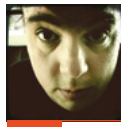

Second Life's dream lives on in Fortnite

Welcome to Build Back Better Island, official home of the Joe Biden presidential campaign in *Fortnite*! Disembark at No Malarkey Station, roll up your sleeves, and get to work on completing Biden-inspired challenges like activating 5G broadband towers, installing high-efficiency air conditioners at a car factory, and finding Kamala Harris's missing trainers.

Sure, it's a baffling ordeal to *find* Biden Island tucked away behind a password-protected portal in *Fortnite*'s Creative Mode, and the gameplay is decidedly janky, but American electoral politics is pretty inaccessible and janky right now, too.

Fortnite and the Biden campaign make strange bedfellows. Why would a presidential candidate spend money on an elaborate get-out-the-vote pitch in a battle royale shooter aimed squarely at an audience that's too young to vote? The answer, of course, is that *Fortnite* is a certified cultural phenomenon that has crossed over into the mainstream in a way that few video games ever do. Here in the strange world of 2020, it's possible that Biden's path to election day Victory Royale ran through *Fortnite*.

Long before *Fortnite* began blurring the lines between our real and virtual lives, Linden Lab's *Second Life* set out to do much the same. Launched in 2003, *Second Life* was an early example of an online world where users could create avatars, socialise, generate content, and buy and sell goods with a virtual currency known as Linden dollars. *Second Life* also actively sought crossover appeal, luring brands like Disney, Pepsi, and Adidas to the platform to establish in-game presences. In 2006, Nissan went so far as to build a multi-storey vending machine in *Second Life* to dispense virtual cars. Meanwhile, musicians such as Ben Folds and Suzanne Vega performed live concerts on the platform, angling for new fans among *Second Life*'s residents.




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Yet *Second Life* failed to break into the mainstream. By the late 2000s, companies were abandoning their virtual storefronts. Product placements were drying up, and celebrities stopped flocking to the online playground. Where did *Second Life* go wrong? It was an online platform built with exactly this kind of real-world crossover in mind, yet *Fortnite* – a game where you might witness an anthropomorphic banana man running around with an assault rifle – has somehow succeeded where *Second Life* ultimately failed.

The answer lies in the numbers; it turns out that you can do almost anything with a video game if enough people are playing it. At its peak, *Second Life* claimed a million registered users. According to Epic Games, *Fortnite* boasts more than 25 million daily players. When electronic artist Marshmello performed a live *Fortnite* concert in 2019, 10.7 million players watched along. More than 12 million players logged on to see rapper Travis Scott perform in 2020. *Fortnite* has also successfully courted media tie-ins ranging from *Star Wars* to *John Wick* to popular streamer Ninja. So, if you ever wanted to see Harley Quinn use Wolverine's adamantium claws to slice up an opponent wearing a licensed NFL uniform and dancing to Doja Cat's hit single 'Say So', *Fortnite* is the place to be.

Of course, with this level of cultural ubiquity comes political influence. Before players ever had a chance to visit Biden Island, *Fortnite* had already hosted a series of in-game conversations about race in America, featuring prominent BIPOC voices from the worlds of media, business, sports, and entertainment. It's an ambitious pivot toward real-world political relevance for a platform built to deliver rated-T-for-teen battle royale action.

Did Biden Island meaningfully impact the outcome of the 2020 election? No, almost certainly not. Nevertheless, with its massive player base and zeitgeisty cultural cachet, *Fortnite* remains poised, against all odds, to influence our first lives in ways *Second Life* could have only imagined. 

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