PLAYING THE CROSSFIT OPEN 2018

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ABSTRACT

Sports and games share many defining features, among them the aspects of playfulness and competition, and new forms of gamified sports and sportified gaming are emerging from the intersections of game and sports cultures. In this essay, we explore a sports competition CrossFit Open 2018 through its various levels of gamefulness and playfulness, asking: In what ways is the CrossFit Open a game? How can it be played? How and whom does it invite to play? In our reading, we present the CrossFit Open as a current pinnacle of the hybridization of sports and games, combining playful forms of exercise with high-level competition, gamified measuring of performance, and participatory play in social media – a game in which the field of play exceeds the limits between offline and online environments.

INTRODUCTION

From the 22nd of February to 26th of March in 2018, half a million people from all over the world took part in a five-week-long fitness competition known as the CrossFit Open. Each Thursday, a competition workout – a carefully guarded secret before the announcement – was revealed and performed by a

group consisting of both elite athletes and everyday CrossFitters in front of a live audience and broadcasted as a live Facebook stream.

In this essay, we will analyze the CrossFit Open 2018 as a game, exploring its gameful and playful elements (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011; McGonigal, 2011; Stenros, 2015), the different ways in which it can be played, and the ways in which it invites to play. We will conduct a close reading on the contents posted in English on the CrossFit Games official Facebook page as well as the official CrossFit Games website during the time of the Open. As the result of this exploration, we will find CrossFit Open 2018 as a gameful, playful, and participatory media sport which can be played both offline and online. In the process, we will also encounter and discuss various interesting confluences between games and sports. We will describe the CrossFit Open as a current pinnacle of the hybridization of sports and games, combining various forms of competitive and casual play, exercise with gameful and playful elements, and social media play – forming a field of play covering both offline and online environments.

Although we, the authors, are personally familiar with CrossFit style training, we have not taken part in the Open as competitors. In this essay, we are therefore 'playing' the Open as a spectator sport, through our observation of (and occasional commenting and reacting to) the live competition broadcasts, studio updates, the online leaderboard, the news stories on the CrossFit website, and – most of all – the social media content surrounding the competition.

CROSSFIT: A BRAND, A CULT, AND A MEDIA SPORT

CrossFit is a fitness regimen created by a former gymnast Greg Glassman and registered as a trademark in 2000. CrossFit is based on Glassman's (2016) own definition of fitness and it was initially developed as an effective program for law enforcement

and military personnel (e.g., James & Gill, 2017). A typical CrossFit workout combines different types of 'functional' movements, such as rowing, rope-climbing, barbell lifts, and handstand pushups, and is performed at high intensity (with heavy weights and fast repetitions). Leslie Heywood (2016, p. 122) states that CrossFit also serves adults' emotional need to play by its back-to-the-playground mentality with workouts containing movements familiar from childhood, such as monkey bars, rope climbing and jump roping. On the other hand, the sport also encourages measuring performance: the workouts are clocked, the repetitions counted, and the scores written up. In that way, CrossFit also provokes competition during each workout. In essence, CrossFit repacks exercises familiar from fitness repertory and places these workouts in a competitive setting (Crockett, 2017; Heere, 2018). As a result, CrossFit has been branded as 'the sport of fitness' (Dawson, 2017).

The official, licensed CrossFit gyms – known as 'boxes' in the CrossFit lingo – are the main venues for taking part in the sport, and, according to the CrossFit Games website, there are currently over 14,500 of them around the world. However, since 2001, the CrossFit 'WODs' (Workout of the Day) are also posted online on the official CrossFit site for anyone to follow (about WOD as a key ritual of CrossFit, see Pekkanen, Närvänen, & Tuominen, 2017). Another feature of CrossFit related to its accessible and participatory nature is the scalability of the workouts: there are – at least in theory – suitable alternatives for each movement for all levels of fitness and capability. Despite its high intensity nature, CrossFit is actively advertised as a sport suitable for everyone. CrossFit as a company is actively and visibly promoting its ethos of accessibility and equality by introducing highly scalable workouts, showcasing adaptive athletes, promoting gender equality in representing and rewarding women athletes equally to men, making its competitions inclusive to transgender athletes, and promoting

LGBTQ rights within its community. However, at the same time, it is worth noting that the sport cannot escape reinforcing the ideals of abled-bodiedness and the structures of hegemonic masculinity prevalent in fitness and sports cultures in general (e.g. James & Gill, 2017; Kerry, 2017). The ideal of CrossFit as a sport accessible for everyone is also hindered by its heavy capitalization: according to a market survey performed in 2017, the two most common membership types (three classes per week or unlimited membership) at CrossFit boxes ranged from 115 to 168 USD per month (Zen Planner, 2018).

