertain to specific social contexts.[145] It's hard to know what reality or knowledge is because each person's perspective is

[144] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* First Anchor Books Edition, 1967 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 1.
[145] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 3.

different. Berger and Luckmann believe that media can shape a person's perception of knowledge and reality through the media's process of constructing ideas through re-presentation of information.[146] They posit that all human activity that is repeated frequently becomes a pattern that can be recreated with the same effort in a process they call habitualization.[147] When a habituated behavior is repeated over and over again by people in a society, that behavior is institutionalized.[148] When the institutionalized behavior maintains itself through repeated action and justification by the actors through cognitive validity, then the behavior is legitimized.[149]

The narrative that cosmetic microtransactions don't affect gameplay and are therefore better than performance-enhancing microtransactions got especially popular after the controversy surrounding *Star Wars Battlefront II*. Right from the beta test, players derided the game for its paid loot boxes giving players items that could be seen as pay-to-win. Each loot box contained a random assortment of "Star Cards" that grant players in-game boosts such as healing after killing opponents, decreasing the time after using an ability before you can use it again, increasing attack power, and more.[150] In addition to that, in order to unlock iconic *Star Wars* characters and play as them, you need to pay for them with in-game credits. These credits can either be earned through optional challenges and rewards in game or by breaking down duplicate Star Cards you acquire in loot boxes. One player determined that it would take 40 hours of gameplay to get the 60,000 credits needed to buy either Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker without opening loot

[146] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 50-52.
[147] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 71.
[148] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 72.
[149] Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 111.
[150] Tom Marks, "Opinion: Star Wars: Battlefront 2 Beta Raises Pay-To-Win Fears," *IGN,* last modified October 6, 2017, https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/10/07/opinion-star-wars-battlefront-2-beta-raises-pay-to-win-fears.

boxes.[151] A community team member for EA responded to the controversy about unlocking characters on Reddit, saying that the intent behind the high cost of the character was to provide players with a sense of "pride and accomplishment" once they unlock the character. Players saw through the response and the comment was downvoted so much that it was listed as the most downvoted comment on Reddit in the 2020 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records with a score of negative 667,824, according to *Business Insider.*[152]

In the fallout of the controversy, Electronic Arts and developer DICE temporarily suspended in-game purchases and reduced the price of heroes before the game launched and then completely removed the loot boxes by March 21, 2018.[153] The *Battlefront II* controversy inspired government investigations into the practice of loot boxes, with some countries placing regulations on how loot boxes could operate or even outright banning the practice in the case of the Netherlands and Belgium.[154] The controversy soured the reputation of not only loot boxes but performance-enhancing microtransactions. To make the microtransactions in their games seem more acceptable, especially to legislators, game industry spokespeople advertise that the microtransactions are cosmetic only. And by repeating that idea over and over, people can start accepting it.

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[151] Matt Martin, "It takes up to 40 hours to unlock Darth Vader and other Heroes in Star Wars Battlefront 2," *VG247*, last modified November 13, 2017, https://www.vg247.com/2017/11/13/it-takes-40-hours-to-unlock-darth-vader-and-other-heroes-in-star-wars-battlefront-2/.

[152] Paige Leskin, "EA's comment on a Reddit thread about 'Star Wars: Battlefront 2' set a Guinness World Record for the most downvoted comment of all time," *Business Insider*, last modified September 9, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/reddit-world-record-downvotes-ea-star-wars-battlefront-2-2019-9.

[153] Oskar Gabrielson, "An update on Star Wars Battlefront II," *Star Wars Battlefront II.* November 16, 2017, https://www.ea.com/games/starwars/battlefront/star-wars-battlefront-2/news/pre-launch-update?utm_campaign=swbf2_hd_na_ic_soco_twt_swbfii-prelaunchblog; Ben, Gilbert. "The latest major 'Star Wars' game finally dropped its most controversial aspect – but it may be too late." *Yahoo! Finance.* March 16, 2018. https://finance.yahoo.com/news/latest-major-apos-star-wars-144004751.html.

[154] Nicholas Straub, "Every Country With Laws Against Loot Boxes (and What the Rules Are)," Screenrant, last modified October 5, 2020, https://screenrant.com/lootbox-gambling-microtransactions-illegal-japan-china-belgium-netherlands/.

Every time people go to the item shop in *Fortnite* to look at what's available and buy something, they're going to see the message at the bottom that "these cosmetic items grant no competitive advantage." It's not a tutorial message for new players that pops up only once. Since the items offered in the shop are randomized every day, people check back daily to see what's available and potentially get exposed to that message. Now many players probably routinely ignore the message like they would ignore a legal disclaimer or the terms of service, but the intention is still there. It's to reinforce the idea that the items Epic Games are selling are cosmetic only and don't affect gameplay until the player accepts it as legitimate. Like many other game developers, they don't just want to perpetuate the idea that their cosmetic items don't affect gameplay but that cosmetic items *mean* items that don't affect gameplay.

But it's not just the repetition that helps players accept the idea that cosmetic items don't affect gameplay; there's also a social component to it. Hamari and Keronen write about subjective norms in the theory of planned behavior, or the idea that certain behaviors are affected by whether they are accepted or not by others. Hamari and Keronen's meta-analysis shows that the intention to purchase a virtual item "has significant correlation with subjective norms, indicating that when purchasing virtual goods is accepted by others, people themselves are more likely to make purchases."[155] So the more players view cosmetic microtransactions as acceptable, the more willing players are of buying them and the more profitable they become.

Game developers have embraced the idea of subjective norms in video game monetization. Torulf Jernström, the CEO of Finnish mobile game developer Tribeflame, outlined many tactics mobile game developers use to get people to spend money in free-to-play games in

[155] Hamari and Keronen, "Why do people buy virtual goods," 66.

his lecture during Pocket Gamer Connects Helsinki 2016.[156] One of these tactics is "social proof."

> "We are herd animals," explains Jernström. "We tend to do what all the others do… The socially accepted way of behaving in your game should be paying. You want to tell people, for instance, when a clan member of theirs spends money, you want the whole clan to know because then that becomes the socially accepted way of behaving. You absolutely do not want to tell them that the majority of the people in your game never spend money. That's poison! Never tell them that."[157]

To help people see themselves as spenders in the game, you get their friends to spend money in the game. That makes a multiplayer game like *Fortnite* especially ripe for getting people to see the value of cosmetic items and make them more comfortable in spending money on them. If a player's friends are doing it, then why not do it? As Jernström said, "telling people the reason to do something makes them much more likely to actually follow through and do that. Spend because reasons. The reasons don't even have to be that good in order for this to work."[158] And according to one study, getting people to spend by having their friends spend might just work. A survey of 428 *Fortnite* players found that one of the most important predictors of a player making a purchase in the game was the frequency the player's closest friend made purchases in the game.[159]

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[156] It's worthy of note that Jernström begins his talk by saying that he expects the audience to be "shocked" by the tactics he's about to outline, but he's going to leave the "morality of it" out of the talk and maybe discuss it after the presentation. They don't. They audience doesn't ask a single question.
[157] Torulf Jernström, "Let's go whaling: Tricks for monetizing mobile game players with free-to-play," lecture, Pocket Gamer Connects Helsinki 2016 from Helsinki, Finland, October 2016.
[158] Jernström, "Let's go whaling."
[159] Daniel L. King, Alex M.T. Russell, Paul H. Delfabbro, and Dea Polisena, (2020) "*Fortnite* microtransaction spending was associated with peers' purchasing behaviors but not gaming disorder symptoms," *Addictive Behaviors 104* (2020): 5.

