The reinvention of video games and new forms of consumption in times of lockdown. The case of *Fortnite*

La reinvención del videojuego y nuevas formas de consumo en tiempos de confinamiento. El caso Fortnite

A reinvenção do videogame e novas formas de consumo em tempos de confinamento. Caso Fortnite

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The purpose of this study is to analyze how the video game industry has reinvented the way entertainment content is consumed during lockdown; specifically, we will study the case of *Fortnite*. The methodological approach is qualitative, supported by content analysis and discourse analysis of Spanish digital media articles and news. The results reveal three elements that favour innovation in the video game industry: the development of new content, in-game events, and added value in the players' experience.

KEYWORDS: Video games, COVID-19, consumption, entertainment, digital media.

El propósito de este artículo es analizar cómo la industria del videojuego ha reinventado la manera de consumir contenido de entretenimiento en tiempos de confinamiento; en concreto, estudiamos el caso de Fortnite. *El enfoque metodológico es de tipo cualitativo, apoyado en el análisis de contenido y el análisis del discurso de artículos y noticias procedentes de medios digitales españoles. Los resultados revelan tres factores que han propiciado la innovación en la industria: desarrollo de contenido novedoso, celebración de eventos* in-game *y valor agregado en la experiencia de los jugadores.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Videojuegos, COVID-19, consumo, entretenimiento, medios digitales.*

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar como a indústria de videogames reinventou a forma de consumir conteúdo de entretenimento em tempos de confinamento; Especificamente, estudamos o caso do Fortnite. *A abordagem metodológica é qualitativa, apoiada pela análise de conteúdo e análise do discurso de artigos e notícias da mídia digital espanhola. Os resultados revelam três fatores que têm fomentado a inovação na indústria: desenvolvimento de novos conteúdos, realização de eventos* in-game *e valor agregado na experiência do jogador.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Videogames, COVID-19, consumo, entretenimento, mídia digital.*

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INTRODUCTION

The first months of 2020 will go down in history as the beginning of a period of widespread uncertainty, social distancing and great challenges for humanity as a result of the social and health emergency caused by COVID-19. In this context, the video game industry positioned itself as the entertainment sector best equipped to respond to the most demanded needs during lockdown (Boldi et al., 2022; Maheswara & Wibowo, 2021).

In the field of game studies, video games have been defined as meaningful cultural artifacts (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) that entertain (Poole, 2007), inform (Bogost et al., 2010), educate (Lacasa, 2011; Portero Tresserra & Bueno Torrens, 2019), raise awareness (Gómez García, 2014), and persuade (Bogost, 2007; De la Hera et al., 2021).

The technological development seen in video games is one of the key elements of the role this industry has played during the pandemic. Advances in artificial intelligence, and virtual, augmented and mixed reality have allowed game developers to design virtual worlds with multiple possibilities (Cordero, 2022; Moreno Cantano & Gómez García, 2021). Thanks to this, many gamers found spaces to socialize during lockdown (Bowman et al., 2022; Wiederhold, 2021) and take refuge (Asadzadeh et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2020).

In this study, we will focus on the opportunities that the video game industry offers as an entertainment platform, exploring the case of *Fortnite* which, together with *Roblox*, became a virtual meeting point where millions of people could enjoy various shows and exclusive premieres. Specifically, we studied the Travis Scott concert and the trailer premiere for Christopher Nolan's movie *Tenet*, both events held within the gameplay.

The video game industry in times of social distancing
The video game industry emerged as the sector with the greatest potential to offer leisure options, providing locked down populations an escape from uncertainty, stress, and gloom (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Ferguson, 2020). During the first days of lockdown, video game sales increased by 63% worldwide (Wiederhold, 2021). Similarly, there

was an increase in the number of users and of hours spent on online gaming (Burdenko & Shchepetov, 2021).

In addition, several titles that were released achieved million-dollar sales, such as: *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (Square Enix), *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog), *Resident Evil 3 Remake* (Capcom) or *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions), among others (Paredes-Otero, 2021).

Similarly, simulation games inspired by the pandemic were launched, such as: *Nixingzhe* (ACE Games) and *Coronavirus Simulator* (Evil Scientists and Reptilians), both with similar themes to the video game *Plague, Inc.* (Ndemic Creations) (López-Redondo & Angulo Egea, 2021). Along the same lines, serious games contributed positively in different areas such as mental health (Barr & Copeland-Stewart, 2022; Wagner et al., 2021), education (Maheswara & Wibowo, 2021), family (Pearce et al., 2021), and sport (López-Cabarcos et al., 2020).