The internet and social media have played an important role in CrossFit (e.g., Heywood, 2015; Knapp, 2015; Powers & Greenwell, 2017) which can be considered a media sport (Turtiainen, 2012). The daily workouts are posted online, there exists an official CrossFit Journal for sharing information about the sport online, and the CrossFit Games organization has been very active in social media – especially on Facebook, where it has created, shared and discussed content with its over 2,660,000 followers (until suspending its official Facebook and Instagram accounts in May 2019; see CrossFit, 2019). The CrossFit Games and the preceding regional competitions are also live-streamed online. Social media plays a particularly important role in the Open, which we will describe in more detail later in this essay. In addition to the CrossFit organization and its official channels, there is a whole world of social media production among CrossFit enthusiasts. Leslie Heywood (2015) argues that CrossFit would not even exist without the Internet. It was the first sport to be established and popularized through digital media, and CrossFitters worldwide are connected across social media platforms. The subculture of CrossFit is strongly based on the visual media (especially short videos) and digital communities. Visuality can be seen as a system of exchange and a part of the embodied experience of CrossFit (Heywood, 2015, pp. 21–25). According to Heywood (2015, p. 21), CrossFit is an example of

'immersive' model of sport. She states that '*CrossFit Sensorium* represents a particular manifestation of embodiment encountered within and beyond the moving image, emphasizing CrossFit as one of the world's first sports to be constituted through digital experience, with specific consequences for the forms of embodied experience it offers to its practitioners'.

At the same time, CrossFit is a highly commercialized sport, a trademark, and a brand, which can be seen in the affiliate license fees, commercial trainer and judge certificate courses, participation fees (as athletes as well as audience) in the competitions, and a great variety of official CrossFit products. CrossFit also enjoys significant sponsorship deals with other sport brands, the most important one being Reebok, signing a ten-year deal in 2011 and rebranding the CrossFit Games as 'Reebok CrossFit Games', affiliate gyms as 'Reebok CrossFit' affiliates, and sponsoring all the CrossFit Games athletes with mandatory competition clothing (with the same or similar designs also available for fans to purchase). By giving a possibility for embodied self-branding and (elite) lifestyle promotion, CrossFit represents 'branded fitness'. The body is the medium – and not only how the body looks but also what it does (Powers & Greenwell, 2017). CrossFit has often been studied from the perspective of neoliberalism (Heywood, 2016; James & Gill, 2017; Nash, 2017). From that approach, CrossFit represents a new sport and the discourse of self-improvement and entrepreneurialism, as well as exceptionalism and risk-taking, such as other extreme fitness programs like obstacle course races (James & Gill, 2017).

Because of its extremely enthusiastic followers, CrossFit has often been humorously referred to as a cult (e.g., Dawson, 2017), attracting the masses to not only take part in a sport, but to follow a way of life, which covers everything from training and diet to social interaction and fashion. For Marcelle C. Dawson (2017) CrossFit represents an 'exercise-military-religion nexus'.

The CrossFit community is based on voluntarism, performative regulation, and the purpose of cultivating a better self. Consequently, Dawson argues that the concept of the 'reinventive institution' describes CrossFit better than a cult. However, CrossFit is fostering its image as a 'tribe', as the brand and at the level of the affiliates alike (Pekkanen et. al., 2017). This image is maintained by marketing and other communication, as well as various affiliate practices. During workouts, the participants exchange cheers, high fives, and fist bumps, and the training session does not end until the last participant has completed the workout – while being encouraged with the loudest cheers. Many boxes also aim to create a family-like atmosphere by organizing various social events in addition to training and encouraging their members to get acquainted with each other. The CrossFit audience is quite often talked about as a 'community', 'tribe', or even 'family' even in the organization's communication. Bailey, Benson, and Bruner (2017) have studied the organizational culture of CrossFit by interviewing its members, concluding that a key element behind the success of CrossFit is indeed the strong sense of community (see also Whiteman-Sandland, Hawkins, & Clayton, 2016), naming team atmosphere and structured program as the two crucial ideologies in the CrossFit culture. Additionally, the CrossFit community values consist of communal pride as well as principles of working hard while having fun and leaving one's ego at the door. CrossFit members are able to complete the challenging workouts because they have a shared aspiration (health and fitness) and they suffer and enjoy together (Bailey et al., 2017, pp. 6–8; Heywood, 2015, p. 24). The cultural and social aspects of CrossFit are just as important than the training style – if not even more so.