The idea that cosmetic microtransactions don't affect gameplay is just one in a long line of ideas the game industry has tried to normalize over the years. Spokespeople tell you that single-player games are dead despite the fact that Sony and Nintendo constantly break sales records with their critically acclaimed single-player exclusives because they want to promote multiplayer games which are easier to monetize.[160] They tell you that horror games, turn-based role-playing games, strategy games, and other more niche genres of games are dead even though those niche genres can still be profitable because those genres aren't as popular as shooter games or action RPGs and aren't as easy to monetize. They'll start creating new names for terms that have sullied reputations, like how an EA senior executive told the United Kingdom's Parliament that the company refers to loot boxes as "surprise mechanics," using the established video game term of mechanics to help legitimize loot boxes as a normal part of game development.[161] They'll also perpetuate that microtransactions are "optional" and all about "player choice" so players see themselves as consenting to the monetization.[162] But as Sterling says, microtransactions are "the publisher's choice."[163] These narratives only benefit them, and they tell the narratives with such conviction and perseverance in the hopes that they become a part of reality. The only reason players have been able to resist those narratives is because the narratives

[160] James Lee, "Consumers don't want single-player games, says Harrison," gamesindustry.biz, May 29, 2008, https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/single-player-games-on-the-way-out-says-phil-harrison; Mark Raby, "EA: Single-player games are 'finished,'" GamesRadar+, December 10, 2010, https://www.gamesradar.com/ea-single-player-games-are-finished/; Eddie Makuch, "Single-Player Games Are Not Dead But The Economics Are 'Complicated,' Xbox Boss Says," GameSpot, October 24, 2017, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/single-player-games-are-not-dead-but-the-economics/1100-6454339/.
[161] Ana Diaz, "EA calls its loot boxes 'surprise mechanics,' says they're used ethically," *Polygon*, June 21, 2019, https://www.polygon.com/2019/6/21/18691760/ea-vp-loot-boxes-surprise-mechanics-ethical-enjoyable.
[162] Tom Phillips, "Shadow of War developer discusses the game's controversial loot boxes," *Eurogamer*, September 25, 2017, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-09-24-shadow-of-war-developer-discusses-games-controversial-loot-boxes.
[163] Jim Sterling, Tweet, October 8, 2018, https://twitter.com/jimsterling/status/1049263957951893506.

always come up short of the reality of the situation, and the narrative that cosmetic items don't affect gameplay is one of them.

Hook, Line, and Hobby: How Developers Use Cosmetic Items to Keep You Playing and Paying

Cosmetic items can be used to keep players playing the game, and the longer they play the more opportunities to expose them to the game's monetization and the more money the game operators get. Research suggests that time spent playing is positively related to the player's willingness to spend money on virtual items.[164] In fact, King et al. found that spending in *Fortnite* is significantly associated with time spent playing *Fortnite* among other factors.[165] Another tactic that Jernström mentions in his talk is "hook, habit, hobby." The developer hooks the player into trying the game, then they encourage multiple play sessions a day so the player makes a habit of playing the game, and then the player sees it as one of their main hobbies and puts a lot of time and money into it. Video gaming might be your hobby, but for many people their hobby is *Fortnite* or some other "games as a service" product. The monetization changes as the player progresses through these stages. At the hook stage, the developers offer a microtransaction that's such a good deal that one "would be crazy to turn it down" as Jernström says. According to him, this does two things: it makes the player emotionally commit to the game to increase retention - the likelihood a player keeps playing a game - and it "breaks the ice" and makes the player think that it's okay to spend money in the game and see themselves as a spender. They no longer have a wall where they refuse to spend money. During the habit phase the developer sells players progression items that help them maximize their stats faster. When

[164] Marder et al., "The Avatar's new clothes," 73; Hamari and Keronen, "Why do people buy virtual goods," 59.
[165] King, Russell, Delfabbro, and Polisena, "*Fortnite* microtransaction spending was associated with peers' purchasing behaviors but not gaming disorder symptoms," 5.

the players reach the hobby phase, the developers can no longer sell progression-based items since the player has already maxed out everything so they sell them consumables (e.g. faster heal times or faster build times for armies in *Clash of Clans*).[166]

Fortnite has two hooks. First, like many free-to-play games, it offers a "starter pack," a pack of virtual items and hard currency intended for new players. The pack changes every season in the game. For $3.99, *Fortnite*'s starter packs offer V-Bucks, an avatar skin, a back bling, and maybe even a weapon skin or a new harvesting tool depending on the pack. Skins range from 800 to 2,000 V-Bucks in the item shop, depending on the rarity, and V-Bucks currently start at $7.99 for 1,000 or up to $79.99 for 13,500. The starter pack offers an immediate deal to the players, and they don't even have to convert their money into V-Bucks to get it.

The second hook is the battle pass (see figure 7). As players acquire experience points (XP) by completing different challenges (e.g. getting eliminations in a certain area of the map, looting treasure chests, fishing, etc.), they level up. If you have the basic, free version of the battle pass, you get rewards about every seven or eight levels. But if you spend 950 V-Bucks, you get a reward every level. Since the maximum level is 100, that means you can earn 100 different rewards with the premium battle pass. A lot of the rewards are pretty minor such as sprays, loading screens, and emoticons, but by the time you reach the max level in a premium battle pass you earn around 6 or 7 skins. In fact, reaching some levels earns you V-Bucks. The website for the Chapter 2, Season 4 battle pass advertises that you can earn up to 1,500 V-Bucks through the premium pass for a net positive of 550 V-Bucks.[167] You're literally paid to play!

[166] Jernström, "Let's go whaling."
[167] "Season 4 – Battle Pass Nexus War," Fortnite, accessed November 13, 2020, https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/battle-pass/nexus-war.

Well, you pay to get paid to play. Every two or three months, Epic Games introduces a new season to the game and a new battle pass to go along with it.

Figure 7: The reward for tier 100 in the Chapter 2, Season 4 battle pass in *Fortnite* is an emote that turns the "Tony Stark" skin (a tier 93 reward) into Iron Man. Note that to actually use the emote you have to complete Awakening Challenges once you reach tier 100.