In spite of the negative effects associated with the video game industry (Cook et al., 2018; Griffiths et al., 2012; Kowert, 2020; Tang et al., 2019), its potential to establish itself as a virtual platform that transcends mere entertainment to become part of the solution to social challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniable (Boldi et al., 2022).

Content consumption: media convergence and streaming

During the first months of the pandemic, the video game industry faced two major challenges: 1) delays in production that led to shortages of next-generation consoles; and 2) the cancellation of major social events (Burdenko & Shchepetov, 2021). Despite these drawbacks, the video game industry has been growing steadily.

Multiplatform formats, streaming, virtual communities, in-game chats, and virtual, augmented and mixed realities have made it possible to create an entertainment platform capable of serving millions of people simultaneously without geographical obstacles. The virtual worlds of today's games are designed to offer not only casual leisure moments, but have the potential to create memorable experiences for consumers (Hodent, 2019; Isbister, 2016).

They are also meeting spaces where players can socialize with others or be mere spectators (Lin et al., 2019; Orme, 2021). In that vein, multiplayer video games like *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* and *Among Us* have been greatly popular during lockdown. Thanks to their success, the user base of streaming services such as Twitch and YouTube has grown significantly (Burdenko & Shchepetov, 2021).

Nowadays, video game content is constantly being updated. Free-to-play titles have moved to the model called Games as a Service (GaaS), which requires publishers to guarantee a constant flow of content and game updates (Fernández Rincón et al., 2021), whether paid or free, through continuous support. According to Bycer (2019, cited in Bernevega & Gekker, 2022, p. 50), this new model was initiated by the company Valve with the video game *Team Fortress 2* (2007).

The Fortnite example

Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017) is a cross-platform battle royale game. During lockdown, it became a virtual meeting point, along with *Roblox* and *Minecraft*, to enjoy events, artists and celebrities. The firm Nielsen (2021) has pointed to recent events as a precedent for a new way of interacting and consuming virtual entertainment content.

Fortnite's large customer or user base is one of the reasons that facilitates organizing large-scale activities within the game. This, in turn, is appealing for certain brands to promote themselves among young audiences (Fernández Rincón et al., 2021; Martí-Parreño et al., 2015; Schöber & Stadtmann, 2020).

More than a leisure artifact, this video game has become a metaverse or virtual universe that enables interaction, integration, collaborative work and the development of players' social skills (Carter, Moore, Mavoa, Horst et al., 2020; Carter, Moore, Mavoa, Gaspard et al., 2020; Navarro, 2020).

OBJECTIVE

The overall aim of this study is to analyze how the video game industry reinvented the way content is consumed during the COVID-19 lockdowns. We have set three specific objectives:

1. Study *Fortnite*'s actions to attract players during lockdown through Spanish digital media.
2. Describe the two most important events organized by *Fortnite* during lockdown: the Travis Scott concert and the premiere of Christopher Nolan's movie *Tenet*.
3. Define the audience experience of these two events according to the digital media studied.

Methodology

This article is part of a broader study in the form of a doctoral thesis about the *Fortnite* phenomenon analyzed from the perspective of Spanish digital media. The approach is based on qualitative research, supported by two methodological tools: qualitative content analysis involving the interpretation of texts in new narratives, taking into account the context and the richness of the data (Krippendorff, 2004) and descriptive discourse analysis by theme, where meaning is considered as an integration of ways of saying (informing), doing (action) and being (identity) (Gee, 2010).

The corpus collected from general research is made up of a total of 2 188 publications (articles, news, entries, etc.) from the general digital press and specialized magazines in Spain (López-Redondo, 2021). The data collection method consisted of tracking news about *Fortnite* through Google Notifications.

The following categories have been chosen for the study based on the inductive method: Game, Platform, Audience and Advertising. Specifically, 49 publications, from April 23, 2019 to December 1, 2021, on Travis Scott's concert and the premiere of Christopher Nolan's movie *Tenet* within the video game were examined for this work. The qualitative analysis software NVivo 12 was used for the analysis of the texts and the validation of the data was based on authority criteria from the reviewed theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analyzed texts reveal three themes in Spanish digital media with regard to the reinvention of the video game and new forms of content

consumption. First, actions undertaken by Epic Games in *Fortnite*. Second, in-game events, especially those held during lockdown: Travis Scott's concert and the trailer premiere for director Christopher Nolan's movie *Tenet*. And third, the experience of the audience that participated in these events. Figure 1 below offers a more detailed explanation.