EVERYBODY GETS TO PLAY: THE GAMES AND THE OPEN

The CrossFit Games, directed by Dave Castro, are the world

championship competition of CrossFit, held every summer since 2007. In 2018, over 415,000 people competed in the Open (CrossFit, 2018c), many unofficial participants excluded. The highest performing athletes from eighteen regions then proceeded to the nine regional competitions, in which the top athletes earned their place in the Games. From the 1st to 5th of August 2018, 40 women and 40 men were then competing for the title of 'the Fittest on Earth' and the CrossFit Games win (and a $300,000 cash price) in Madison, Wisconsin, the United States. In addition to the main competition, there were also separate divisions for teams, teens, and masters (athletes over 35 years old). The Games differ significantly from other sport competitions in being unpredictable: during the competition, the athletes will face a series of challenges that will only be revealed to them on the spot. In addition to more traditional fitness movements such as weightlifting and gymnastics, the competition may include anything from open water swimming to peg board climbing. The element of surprise makes it difficult for the athletes to train for the Games – and entertaining to watch for the audience.

Since 2011, the first part of the Games qualification process has been the five-week-long online qualifier called the CrossFit Open. During those five weeks, a competition workout is revealed in a live broadcast every Thursday, and after the announcement, the competitors have until the following Monday to complete the workout. The workouts are named by the year and order in which they have been released: for example, the first workout of the 2018 Open is 18.1. In the Open 2018, right after a workout has been released, it will be performed live in front of an audience and in a live broadcast by a selected group of previous Games athletes as well as everyday CrossFitters. The workout description, movement standards, and scoreboard are also simultaneously released on the Games website. For each workout, there are a few different options. 'Rx'd' is the (very

challenging) default option, but there is also a scaled option with easier movements and lighter weights, and teenagers (14–17 years old) as well as athletes over 55 years old also have their own standards. The variety of standards is meant to ensure that 'everybody gets to play', as the Games director Dave Castro declares during the 18.5 Open workout live announcement. To take part in the Open, the athlete needs to register online and pay a $20 fee. Then, after completing a workout, the athlete can upload their score to the official online leaderboard. Most of the people taking part in the Open complete the workouts at a registered affiliate gym under a qualified CrossFit judge, and the affiliate then validates their score in the system. However, it is also possible for anyone to take part in the Open from their 'garage gym' (Wool & Lawrence, 2017) with a video submission.

Jules Woolf and Heather Lawrence (2017) conducted a survey for the CrossFit Open 2015 participants from one box before and after the competition, examining if the competition affected the participants' social identity and athletic identification. Based on the study, it is worth noting that participants may have different motivations for getting involved in the Open. The opportunity to compete is a strong motivating factor to participate, but the participants also tend to focus on their own performance and yearly progress. Other researchers (e.g., James & Gill, 2017) have similarly remarked that the competition is being used to follow individual improvement and to achieve individual goals. The celebratory atmosphere at the box, when all the members come together to cheer for each other, was described as another remarkable factor for motivation.

In its promotional materials, the CrossFit Open is presented as a sport event and the participants are called athletes. As Dawson (2017) puts it, 'fitness fanatics are reinvented as athletes'. However, according to the research of Woolf and Lawrence (2017, pp. 173–175), not all Open participants consider themselves as athletes, and branding them as such may result in

them doubting their belonging to the community. Whether or not you consider yourself as an athlete, the CrossFit Open offers a unique chance to compare yourself to the professional athletes taking part in the same competition. The competition is literally open to everyone: every participant's results are represented on the same official leaderboard, and every recreational 'athlete' has an equal opportunity to try to qualify for the CrossFit Games, making the Open exceptionally accessible in the context of competitive sports.