The common thread through both hooks is not only are they great deals, but their biggest draw is the cosmetic items. The emoticons, sprays, loading screens, and even the V-Bucks strewn about the line of rewards in the battle pass are mere appetizers compared to the skins, and the biggest reason to get the starter packs is for the V-Bucks and the skins. Epic Games knows that the skins are the most desirable cosmetic item as they change the avatar the most and are the most immediately noticeable by players (though emotes can be just as important for their functional purpose in communicating ideas and feelings), so they work to make them front and center in the battle pass through the marketing and the presentation within the game. Both the starter packs and the battle passes are very enticing offers for players, but they're ones designed to break down their defenses and get them to spend even more on the game by making them see themselves as spenders. And there's evidence to suggest that this will work for *Fortnite*. The

survey of 428 *Fortnite* players also found that spenders scored significantly higher than non-spenders on motivation to acquire in-game rewards and the perception of game items as representing good value for money.[168]

The battle pass is by far the most important hook, as the core loop of the game revolves around it. If cosmetic items are the raw materials players use to create their own metagames and craft their identities in the game, then leveling up in the battle pass gives players more raw materials to work with and more gameplay opportunities. That makes cosmetic items a very enticing reward to offer in the battle pass. Epic Games makes deliberate choices with the battle pass and how players progress through it to keep players playing. Wang and Sun say that a player's sense of accomplishment and value is tied to properly timed rewards while poorly timed rewards can cause players to give up and play other games. They also have to balance player commitment with reward quality to keep both casual and hardcore players playing even through good and bad days of playing.[169] Wang and Sun note that reward mechanisms in video games can enhance feelings of fun long before the rewards are given by driving the sense of anticipation among players who know what the item is before they get it.[170] Every player can look within the game and see all of the rewards in the battle pass on offer up to tier 100. It's exciting to think about not only earning all of the rewards but working to get to the very last reward, motivating players to keep playing.

The battle pass is a similar concept to subscription services, where you spend hard currency but only get benefits if you come back to the game which drives both retention and

[168] King, Russell, Delfabbro, and Polisena, "*Fortnite* microtransaction spending was associated with peers' purchasing behaviors but not gaming disorder symptoms," 5.
[169] Wang and Sun, "Game Reward Systems," 6.
[170] Wang and Sun, "Game Reward Systems," 8.

monetization because people want to make the most of their investment according to Jernström.[171] And as I write this, Epic Games introduces a subscription service for *Fortnite* called Fortnite Crew that gives you the battle pass for the season along with 1,000 V-Bucks and an exclusive outfit bundle every month for $11.99 a month.[172] The battle pass also encourages players to play *Fortnite* and *Fortnite* alone. Why play any other game when you've already invested money into the battle pass? You need to invest time to get all the rewards. Don't you want all the rewards before the battle pass resets? Even the free V-Bucks have a purpose beyond making Epic Games look generous: you have to keep playing the game and moving up the tiers in a battle pass to get the free V-Bucks to afford the next battle pass. They encourage players to keep playing the game and earning V-Bucks to make their initial investment grow.[173] Also, according to Hamari and Lehdonvirta, having leftover hard currency drives players to buy more hard currency since they don't have enough to buy the cosmetic items.[174]

Epic Games also encourages players to play a metagame of figuring out how to earn XP faster and reach tiers in the battle pass sooner.[175] Optimizing XP gain is especially important when the XP requirement to reach a tier gets higher every time the player levels up, meaning they'll have to work harder every time they pass a tier.[176] While you can advance through the tiers by paying V-Bucks, players will have to complete the challenges if they want to save their

[171] Jernström, "Let's go whaling."
[172] "Fortnite Crew," Epic Games, accessed November 24, 2020, https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/fortnite-crew-subscription/.
[173] Jernström also mentions the idea of reciprocity, or the idea that if you give someone a gift, they might be inclined to give you something in return. It's possible that free V-Bucks as well as free cosmetic items as part of promotions and special events would inspire players to give back to the developer by making a microtransaction. It's a sentiment I've seen among games celebrated by the free-to-play game community, where they'll give money to a developer if their game doesn't pressure them into spending money unlike other games.
[174] Hamari and Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 23.
[175] As evidenced by the many guides you can find online for how to optimize XP gain in *Fortnite*. I've also had players give me advice on how to gain XP quickly through the chat features in the game itself.
[176] Chris Jecks, "Fortnite Season 4 Level XP List: How Much XP You Need to Get From Level 2 – 100," Twinfinite, August 27, 2020, https://twinfinite.net/2020/08/fortnite-season-4-level-xp-list/.

V-Bucks for cosmetic items or future battle passes. It's another example of how players tailor their play because of cosmetics. Players earn XP by doing common actions like eliminating players or outlasting them, or opening chests and ammo boxes, and these actions earn players about 100 to 2,000 XP each depending on the game mode. But Epic Games offers players daily challenges that grant 10,000 XP each, as well as sets of challenges every week of the season that grant 20,000 to 50,000 XP each (see figure 8). Some tasks can be fulfilled by every player in a squad, encouraging people to work together. The tasks even offer rewards beyond XP; for chapter 2, season 4, completing a certain number of tasks across different weeks rewards you with new styles for the skins you unlock in the battle pass. The tasks give players a reason to play beyond each match's goal of being the last player or last team standing. Like a dog earning a treat for consistently performing tricks, the consistent and relatively frequent reward of huge quantities of XP for each task keep players playing.

Figure 8: The list of week 5 challenges for Chapter 2, Season 4 in *Fortnite*. Notice how the map screen in the game lists not only the tasks but where you complete them, encouraging players to explore. The tasks with "Rec: 4 Players" next to them can be completed by yourself or with up to three other players with everyone contributing to the task and reaping the rewards.

Wang and Sun note that reward systems can encourage exploration of game worlds and can maintain player interest even during lulls in the action.[177] Many of the challenges in *Fortnite* can only be completed in certain areas of the map, incentivizing people to travel to those areas. Every week, Epic Games adds XP coins that grant 5,000 to 15,000 XP each in certain spots on the map.[178] For the Chapter 2, Season 4 battle pass, certain cosmetic items can be only unlocked when you not only reach the necessary tier but by completing certain challenges, usually related to a skin that cosmetic item is tied to. To unlock the Mjölnir harvesting tool for the Thor skin, you need to visit a crater on the map where the hammer landed and then interact with it while wearing the Thor skin. Setting challenges in different areas of the map prevents players from dropping into the same areas and making play repetitive, which could increase their long-term enjoyment and how long they stick with *Fortnite*.