FIGURE 1

FORTNITE STRATEGIES DURING LOCKDOWN ACCORDING TO SPANISH DIGITAL MEDIA
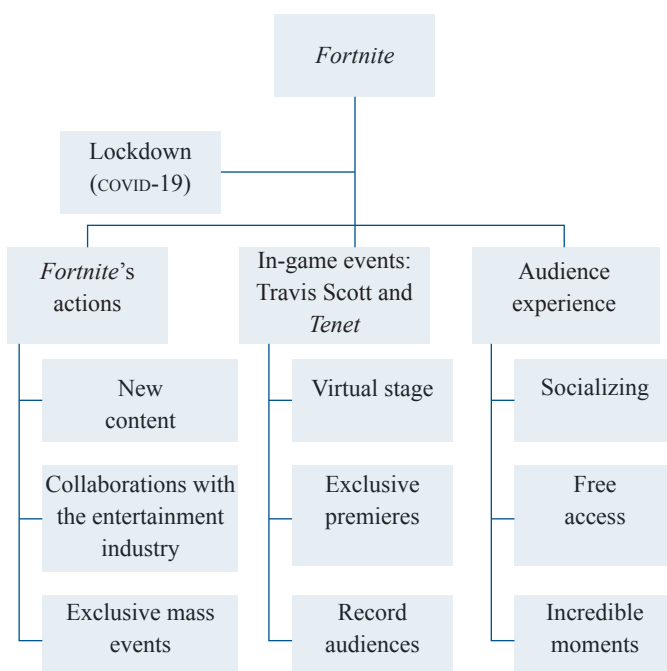
Source: By author.

The results of this study show that *Fortnite* has media coverage mainly from specialized digital media (57%), but also has a notable presence in the general digital press (43%). This evidences the role that the media have had in legitimizing video games in society (López-Redondo, 2021).

Similarly, these media outlets emphasize *Fortnite*'s innovative strategies in keeping a homebound audience entertained for several months. The key to its acceptance has lied in the developer's (Epic Games) versatility, flexibility and technological capacity to recreate in-game leisure options that, until recently, the entertainment industry could only aspire to.

Actions by Fortnite *during lockdown*

The media studied highlight that *Fortnite* has been able to reinvent itself during the pandemic, especially during quarantine. This video game has opted for content personalization, innovation through collaborations with other sectors of the entertainment industry and holding exclusive events for its player base, also with a view to attracting new consumers. Below are the kinds of actions implemented by Fortnite and some examples to illustrate them.

New content. As usual in *Fortnite*, its content is a powerful tool to attract players, due to constant updates to the game's season (each *Fortnite* season, which lasts around 10 weeks, introduces new content around a new theme). According to Fernández Rincón et al. (2021), "the game ceases to be a finite product and instead becomes a flexible product, unlimited and in continuous renewal" (p. 48). This is explained in the following example:

> *...For[t]nite* is one of the titles known as games as a service, where *its success lies in its ability to offer new content that keeps players engaged: different maps every so often or skins and dances every day* [italics added] (the latter, paid) are some of the keys to continue offering players a different experience.
> Romerales (2020).

These types of actions allow *Fortnite* to keep players' interest and build hype around its content. As a video game in constant development, it is a product in motion, evolving and never ending. Bernevega and Gekker (2022) state that "in the realities of the live service strategy, a finished and passive game is a dead game, doomed to lose its audience and profits" (p. 51).

Collaborations with other entertainment sectors. Fernández Rincón et al. (2021) have established seven categories of cultural reference points to which *Fortnite* resorts to connect with its audiences: 1) events related to film productions; 2) hospitality, leisure and sports brands; 3) music industry; 4) seasonal and cultural events; 5) traditional sports; 6) own events or with other video games (also called "crosso-vers"); and 7) in-person events. The Spanish newspaper *El País* illus-trates this with the following argument:

> Much of the *Fortnite* universe has been forged through content personaliza-tion. No one denies that the essence of the title, trying to be the last player standing in a virtual cartoon world, has revolutionized known formats; but *its collaboration and openness towards other entertainment sectors has ca-tapulted it to stardom* [italics added]. The success is undeniable... (García, 2021).

This example shows the importance of content personalization to attract consumers from other entertainment sectors, thanks to the use of popular cultural references and the fan phenomenon generated through iconic characters. Likewise, these alliances facilitate hosting exclusive events and products within the video game itself.

