

# He's got celebrity pals, millions of fans and (probably) millions of dollars: Meet Ninja, Chicago's 'Fortnite' superstar



Tyler "Ninja" Blevins reacts as he plays "Fortnite" during an all-night tournament, Red Bull Rise Till Dawn, on July 21, 2018, at Willis Tower in Chicago. Blevins partnered with friend DrLupo against 100 other teams of two in contests from sunset to sunrise. (Moe Zoyari/for the Chicago Tribune)



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**I**f a single moment captured the dramatic rise of Tyler Blevins from a relatively obscure video game competitor to a red-carpet celebrity, it came on a late night in March, when the mega-popular rapper [Drake](#) joined him for a round of "Fortnite."

The match was broadcast live on the streaming platform Twitch, and after Drake announced he would share the link with his tens of millions of [Twitter](#) followers, Blevins, better known by the gaming handle Ninja, gave his webcam a wry, can-you-believe-this look.

"I'm like 99.9 percent sure we are about to break Twitch," he said.

Sure enough, the stream drew a record 628,000 concurrent viewers and led to an interview on [CNBC](#), introducing a mainstream audience to the 27-year-old product of Grayslake Central High School who has the energy of an arcing power line and hair the color of a Slurpee.

Ninja, who still lives in the Chicago suburbs, has just gotten bigger since the Drake stream. He has won a "Fortnite" tournament with the EDM star Marshmello, attended the ESPY awards and signed a partnership deal with Red Bull. He has nearly 10 million Twitch followers and 16 million YouTube subscribers.

With fame has come fortune: Some observers estimate Ninja earns well over \$500,000 a month through streaming, online ads and other gaming-related revenue. (Ninja declined comment on his income, saying, "I don't want to seem cocky.")

Though Ninja might seem to be an overnight sensation, his prominence is a combination of luck, foresight and years of hard work. In a recent interview, he attributed his massive following to the skills and showmanship he learned after becoming a pro gamer as a teen.

"When it comes to streaming in general, I've been doing it a long time," he said. "I know how to put on a good show, and being a top player is always a way to get fans. There's something about people saying you're the best that just drives more people to say, 'Who?' And then they go and watch. It's just a domino effect."

## Natural gamer

As with a lot of kids, Ninja's childhood was a mix of sports and video games. His deal with his parents was that one hour of outside play brought one hour of gaming, and his early favorites included "Earthworm Jim" and "Ratchet & Clank."

He had natural ability with video games, beating almost everyone he played (the one exception was his father, who never failed to best him at "NFL Blitz"). He kept up his grades and played midfield for Grayslake Central's soccer team, but after graduating in 2009, devoted himself to a career in gaming.

It started with "Halo," a futuristic shoot-'em-up title. He joined a series of professional gaming organizations and earned ever-higher places at tournaments. At the same time, he began streaming, allowing an online audience to watch him dispatch virtual foes as he kept up a steady line of chatter.

Only a few people watched at first — mostly his family and Xbox Live friends, he recalled. But he persevered, grinding away for up to 14 hours a day, gradually learning that the best way to draw a crowd is through competition.

"I would play GameBattles matches," he said, referring to an online tournament system. "Anything competitive is always going to get you more viewers. When there's something on the line, it's just more exciting to watch. (One-on-one matches) in 'Halo: Reach' were kind of my bread and butter."

The promise of building a bigger audience led him to switch to new games — “H1Z1,” a free-for-all in an apocalyptic landscape, and “PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds,” or “PUBG,” a fight to the death among dozens of players.

His following steadily grew. But when he started playing “Fortnite” in December, it exploded.

## Wise choice

Like “H1Z1” and “PUBG,” “Fortnite” is a battle royale game, meaning 100 players start, and the last one standing is the winner. But “Fortnite” is free to play (its publisher, Epic Games, makes money through the purchase of optional in-game items), cartoonish rather than gory and available on every platform, from PlayStations to cellphones.

Ninja said the game’s enormous potential audience and “happy-go-lucky vibe” convinced him it would be a winner. He began to stream constantly and bombard his social media accounts with “Fortnite”-related material.

“I made sure I was posting all over Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, uploading daily,” he said. “It was almost impossible not to see new content from me.”

His choice proved fortuitous. According to Epic Games, “Fortnite” went from 30 million users in December to 125 million users by June. That would make it among the most-played games on earth.

As “Fortnite” boomed, so did Ninja’s following. Twitch allows viewers to pay \$5 monthly to subscribe to a streamer’s channel, giving them extra ways to interact with the gamer, and Ninja said he now has more than 100,000 subscribers (Twitch declined comment on that figure, which is not available publicly).

Forbes estimated earlier this year that Ninja’s portion of the subscription fee earns him more than \$500,000 a month, to say nothing of other gaming-related income. Though Ninja declined to clarify his earnings, esports consultant and journalist Rod Breslau said the half-million figure seems low.

He attributed Ninja’s success to picking the right game, and to having the skill to stand out from the crowd. (Ninja said when he takes a match seriously, he wins 90 percent of the time.)

Though other gamers have cracked the mainstream from time to time, Breslau said, Ninja has entered uncharted territory.

“He really was at the right place at the right time to transfer himself to where he is now,” Breslau said. “There really is no one else who has the same kind of trajectory.”

## Amiable superstar

Ninja’s appeal was evident during an all-night tournament called Red Bull Rise Till Dawn, which he hosted in July at Chicago’s Willis Tower. As captured on the stream, he mingled with star-struck fellow competitors

during breaks, posing for selfies and autographing shirt after shirt.

“My kids are huge fans,” one man said, wielding his cellphone. “Any way I can get a video of you saying hi?”

“Yo, what’s up, guys?” said Ninja, smiling and waving as the camera rolled. “Sorry you guys couldn’t make it, but I’ll probably meet you at some point, all right?”

That amiability is what made “Fornite” devotee Zach Carson, 21, a Ninja fan. He said he started following Ninja because of his skill, but was further won over by his friendly personality — an impression that only strengthened after he ran into Ninja at O’Hare International Airport, where Carson works as a greeter for a transportation company.

“It’s sometimes hard for younger crowds to sort out who is a good person online and who just wants their money,” Carson said. “Ninja genuinely cares and is a good person. And he’s hilarious. And when you combine all those things together you get the best.”

Ninja said he and his wife, Jessica, a streamer who goes by JGhasty and works as his manager, are recognized in public without fail, an experience he said is “sometimes exhausting, but mostly fun.” He figures he’ll encounter a jerk someday, he said, but that has yet to happen.

While fame has brought few pitfalls, one misstep came two weeks after the Drake match, when Ninja was [captured](#) on a stream dropping the N-word while rapping along to the Logic song “44 More.”

He promptly apologized, tweeting that he hadn’t meant to use the word — he had gotten tongue-tied and fumbled the lyrics, he said — but still recognized the hurt and offense it caused.

That incident aside, Ninja has embraced his role model status by watching his language online, raising money for charity via streaming and encouraging young gamers not to neglect their studies: A career like his, he said, is as rare as a basketball player making it to the NBA.

But now that success has arrived, Ninja is determined to keep it going. Red-hot video games come and go, and should the crowd move on to another title, he said, he is ready to evolve and adapt yet again.

“I’m confident that no matter what game comes out, I’ll be able to play at a top competitive level,” he said. “And if it’s going to be more popular than ‘Fortnite,’ I’ll be at the forefront of it.”

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