The constant updates along with new battle passes adding new cosmetic items also keeps players coming back, because it's exciting to have brand-new toys to play with each season. Hamari and Lehdonvirta mention that new content can devalue the existing content and items, making the new content more desirable to obtain. There's a constant cycle of getting attracted to new content and dipping back into the game. Hamari and Lehdonvirta also mention that games can incorporate these updates into the lore of the game so they're not seen as intentional alterations to the service, which supports user acceptance.[179] Every season the map changes in *Fortnite*, it's always accompanied with game lore to explain the changes. The stories even cross over into the offline world. In July 2018, prior to Chapter 1, Season 5, a rift sucked in the Durr Burger, a Big Boy-esque mascot on top of a restaurant in the Greasy Grove area of the game

[177] Wang and Sun, "Game Reward Systems," 4.
[178] Shaun Savage, "Fortnite Season 4 XP Coins Locations – Maps for All Weeks!" Pro Game Guides, October 30, 2020, https://progameguides.com/fortnite/fortnite-season-4-xp-coin-locations/.
[179] Hamari and Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 24-25.

map, removing it from the game. Sometime thereafter, the Durr Burger appeared in physical form in the middle of a desert in California. Players also found Loot Llamas, big pinatas in the game that contain resources, in London, Cologne, Barcelona, Paris, Cannes, and Warsaw.[180] These alternate reality games were tying into the fact that season 5 would see the game map populated with objects from the real world like a Viking ship and ancient statues.[181] Then in October 2019, at the end of Chapter 1, Season X, an in-game event saw the game map sucked into a black hole, making the game unplayable for 48 hours before Epic Games added a completely new map for the game and officially ushered in Chapter 2.[182]

By turning the game's updates into events big enough to cross over into the physical world, Epic Games encourages the metagame of speculating on what's going to happen in the next season. This not only encourages players to invest in the experience by getting involved with the community but immerses players in the narrative of the game on a whole new level.[183] Players get to pretend that *Fortnite* changed because of cataclysmic events within and even outside the game, not because Epic Games made the changes. As Wu and Hsu found, players perceiving the game experience as authentic can be a significant predictor that they'll not only play the game but make a microtransaction within it. It's easier for them to find a sense of existence in the world if they perceive it as authentic and thus they attach greater importance to the game world.[184] Hamari and Keronen found that across the literature on purchasing motivation for virtual items, flow or immersion in the gaming experience was one of the

[180] Richard Scott-Jones, "The Fortnite agent's messages got decoded and there's a llama in London," PCGamesN, July 10, 2018, https://www.pcgamesn.com/fortnite/fortnite-season-5-arg.
[181] The Fortnite Team, "Fortnite Season 5 of Chapter 1," Epic Games, July 12, 2018, https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/news/season-5.
[182] Taylor Lyles, "New map, boat battles, fishing, swimming! Fortnite: Chapter 2 is finally here," digitaltrends, October 15, 2019, https://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/fortnite-chapter-2-officially-revealed/.
[183] Pun not intended.
[184] Wu and Hsu, "Role of authenticity in massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs)," 242, 246.

strongest factors that was positively associated with purchasing behavior.[185] By crossing over into the real world, *Fortnite* could get players more invested in its world and story. This can better immerse players in the gaming experience and make them perceive the game world as more authentic, which could make them invest more time and money into the game.

Mechanics like the battle pass and the updates encourage constant dips into the game, which for many players can become a routine they stick to for years and years. This is thanks not just to the design from the developers but to the allure of cosmetic items. Their use as incentives in these systems further drives players to engage in these systems, and the more they play the more likely they'll pay.

How Epic Games Limits Access to Items to Drive their Value

Scarcity is a common marketing strategy that can be one of the biggest drivers of value for a cosmetic item. The less likely one is to obtain an item, the more valuable it becomes. Scarcity doesn't just have to come from low supply either, especially for virtual goods which can theoretically be infinite as reproducing them costs close to zero according to Lehdonvirta, Wilska, and Johnson.[186] Through marketing communications you can create the illusion of scarcity. In a Game Developer Conference 2019 lecture, Vlad Panchenko of secondary skin marketplace website DMarket said that the rarity of an item in a loot crate has a corresponding price attached to it. For CS:GO, "Mil-Spec" skins with a drop chance of 79.92% have an average selling price of $0.68 while "Ultrarare" skins with a drop chance of 0.26% have an average price of $143.49.[187] *Fortnite* doesn't have a loot box system or any kind of mechanic that randomly

[185] Hamari and Keronen, "Why do people buy virtual goods," 64, 66.
[186] Lehdonvirta, Wilska, and Johnson, "Virtual Consumerism," 1063.
[187] Vlad Panchenko, "The Math of Skins: Tools and Formulas to Build a Strong In-Game Items Economy." Lecture, Game Developer Conference 2019 from Informa, San Francisco, CA, March 2019.

distributes cosmetic items for a price, and there's no official marketplace for players to sell skins (though there are secondary markets like PlayerAuctions), but they do have ways of adding scarcity and therefore value to the virtual items.

Every day at 00:00 UTC the item shop's daily section changes its wares (See figure 9). This incentivizes players to keep logging into the game every day so they can see what new items they could get (though there are some websites and Twitter accounts that list the daily items so you don't have to log in). But one of the most important functions of the rotation of the item shop is to drive the value of the skins. While the skins are all at a set price, some skins become more valuable than others depending on how frequently they appear in the item shop. If a skin rarely shows up, that increases the value due to the scarcity. Since new skins are being added frequently, the increasing pool of skins makes individual skins show up in the shop even less frequently. User palistin on the FortniteFashion Subreddit compares collecting skins in *Fortnite* to collecting rare Pokemon cards.[188] Like how certain high value cards only appear once per set and rarely come back, items in the item shop may only appear once or twice and rarely come back if ever. Even if the skins don't change in price in the item shop due to their scarcity (though it could happen if the skin is offered on a secondhand shop) and even if skins are functionally no different from one another, the limited items grant players an added level of clout due to their exclusivity, the same way luxury outfits do in the offline world.

[188] palistin, November 6, 2020, comment on Fennimore, "Do cosmetic items affect gameplay?" https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteFashion/comments/jphxgp/do_cosmetic_items_affect_gameplay/.