Exclusive mass events. Fortnite's potential to be considered as a virtual advertising platform is due to the large number of players it is able to gather in the same space, with no capacity or time barriers (Schöber & Stadtmann, 2020). For this reason, several brands have chosen to present their new products to a captive audience, mainly young people, at times when it was not possible to hold in-person events, as explained by *Dot Esports*:

> While other developers use events to boost active users, *Epic's ability to promote Fortnite as a mass game with equally mass exclusive events* [italics added] is what continues to separate them from the rest of the video game industry to this day (Maura, 2020).

Standing out in the video game industry is vital to be one of the titles preferred by the general public. In this sense, *Fortnite* has played its cards well since its inception, as it has managed to strike out on its own by presenting high-profile in-game shows.

In-game events: Travis Scott concert and Tenet trailer premiere

The staging of virtual shows during lockdown brought audiences closer and provided a new way of consuming entertainment content without the need to travel. The digital media studied highlight three main elements: 1) the video game as a virtual stage; 2) exclusive in-game premieres; and 3) record-breaking audiences for *Fortnite* events.

With this type of in-game shows "an emotional connection is sought with the audiences related to those series, movies, musicians and the video game itself, expanding experiential relationships as a brand strategy" (Fernández Rincón et al., 2021, p. 49; Isbister, 2016). Below, we break down the three main elements of in-game events recreated in *Fortnite*.

Virtual stage. Technological development is another feature that positions *Fortnite* as a video game with the potential to create a metaverse capable of reproducing real-life experiences within the game map. Aesthetic aspects are tended to in detail, so the video game is able to recreate environments such as concert stadiums or drive-in theaters.

IMAGE 1
TRAVIS SCOTT CONCERT IN *FORTNITE*

Source: Pinedo (2020).

The Travis Scott concert (see Image 1) set a precedent for virtual events in times of lockdown. According to the media, this event can be considered as the beginning of a series of shows of various kinds that can be recreated within *Fortnite*'s gameplay, thanks to the support of millions of players around the world. *Areajugones* expresses the following view on this:

> Undoubtedly, *a door for upcoming artists who can use currently popular video games as a platform for their shows* [italics added], and who knows if it is also the beginnings of a reinvention in the music scene (Díez, 2020).

Despite the benefits of this type of event for the video game and the brand, there are legal and economic issues that have not yet been fully defined or regulated by a regulatory framework applicable to the video game world. This is revealed in an article in the newspaper *El País* with the following argument:

> These types of new interactions raise a whole battery of questions that must be answered if we are to act with any certainty. *From the financial side to legal issues, it is not clear how this type of event should be framed* [italics added]. Are they really concerts? Are we talking about live creation or mere reproduction? What happens with royalties or distribution rights? (Morla, 2020).

The general digital press not only focuses on reviewing details of the events held within *Fortnite*, but also goes a step further and questions aspects beyond the audience. According to *El País*, hosting exclusive releases raises issues such as the way in which content is consumed and distributed in the digital environment – in this case, within a video game.

Exclusive releases. Part of *Fortnite*'s innovative content offer involves presenting unreleased songs and releasing previews or movie trailers, among others. Lockdowns meant this type of premieres had a greater impact on audiences, due to the closure of entertainment spa-

ces such as movie theaters, auditoriums, stadiums, etc. In this example, *Hobby Consolas* announces the event:

> *The new trailer for Christopher Nolan's latest movie,* Tenet*, will premiere exclusively at a Magisterial Party event* [italics added] in *Fortnite* at 2 am on Friday, 22 (Spanish mainland time) (Escribano, 2020).

It is worth noting how the different entertainment industries, including music and film, have been able to take advantage of this video game's captive audience to promote their cultural products, as can be seen in this example.

> *The awaited new Tenet trailer premiered early this morning for Fortnite players* [italics added]. The popular Battle Royale [sic] game has become an unbeatable framework for many marketing companies, which often implement numerous events and easter eggs in the game to promote movies, bands and all kinds of pop culture products. *Christopher Nolan wanted to take advantage of the game's popularity* [italics added] this summer (Cazallas, 2020).

The strategies deployed by Epic Games have made it stand out within the video game industry when much of the world was in lockdown. Through in-game events, *Fortnite* has provided a platform for players to escape and have fun, such as with the premiere of the movie *Tenet* (see Image 2).

Video game entertainment marketing is currently one of the most profitable strategies to promote brands among young audiences (Martí-Parreño et al., 2017). Its scope is not limited to promoting cultural and leisure products and services, but extends its range of possibilities to other areas such as politics.

Record audiences. In the midst of lockdowns, *Fortnite* broke audience records by gathering millions of viewers for the same purpose: to witness a live virtual event – the concert of American rapper Travis Scott, held from April 23-25, 2020. The media outlet *IGN España* highlights the number of spectators:

IMAGE 2

PREMIERE OF THE *TENET* TRAILER IN *FORTNITE*

Source: SomosXbox (2020).