The CrossFit culture has been considerably criticized in previous studies. Researchers have questioned the inclusive nature of CrossFit and its unique sense of community (as CrossFit being too greedy in its demands for loyalty) as well as the healthiness of the workouts, and gender representations (e.g., Bailey et al., 2017; Dawson, 2017; James & Gill, 2017; Kerry, 2016; Nash, 2017). Nevertheless, CrossFit emphasizes physical capabilities over gender, which in theory means that women can be equal CrossFit athletes to men. In practice, hegemonic masculinity and ideal femininity (versus alternative femininity) are both resisted and reinforced among the CrossFit culture (James & Gill, 2017; Knapp, 2015; Podmore & Ogle, 2018; Washington & Economides, 2015). However, in the CrossFit Games and the Open, the women and men competing are treated as equal participants, and they are given similar attention and appreciation during the competition – which is something that cannot be taken for granted in sports culture generally. Since 2019, transgender athletes have also been able to participate in the competition.

PLAYING THE OPEN 2018

Play and playfulness are not limited to the context of playing a game: they can manifest in various environments and in all social interaction (Stenros, 2015, p. 147). The Open is played both offline and online. Offline, the play occurs while completing

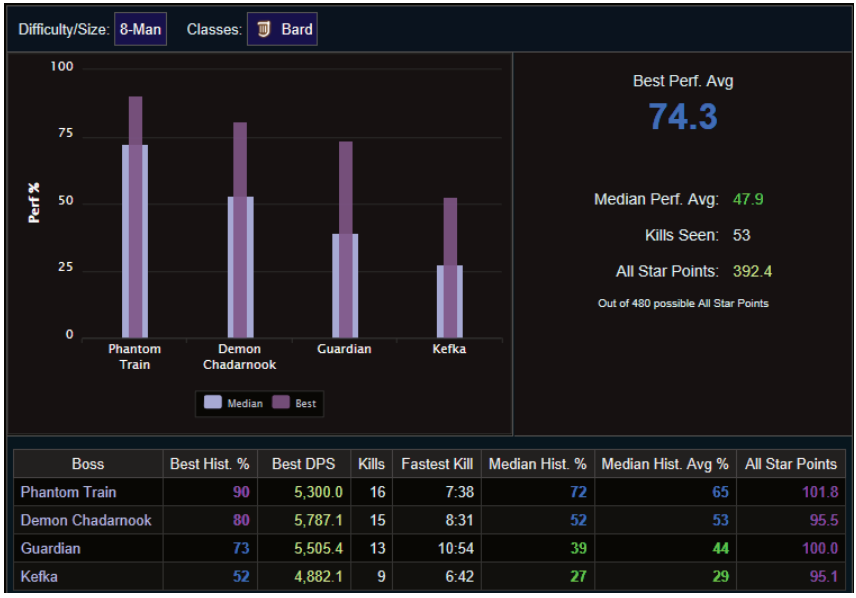
the workouts, that is when the athlete is performing the required set of movements according to the official standards (constituting the 'game rules' for the Open) and being watched by a judge who counts their score. After the workout is completed, the play transfers online: the score is submitted to the online leaderboard to be compared to all other athletes in the competition. The online play also occurs in social media in various forms: in sharing and commenting workout videos, images, and other content such as memes related to the Open and CrossFit in general. The CrossFit Games Facebook page and the leaderboard can be seen as a *mediated playscape*, as its social play value is based on sharing and interaction, and it enables a feedback system familiar from games (Heljakka, 2016).

Gaming the Leaderboard

The official online leaderboard is the primary way to follow the game. It shows an athlete's score for each workout and the whole competition. The scores can be searched and compared based on the athlete's name, gender and age, region, occupation, and affiliate. Each athlete has a personal profile page where they can submit additional information of themself (height, weight, picture, biography, and benchmark stats). The page also shows the athlete's overall Open rank worldwide, by region, and by country (and state). All these functions can also be found in the CrossFit Games mobile application, which also allows the user to follow specific athletes.