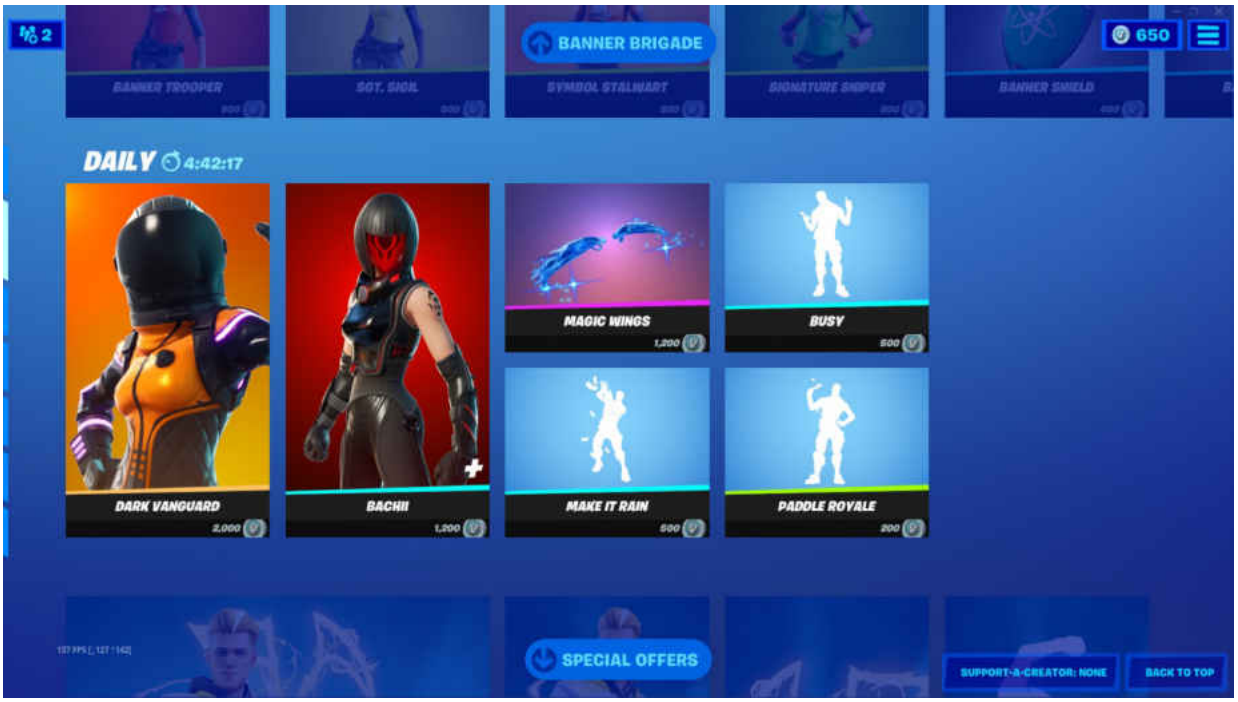

Figure 9: The Daily section of the Item Shop in *Fortnite*. Notice the time limit.

For example, the Rosa and Dante skins, skins with designs inspired by Dia De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead), have only been offered in the item shop around Dia De Los Muertos according to unofficial cosmetics directory fnbr.co.[189] The Marshmello skin based on the music artist of the same name was sold during his virtual concert in the game in February 2019 according to fnbr.co. The Marshmello skin came back to the item shop once more during the *Fortnite* World Cup in July 2019 because he performed during the competition.[190] Some skins may become scarce due to being only available in battle passes. Some skins like the highly coveted "Black Knight" skin and The Reaper skin are only available at the highest tiers of the battle pass of their respective seasons and are never sold in the item shop. One of the rarest skins is the "Renegade Raider" skin, which could only be obtained by level 20 players in the very first season of *Fortnite: Battle Royale* in the season shop, an item shop separate from the regular item

[189] "Rosa," fnbr.co, accessed November 13, 2020, https://fnbr.co/outfit/rosa; "Dante," fnbr.co, accessed November 13, 2020, https://fnbr.co/outfit/dante.
[190] "Marshmello," fnbr.co, accessed November 13, 2020, https://fnbr.co/outfit/marshmello.

shop that featured items you had to unlock by reaching certain levels before you can buy them according to the *Fortnite* wiki. The season shop was replaced by the battle pass in season two.[191]

Another important function of the item shop's rotation is to induce impulsive spending. Market research sees behavior as guided by two types of states: sometimes referred to as System 1 and System 2 but more commonly referred to as hot and cold states. A hot state "tends to operate quickly, effortlessly, and automatically," and based on perceptions, intuitions, and emotions according to Yang et al. A cold state, on the other hand, is "typically slower, more effortful, and deliberate," and is based on in-depth logic and reasoning. Hot state thinking is used for quick thinking and for satisfying immediate urges while cold state thinking monitors and modifies hot state thinking.[192] Game developers like Jernström have taken note of this theory of thinking and applied it to game design, offering microtransactions that are immediately useful and gratifying (e.g. paying to continue after losing a run in *Temple Run*) to induce that hot state thinking and get people to impulsively spend.[193] When you see a cool skin in the item shop in *Fortnite*, there's extra pressure to buy it because it's only available for at least 24 hours and if you don't buy it you might never see it again. Time is slipping and you're not getting any younger. Making them available for a limited time artificially increases the value of skins, making you want them more. The limited availability doesn't make the items any cooler looking, but it can feel that way due to their exclusivity. Epic Games decides how much to limit an item's

[191] "Renegade Raider," Fortnite Wiki, accessed November 13, 2020, https://fortnite.fandom.com/wiki/Renegade_Raider; "Season Shop," Fortnite Wiki, accessed November 13, 2020, https://fortnite.fandom.com/wiki/Season_Shop.
[192] Haiyang Yang, Ziv Carmon, Barbara Kahn, Anup Malani, Janet Schwartz, Kevin Volpp, and Brain Wansink, "The Hot-Cold Decision Triangle: A framework for healthier choices," *Marketing Letters* 23 (2012): 458.
[193] Jernström, "Let's go whaling."

availability in a carefully calculated design decision to drive as much value for the item as possible.

And then there's the collection aspect. As I said in the previous chapter, cosmetic items can be materials for creating metagames, for instance the game within a game of dressing up your character. The more cosmetic items you have, the more tools you have to work with. Having a large collection of items is satisfying to players not only because it gives them more options for item combinations but building up a collection over time the more you play and spend is satisfying in and of itself to many players. According to Wang and Sun, collecting also helps players recognize like-minded players with similar interests when meeting on or offline.[194] "I do just get a sense of enjoyment for 'completing my collection'. The very ownership of an item makes me happy. However, it also allows me to have a broader range of options for making combos, which in turn I get to post here and share with people who will enjoy them as much as I do," said oklopfer.[195] There's also a competitive aspect to building up a collection, as players can compare how many virtual items they have.[196] The rotation of the item shop also encourages the thrill of hunting items for a collection; some items belong to sets, and so you'll have to keep looking in the item shop for each item in the set so you can complete the collection.

If Epic Games allowed players to search for and buy all of the skins in the shop, then that would reduce the exclusivity of the skins and therefore their value and players would feel no pressure to buy them. Players wouldn't engage anymore with the economy of *Fortnite*, they'd just buy the skins they want and be done with it. Derrick Morton, the CEO of casual MMO

[194] Wang and Sun, "Game Reward Systems," 6.
[195] oklopfer, November 6, 2020, comment on Fennimore, "Do cosmetic items affect gameplay?" https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteFashion/comments/jphxgp/do_cosmetic_items_affect_gameplay/.
[196] Hao Wang and Chuen-Tsai Sun, "Game Reward Systems: Gaming Experiences and Social Meanings," Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play, 2011, 2.

developer FlowPlay, said that for their games, "people, once they get satisfied with the cosmetic end of virtual goods especially in a virtual world, they're done at some point. But once you add this level of collectability and rarity, they'll continue to buy, buy, and buy."[197] Epic Games limits the access people have to cosmetic items to keep people constantly checking into and engaging with the game and its monetization and to artificially increase the value of the items to get people to buy them.