Scott's performance was viewed by 12.3 million players simultaneously, breaking Marshmello's previous record [italics added] of 10.7 million viewers. In total, counting event replays, *Scott's 5 concerts were viewed by more than 27.7 million unique players* [italics added] (Soriano, 2020).

The views and number of active players at the event represent a historic feat not only for artist Travis Scott, but are also a milestone in the music industry. This concert has paved the path to considering video games as a platform where different types of audiovisual content can be successfully showcased.

Along the same lines, a direct beneficiary of these innovations is the audience, given the added value offered by in-game events. The game's ability to create and recreate entertaining environments allows players to experience emotions similar to those they would have in a real-life event.

Audience experience

Fortnite players, as the game's main asset, have opted for this form of entertainment due to three essential factors: First, free access: as a free-to-play video game, it is affordable for consumers (Fernández Rincón et al., 2021); second, socialization with other players, friends, family, etc. is promoted in the video game (Carter, Moore, Mavoa,

Gaspard et al., 2020); and third, incredible moments brought about by the sensations experienced by the audience during the events (Hodent, 2019; Isbister, 2016).

Free access. The free-to-play business model has been a key element in *Fortnite*'s success since its launch. During the first few months of the pandemic, audience interest was evident as it achieved a base of 350 million registered players by May 2020 (Statista, 2020).

> *Fortnite players will enjoy the full movie for free* [italics added]. Geoff Keighley has announced via Twitter that Epic Games' popular battle royale game will be releasing a full "iconic" Christopher Nolan movie this summer, and it will be completely free (*3DJuegos,* 2020).

This quote shows how transmedia communication is part of the *Fortnite* world. Social networks and media converge with the video game to create narratives for both the audience and the developer itself.

Socialization. The social factor in *Fortnite* has been reinforced in times of lockdown, given the communication tools available within the game, such as the chat or audio service that promote interaction among players (Carter, Moore, Mavoa, Horst et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, the video game industry worldwide is taking advantage of this pandemic to enable gamers to entertain themselves without the need to leave their homes (Maheswara & Wibowo, 2021; Wiederhold, 2021). *La Vanguardia* emphasizes this idea:

> ... yet another demonstration of how *Fortnite has become more than just a game, a space for socializing in which its users interrelate* [italics added] as in any other social network (García, 2020).

This type of approach during the social distancing stage of the pandemic contributed to the development of prosocial behaviors among players aimed at providing support, social acceptance and friendship – skills that are also linked to empathy and identity formation in young

people (Navarro, 2020; Portero Tresserra & Bueno Torrens, 2019; Wiederhold, 2021).

Incredible moments. The *Fortnite* metaverse has allowed the creation of a virtual universe that emulates leisure activities that were commonplace before the pandemic. Aesthetic details, audio and special effects help create an immersive entertainment atmosphere or environment, as *SomosXbox* explains:

> Epic Games undoubtedly knows how to create events never seen before in a video game. The vast majority of them turn out to be incredible, and the American rapper's concert was not going to be any less. *Epic Games has taken care of every detail in their Fortnite events, and that great work has always been noticed, leaving us with incredible moments that we can only experience within the famous battle royale game* [italics added] (Bustamante, 2020).

Digital media outlets describe the audience experience during Travis Scott's concert as epic. This can be seen in the following *Hipertextual* publication:

> Regardless of whether or not you like the singer's music, *it's impossible to deny that the experience For[t]nite offered was epic* [italics added] (Pinedo, 2020).

In addition to recreating the socialization opportunities available in the physical world, the virtual world offers its own unique experiences (Wiederhold, 2021). In short, digital technology and video games can be particularly effective in giving young people a sense of autonomy and control, as it has helped them meet their needs for independence which, in a context such as the pandemic, was difficult to find in real life (Ferguson, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a reinvention of the video game industry thanks to the adoption of technologies from other sectors and the support of gaming communities. This has changed the way in which content is consumed and distributed in digital environments.

Three factors have led to innovation in the industry: 1) The developer's actions to make its product more attractive through content personalization and collaborations with other entertainment industries; 2) Organization of in-game events, including the design of immersive virtual spaces and premieres of exclusive products; 3) Added value in the player experience, thanks to free access to the events and the design of an ideal environment for socializing.

This research aims to further the scientific community's understanding of the digital entertainment game as an alternative platform to carry out leisure activities in a virtual format. However, knowledge on the subject could be expanded with further exploration and by comparing other case studies.

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