In addition to showing their overall and regional ranking, the leaderboard is designed to let the athlete compare their performance to people with a similar background (same gender and age group), or to people from the same box, and even to the very best athletes in the world. Interestingly, it shares features and functions with leaderboards appearing in digital multiplayer games, designed to compare the players' performance level and to show how they fare compared to other players based on

specific variables. For example, comparing the Open leaderboard to FF Logs – a website where the players of a MMORPG *Final Fantasy Online* can submit parse data for ranking and analysis – the two sites work very similarly. On FF Logs, a user can search for a specific player or team and find their ranking for each fight in the game or look for player or team rankings based on their in-game job, in-game server, or geographical area. There are also 'All Stars' listings showcasing the top players and teams for the current and past raid tiers. On the Open leaderboard, the individual athletes and teams are ranked and displayed in a very similar manner. A Final Fantasy XIV player looking for their ranks for the raids in a specific patch will see the list of the raid bosses, their DPS (Damage Per Second) number, as well as their rank percentile and their all-star points for each battle (image 1). Similarly, a CrossFit Open participant can open their CrossFit Games mobile application and see their score and percentile for each Open workout (image 2).



Boss	Best Hist. %	Best DPS	Kills	Fastest Kill	Median Hist. %	Median Hist. Avg %	All Star Points
Phantom Train	90	5,300.0	16	7:38	72	65	101.8
Demon Chadarnook	80	5,787.1	15	8:31	52	53	95.5
Guardian	73	5,505.4	13	10:54	39	44	100.0
Kefka	52	4,882.1	9	6:42	27	29	95.1

Image 1. An example of a Final Fantasy XIV player's rankings as presented on FF Logs.

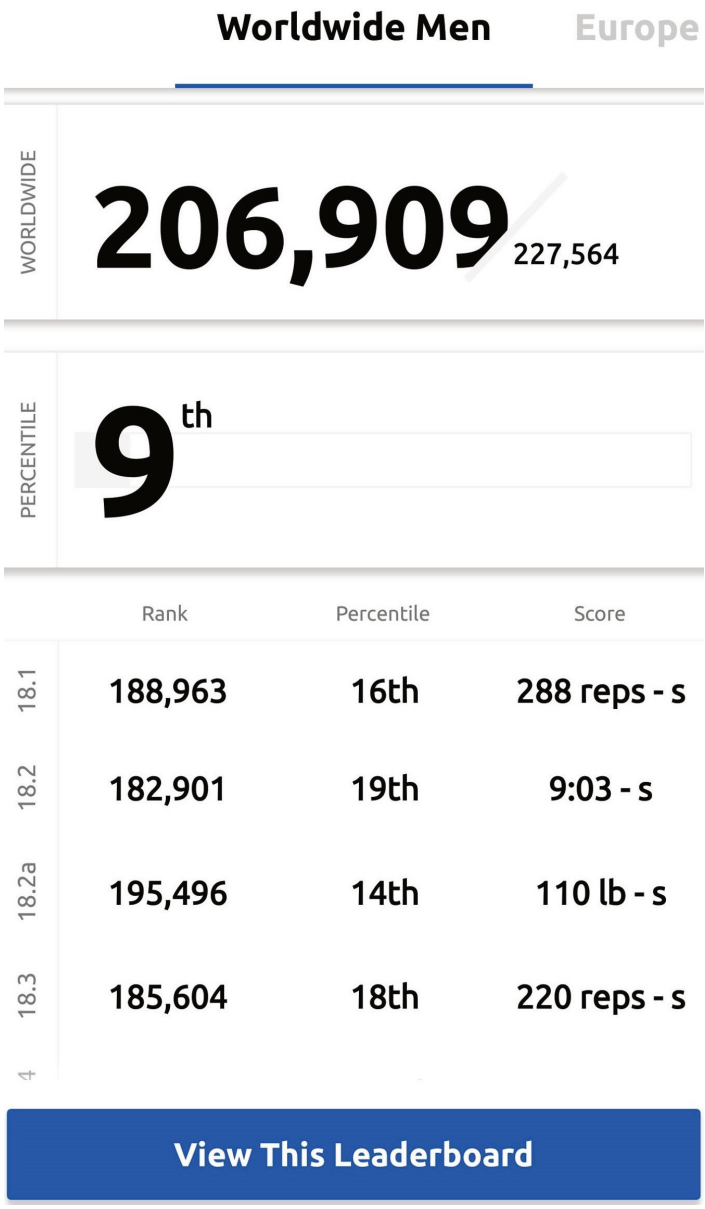


Image 2. An example of a CrossFit Open 2018 participant's rankings as presented on the CrossFit Games mobile application.