Squad Goals: How Cosmetic Items Bring People Together and Drive Them Apart

Cosmetic items can work with the design of the game to bring players together. Wang and Sun write that social aspects are important motivations for playing games, and "social relationships inevitably affect and are affected by game play activity." Past games have let players use virtual items as social tools to show off achievements to establish status, communicate effectively and efficiently with one another, and entertain each other in the case of silly skins and emotes.[198] *Fortnite* is no different, but there's something unique about the design of *Fortnite* that gives the cosmetics extra meaning. Wang and Sun note that game companies are exploring new and more elaborate reward systems to support social interaction. One such reward system revolves around locating information that can be explored by and discussed among players in forums so that they figure out how to get the item. The players then build relationships with one another along the way. If a player sees another with a cosmetic item, they can ask them where they got that item, fostering communication within the game. Rewards that show group achievement can enhance feelings of belonging within the group.[199]

[197] Derrick Morton, "Making Your Virtual Goods Collectible," Lecture, Game Developer Conference 2013 from Informa, San Francisco, CA, March 2013.
[198] Wang and Sun, "Game Reward Systems," 8.
[199] Wang and Sun, "Game Reward Systems," 7-8.

While a lot of items in *Fortnite* are sold in the item shop, several of them can be won by completing certain tasks. There are plenty of items like this in the Chapter 2, Season 4 battle pass, where even if you get to the tier necessary to unlock an item you still need to complete "Awakening Challenges" to actually get it. Many of these involve travelling to a specific area of the map. Even though there's an in-game map that will show you the location where a challenge can be completed, you'll still need to look around in a specific spot that can be pretty well hidden. The game will tell you that the "Wolverine's Trophy" item is in Dirty Docks, but it's in a small building to the south of the site and hidden on a shelf behind a crate. There's even a secret challenge where you can unlock an additional style for the Wolverine's Trophy by landing on a headless Sentinel robot on the map while wearing the item. While there are plenty of articles from games media outlets that will tell you where to go, you can also look up a YouTube video from a fellow player or ask someone on your squad with the item where they got it. Some XP Challenges are only possible with other teammates, such as the task in Chapter 2, Season 4 where you shoot a gas can that one of your teammates threw. Some XP Challenges are completed by defeating computer-controlled enemies on the map like Iron Man and Dr. Doom in Chapter 2, Season 4 who are very tough to fight on one's own, encouraging people to get together into a squad to take them on. Whether you hunt for the items alone or in a squad, the game encourages you to get in touch with other players to complete these challenges.

However, there are ways that the cosmetic items and game design mesh that divide players rather than bring them together. There are several hundred skins in *Fortnite* with a vast diversity of designs. Many of them draw from different cultures around the world. Some are even based on popular brands like Marvel, DC Comics, and Star Wars. Having such a vast diversity of skins is all part of a marketing strategy. Segmentation is where a company identifies

and divides an audience based on customer identity and needs. Differentiation is a related strategy where the company distinguishes its products from the products of other companies (vertical differentiation) or offering a variety of products that are completely different from each other (horizontal differentiation).[200] These two strategies work in tandem. "While segmentation itself does not make products more desirable to customers, it enables identification of strategically relevant customer groups and enables differentiation of products to address the needs of costumer segments, resulting in more desirable products," notes Hamari and Lehdonvirta.[201]

Segmentation and differentiation have applications in game design, such as segmenting a player base according to player level, time investment, preferred gameplay style, or the character classes they like to play as.[202] For instance, Nick Yee found that male players are generally more interested in achievement aspects of games while female players are generally more interested in social aspects.[203] However, there are exceptions like female players who are attracted to the achievement aspects of Facebook games as Jason Begy and Mia Consalvo found.[204] You can tailor your monetization options for each of these segments, such as selling consumables that increase XP for achievers so they can complete the game's challenges faster and selling emotes to socializers so they can have more options for socializing.[205]

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[200] Juho Hamari and Vili Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 17.
[201] Hamari and Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 18.
[202] Richard Bartle, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who suit MUDs," *Journal of MUD Research* 1, no. 1 (June 1996): 3-5.
[203] Nick Yee, (2006) "The labor of fun: how video games blur the boundaries of work and play," *Games and Culture 1* (2006): 68-71.
[204] Jason Begy and Mia Consalvo, "Achievements, Motivations and Rewards in *Faunasphere*," *Game Studies 11*, no. 1 (2011): n.a.
[205] Wang and Sun, "Game Reward Systems," 6.

In *Fortnite*, there seems to be an item for every kind of person whether they like opulent, cybernetic, retro, cultural, or silly skins. The horizontal differentiation of offering many types of cosmetic items that are not mutually rivalrous gives people tons of combinations of items to create their own styles.[206] There's a lot of crossover between fans of video games and fans of geek culture like comic books and movies so Marvel, DC Comic, and Star Wars items would be appealing to those players. Epic Games collaborated with the NFL for skins that can be customized to look like players from any team in the league (see figure 10). Epic Games also appeal to black players with their emotes copied from dances from black artists and their brief partnerships with Michael Jordan and music artist Travis Scott.[207] They also have skins styled after holidays like Halloween, Day of the Dead, and Christmas. According to Hamari and Lehdonvirta, cosmetics can reference holidays that traditionally provoke buying behavior to increase the possibility that people will buy them or gift them to friends.[208] The game even has skins based on popular *Fortnite* streamers and content creators like Ninja and Lachlan.

Hamari and Lehdonvirta say that while in traditional marketing you release a product and then separate the audience into groups based on their identity, you need to decide how to segment the audience before releasing a game as you design avatar items. In other words, in designing cosmetic items the game developers also design the segmentation attributes.[209] The game designers design the skins not with players in mind but with *you* in mind, selling to the individual to maximize the potential players will buy it. These branded skins also allow players an easy way to signal their affiliation with a community of fans. Buying and wearing a Marvel-

[206] Juho Hamari and Vili Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 17.
[207] Tom Phillips, "Fortnite's latest collaboration is with Michael Jordan," *Eurogamer*, May 22, 2019, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2019-05-22-fortnites-latest-collaboration-is-with-michael-jordan.
[208] Hamari and Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 23.
[209] Hamari and Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 21.

branded skin says to other players that you're a fan of Marvel, potentially connecting players via their shared interests. However, it can also divide players based not only on what branded skins they choose to wear but what skins they don't wear.

Hamari and Keronen note that there's a difference between a game and a virtual world. Games are more competitive, fast-paced, rule-driven, goal oriented, and narrative rich while virtual worlds are more free form as they're not built around clearly defined goals or competition. Therefore, the motivations for purchasing virtual goods might be different.[210] In fact, their meta-analysis found that both the intention to play and enjoyment were significantly stronger predictors for virtual good purchases in virtual worlds than in games.[211] *Fortnite* is able to have it both ways, creating a fun, competitive and skill-dependent game yet with ample opportunities for use as a social space with Battle Royale as well as dedicated social virtual worlds with creative mode and Party Royale. Players who like Party Royale the best might be most interested in the items with patterns that react to the music, while players who like the competitive modes the best might like the items with patterns that react whenever the player eliminates another player or weapon skins that light up when they fire their weapon. Epic Games are able to appeal to all kinds of players whether they prefer games or virtual worlds, and more importantly accommodate each player's individual motivations for buying virtual items.

