

GET THEM HOOKED

THE USGS NEEDS TO LEARN FROM GAME DEVELOPERS AND GIVE AWAY LANDSAT DATA FOR FREE IF IT REALLY WANTS TO MAKE MONEY FROM IT, SAYS **ALISTAIR MACLENAN**

If you are a pre-teenage school child, a parent or a late middle-aged man who really should know better, you will be intimately familiar with the game Fortnite. Depending upon your view of video games, you will either love it or loathe it.

For the uninitiated, Fortnite is not just any video game, it is an MMOG. That's a Massively Multiplayer Online Game and in this case, when they say 'Massively', they mean it. Estimates vary, but there is very strong evidence that at any one time, more than three million people are logged on and trying to virtually kill each other in the Fortnite world. It's huge.

It's also free. Free to download and free to play. It's not just the game that's free, either. Its creator, Epic Software, makes the technology at the heart of the game – the 'Unreal Engine' – free to download too and if you want to make your own game, you can use the Unreal Engine for free.

Yet despite giving away everything, Superdata Research reports that in February this year, Epic made sales of (wait for it)... US\$128 million. That's in the shortest month of the year.

How on Earth do they do it? Well, the answer is obvious to anyone who has noticed the business model of the internet that has developed in the past 30 or so years and was possibly stolen from drug dealers.

If you make your service free and it's a great service, a lot of people will use

it and, crucially, come to rely on it. In other words, they're hooked. 'In-game' purchases then become valuable to the players and when something is truly valuable, people are happy to pay for it.

Players want to individualise their characters, so they'll buy 'Vbucks' (at an exchange rate of roughly 100 VBucks to the British pound), which can be exchanged for outfits, as well as a host of other advantages in the game, too. With three million players at any one time, you can see how the Vbucks start racking up so quickly and so high.

Unless, that is, if you work for the US Department of the Interior.

LANDSAT'S TRUE VALUE HAS ONLY BEEN REALISED BY OPENING UP ITS ARCHIVE AND GETTING PEOPLE HOOKED ON ITS USE

If you work for the organisation that recently announced it was reviewing the policy of making Landsat data freely available, it appears that you can't see this runaway success at all.

The Landsat series of eight satellites – a ninth is planned for launch in 2020 – is a low-Earth-orbiting Rosetta Stone. The imagery they have provided over the past five decades can be used to interpret our planet's construction, development and health. But just as the original tablet was utterly useless until it was dug out of the

Egyptian sand, Landsat's true value has only been realised by opening up its archive and getting people hooked on its use.

In 2008, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) started to provide images from the world's largest, continuous archive of space-based earth observation, for free. Remarkably to absolutely no one at all, the use of this highly valuable (there's that word again) resource, skyrocketed. As of the latest figures I could find, there had been a staggering 75 million downloads by March this year.

That means that the first step of the tried and tested method of making a success of something online was executed as clinically

as a Fortnite player using a scope on a hunting rifle! So why would the supplier start charging, in the face of overwhelming evidence about the merits of 'free'?

What the USGS should do instead is come up with some valuable 'in-game' purchases, while keeping the imagery free to access. That will replicate the runaway success of so many other products that have had the bravery to keep on going.

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