[210] Hamari and Keronen, "Why do people buy virtual goods," 63.
[211] Hamari and Keronen, "Why do people buy virtual goods," 64-65.

Figure 10: One of the NFL skins in *Fortnite*, which allow you to style the skin after your favorite team. There are eight skins like this consisting of masculine and feminine skins of four races each.

The exclusivity of certain virtual goods and the way they are sold to a segmented audience can foster a "haves" and "have-nots" environment. Different cosmetic items carry different messages and signifiers, and thus what cosmetics players choose to wear says a lot about them. Cosmetic items can be used to signal distinctions between high status and low status, between membership and non-membership, and between the in and out group just like clothing in the offline world.[212] Wearing certain items can inspire awe and respect, such as a trendy, fashionable items, items that required a lot of time or skill to acquire, or limited items. However, wearing certain items can inspire mocking and othering, and it seems like some skins are deliberately designed to elicit this not only through the item's design but how it's implemented in the game.

[212] Lehdonvirta, Wilska, and Johnson, (2009) "Virtual Consumerism," 1073.

As we mentioned in the first chapter, players with a default skin have a stigma attached to them because using the default skin suggests that they're an inexperienced player and/or don't invest enough time to get better at the game. By comparison to premium skins, the default outfit of a drab, military green jacket, brown pants, and chunky steel boots looks shabby (see figure 11). Cool is often defined in contrast to what is deemed uncool. All of the premium skins look even cooler because there's such a stark contrast in quality between them and the default outfit, not to mention the stigma attached to the default outfit. As Lehdonvirta says, if everything is cool then nothing is.[213] Even the premium outfits fall in a hierarchy of attractiveness: the higher the rarity (and the price in V-Bucks), the more complicated and stylish the premium skins get. This could make players envious of other players with the cool, expensive, and exclusive skins and make them seek out their own cool skins and make others feel envious of them. By creating a clear distinction between haves and have nots, Epic Games encourages people to engage in the metagame of trying to look as cool as everyone else and buy the most expensive or most popular skins. As Reddit user Wafflecide says, "If I look like a badass, I feel like one. If I look like absolute garbage, I feel like garbage."[214]

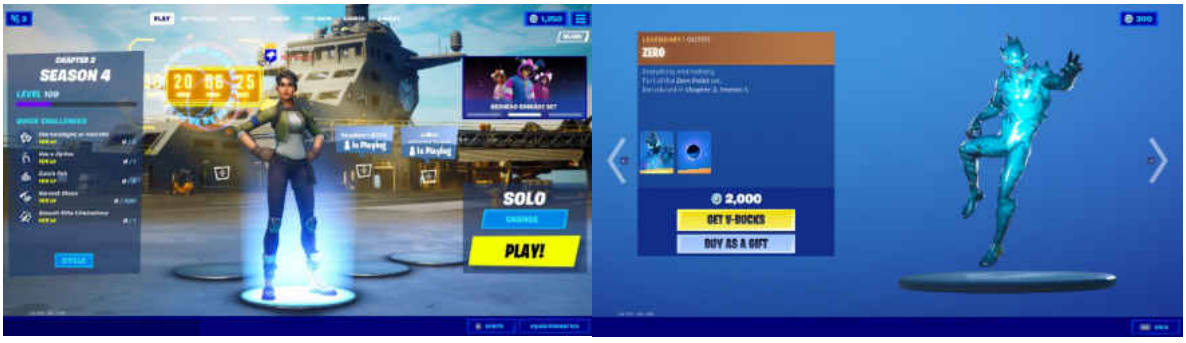

Figure 11: One of the default skins (L) and one of the legendary skins (R) in *Fortnite.*

[213] Lehdonvirta, "Virtual item sales as a revenue model," 107.
[214] Wafflecide, November 6, 2020, comment on Fennimore, "Do cosmetic items affect gameplay?" https://www.reddit.com/r/FortniteFashion/comments/jphxgp/do_cosmetic_items_affect_gameplay/.

Conclusion

With increasing pressure from legislators and other organizations to regulate microtransactions as well as the video game community's tolerance for performance-enhancing microtransactions being at an all-time low, game industry spokespeople insist repeatedly that cosmetic microtransactions don't have any impact on gameplay in the hopes that they become a normal and accepted part of games. However, their idea is based on a narrow way of defining games. If we view games as an ever-evolving concept as many scholars do, then we can view cosmetic items as a component that influences the meaning of one's experience with the game.

Virtual items in a game don't emerge out of nowhere. Designing cosmetic items and the systems that let (or prevent) players access them is as much of a part of the design of the game as deciding how much damage shotguns do or where to place landmarks on the map. As Hamari and Lehdonvirta argue, "game designers, by creating and modifying the rules and mechanics of the game… or other online hangout, have an essential, but sometimes unrecognized role in planning the marketing of virtual goods." Game developers not only create the virtual items, but the environment (in every sense, including the climate of the player community) where those items are used and the mechanics of how those items are used.[215]

Game industry spokespeople perpetuate the idea that cosmetic items don't affect gameplay, but that idea isn't congruent with the way game developers make cosmetic items so integral to the experience of playing their games. They know how much cosmetic items can add to the player's experience, and so they use cosmetic items as rewards for playing the game and playing it constantly via mechanics like the battle pass. They restrict access to items not only

[215] Hamari and Lehdonvirta, "Game design as marketing," 26.

with the price but with a rotating item shop to increase their value without making them valuable deals. Cosmetic items can bring people together, but it can also create a haves and have-nots environment that divides players and makes people spend money to keep up with everyone else that spends. The effectiveness of these mechanics popularized by *Fortnite* haven't gone unnoticed by game developers, and they're incorporating them into the monetization strategies of their own games (see *Crash Team Racing: Nitro-Fueled, Anthem,* and *Marvel's Avengers* for just a few examples).

Game mechanics can have powerful effects on their audience. They can help punctuate the most emotional parts of a game. They can help establish a mood like the intentionally cumbersome mechanics of horror games instilling a feeling of helplessness. They can encourage players to never give up in the face of a hard challenge like in *Dark Souls*. But it can also encourage people to spend way more on virtual items than they can manage, and game companies are aware of this. It might seem absurd of a person to spend thousands on a game, but it's much easier to understand why when one looks at how games with microtransactions are designed to get one to spend their money on virtual items in games.

Conclusion: Cosmetic Microtransactions Are Not Just Cosmetic

Game companies maintain that cosmetic microtransactions are "just cosmetic" and don't affect gameplay to establish them as the new normal in video game monetization after they've crossed the line for many gamers with performance-enhancing microtransactions. However, that's only true if you view the gameplay experience as only governed and defined by the rules. But as many scholars have argued, games aren't reducible to their rules. Players can generate new practices, activities, and meanings from games, using the raw material of the game itself. While cosmetic items may not change the mechanics of a game or the statistics of its players, players can use cosmetic items to help craft their own experience with the game that go beyond what a game initially offers.

Players use cosmetic items not only to be fashionable, but as tools to fashion their own metagames. Players have created entire games within *Fortnite* to accommodate a new style of gameplay as artistic expression. They didn't create the fashion shows in creative mode because Epic Games told them to do it. They did it because the act of using cosmetic items is that much fun and would be perfect for something like a fashion show. Even outside of creative mode, cosmetic items can augment the experience of playing *Fortnite*. Cosmetic items help establish a feeling of presence players feel in virtual worlds, immersing them in the experience and sense of being in the world. They allow players to express themselves in the middle of gameplay and signal group affiliation. Some cosmetic items can be signifiers of skill and achievement because the player must complete a specific task in order to get them. In displaying those items, the player invites a sense of superiority and honor over other players. Some cosmetic items have functional purposes ranging from communicating information effectively to helping people fit into peer groups. Some cosmetic items can even upset the balance of multiplayer matches by

camouflaging the player or making them harder to hit, though that's likely unintentional on the part of the developer. Cosmetics like emotes can be incorporated into the tension and release of the gameplay to help keep each match exciting. Playing a game is an ever-developing process of meaning-making, and cosmetic items can be an important ingredient or tool in that process.

Game companies insist that cosmetic microtransactions don't affect gameplay, but they know how desirable and profitable cosmetic items are and so they work to make them as essential to the experience as possible. While game players use cosmetic items as tools to create their own games, game developers use them as tools to tailor play in a way that encourages the player to spend money in the game. Cosmetic items are effective rewards that keep players playing. Game developers hook the player with excellent deals like the starter pack and the battle pass before reinforcing their frequent and consistent gameplay with new challenges and rewards all in the hope of convincing the player to invest money into the game after they've invested so much time. They restrict cosmetic items to artificially increase the value of the microtransactions and to encourage people to impulsively spend on skins before they go off the virtual shelves. While cosmetic items can bring people together, they can also divide people into haves and have-nots as game developers segment the player base and create hierarchies of quality in the design of the cosmetic items.

While I've based my investigation on cosmetic items in *Fortnite*, my research can be applied to many different phenomena surrounding cosmetic items in games. Not all cosmetic items are the same, of course, and each game has its own nuances when it comes to how players use cosmetic items, but my ideas can still explain how cosmetic items can influence the play experience in a variety of games. For instance, in October 2019 *Gears 5* introduced the T-800 of *Terminator* fame as a paid DLC character for multiplayer battles to promote the film *Terminator:*

Dark Fate. It turned out that the T-800 of *Dark Fate*, much darker than the ones from the original *Terminator* films, can potentially give players an unfair advantage in battles as they can blend in with the dark, metallic backgrounds of the arenas and hide from other players. Players can also confuse the T-800 with fellow friendly COG players, giving the endoskeletons further survivability.[216] Players use the T-800 skins to play the metagame of optimizing their chances of surviving multiplayer matches and rising up the ranks. The character design of the skins interacted with the game design of *Gears 5* in a way that encouraged players to adapt their gameplay to take full advantage of the skin's attributes. Another example is the "fashion police" in *Dark Souls* where players would use the game's multiplayer features to invade other players' game worlds and use the limited communication features to give them tips on how to make a more fashionable outfit with the in-game armor pieces.[217] While the difficult gameplay of *Dark Souls* encourages players to choose armor with stats and attributes that give them the most advantages for a given level (e.g. wearing something that grants high resistance to poison in a poisonous swamp), the fashion police show that the fun of playing *Dark Souls* can go beyond the typical gameplay of surviving the world. Gameplay can include creating a style that suits you and helping others find their style.

Possible future research directions include seeing if certain cosmetic items can give players competitive advantages in multiplayer matches. Can cosmetic items like the Plastic Patroller skin give players an advantage over others in *Fortnite*? Would a bulky or flashy skin give players a disadvantage? The logic for why they would is sound, but any reports about their

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[216] Wesley Yin-Poole, "In Gears 5, Terminator is a bit of a cheat character," *Eurogamer,* last modified October 16, 2019, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2019-10-16-in-gears-5-terminator-is-a-bit-of-a-cheat-character-and-everyones-using-it.

[217] Lauren Morton, "In search of the mysterious Dark Souls fashion police," *PC Gamer*, last modified July 11, 2017, https://www.pcgamer.com/in-search-of-the-mysterious-dark-souls-fashion-police/.

effectiveness in combat are only anecdotal. While I mentioned how the value of cosmetic items can increase with their functional use as communication tools as well as scarcity and connections to culture and cool styles, there are more ways that cosmetic items get their value that need more research. For instance, Panchenko said that the price of items and the demand for the item are connected to the amount of time you see the item in the game. The more often you see an item in a match, the higher it sells for in the marketplace.[218] We could also investigate the effectiveness of cosmetic items in advertising certain brands like how some cosmetic items in *Fortnite* advertise Star Wars and Marvel comics. It would also be interesting to examine how cosmetic items influence world building and art direction in games. I'd also like to see more research done on how certain skins like the default skin in *Fortnite* come to develop stigmas among players. I'd also like more said about cosmetic items and cultural appropriation. There's more to be said about how public relations in the video game industry use language to attempt to prevent legislators from regulating monetization or attempt to self-regulate. We also need to examine how the desire specifically for cosmetic items could exacerbate unhealthy spending behaviors for people with video game addiction or gambling addiction.

Cosmetic items can influence the way we experience games in both powerful and subtle ways. To say that they have no impact on gameplay ignores the capacity of the player to make their own fun in games and the nuanced ways in which games can develop into something that goes beyond their core mechanics. It also ignores how game companies use cosmetic items to get people spending in their games. As Sterling said, if you say that cosmetic items don't matter, then you're saying visual design doesn't matter and has no bearing on gameplay – that art teams

[218] Panchenko, "The Math of Skins."

and art direction aren't important in game development.[219] *Fortnite* wouldn't be the gargantuan financial and cultural force it is without cosmetic items. Cosmetic items let players engage in the gameplay of artistic expression and help immerse players in the world of the game. They make for a more well-rounded gaming experience that goes beyond the standardized gameplay model of kill or be killed in mainstream game development. Players can use cosmetic items to bully others such as using *Fortnite* dances to humiliate marginalized people, but they can also use them to come together in communities inside and outside of the game and share each other's style. They can make games more engaging, satisfying, and personal. Even if a cosmetic item doesn't let you dodge bullets, it still matters.

[219] Jim Sterling, "It's Just Cosmetic (The Jimquisition)" YouTube Video, 17:03, December 18, 2017, https://youtu.be/Ce5CDrq4dGg.

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