The Open leaderboard's primary function is to present the current state of the game, but it can also be viewed as a game in itself. While a competition workout is revealed on Thursday, the athletes have until the following Monday to submit their scores, and the affiliates have until Wednesday to confirm the submitted scores – leaving them invisible before that. The competition workouts can also be completed, and the scores submitted, several times within this timeframe. An athlete can choose when to submit their score, and an affiliate can choose when to confirm the score and make it public. It is also possible for an athlete to first submit their initial score, then redo the workout, and later submit a higher score. The spots in the Regionals are distributed solely based on the leaderboard rankings. This means that the athletes competing for those extremely limited spots are keeping a close eye on each other's scores, and it also makes the leaderboard a strategic tool in the competition. It may not have been a coincidence, for example, that athlete Ragnheiður Sara Sigmundsdottir, who came fourth in the 2017 Games, did not have her 2018 Open scores published until the last moment for each workout, when it was no longer possible for other athletes to try to beat her. This is just one example of how the athletes are able to 'game the leaderboard' to their advantage, the importance of which is acknowledged even in the Open update studio broadcast 18.1 Women's Top Stories (CrossFit, 2018a), during which the show host Sean Woodland declares that 'it seems now more than ever the athletes really have to game the leaderboard, the days of just "I'm gonna do a one-and-done" are far behind us'. There is also a discussion point text 'Strategy is becoming more important. Do you have to game the leaderboard?' on the screen while Woodland continues to discuss the topic with athlete Annie Sakamoto and the show co-host Pat Sherwood, who points out how 'the Open is so important, why not give yourself every advantage as an athlete'. Gaming the leaderboard is similar to many other ways of 'playing the system', a process familiar from games in which the focus of play moves from the game

itself to the game system (Stenros, 2015, pp. 170–173). In the case of the CrossFit Open, the game moves from completing the workouts into gaming the leaderboard.

The Game Master: Dave Castro

The CrossFit Games Director (and the CrossFit Co-Director of Training alongside Nicole Carroll) Dave Castro has been organizing the Games from their very first year 2007. In CrossFit, Castro is a cult character of sorts, evoking fear and hate as much as respect and admiration. During the Open, Castro spends quite a lot of time in the spotlight as he announces all the competition workouts in the live broadcasts. He also participates in the online play of the Open by sharing hints about the future competition workouts on social media. These hints and the community's efforts in trying to solve them can be viewed as a game of riddles in itself (image 3).

Image 3. Dave Castro's hint for the Open workout 18.1 and one interpretation for it.

Castro and his team design all the CrossFit Games workouts,

including the Open and the Regionals. Interestingly, the workouts are not necessarily designed to be beatable. In the 2018 Open, for example, the third workout 18.3 included two rounds of 100 double-unders, 20 overhead squats, 100 double-unders, 12 ring muscle-ups, 100 double-unders, 20 dumbbell snatches, 100 double-unders, and 12 bar muscle-ups – a total of 928 repetitions, all to be completed within a time cap of 14 minutes. In the update studio broadcast 18.3 Men's Top Stories (CrossFit, 2018b), analyst Tommy Marquez describes this challenge presented by Castro to the athletes:

[block quote] I felt like all the Games athletes kind of grouped together like the Avengers, it was like a preview of the Infinity War [movie] coming out pretty soon, and Castro was Thanos, all of them, taking the challenge like 'hey, one of us has to take this workout down and finish it'. It was kind of cool to see everyone kind of rally behind that goal, and you know, and see a couple of people actually do it. [block quote]

In the end, only two of the half a million people participating in the Open managed to complete the workout: Josh Bridges and Dakota Rager. Castro has since revealed he did not initially expect anyone to be able to finish the workout and that is was designed to 'cause panic and confusion' (Saline, 2018). Despite the challenges they may contain, games are usually designed to be beatable. The enjoyment for playing a game, for most players, comes from the game being difficult enough to pose a challenge, but not too difficult to create a frustrating experience. This balance of challenge is generally acknowledged having a central role in creating an engaging game experience (e.g., Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005; Wiebe, Lamb, Hardy, & Sharek, 2014).

The Open participants commonly experience anxiety toward unrevealed workouts and their assumed exhaustiveness (Woolf & Lawrence, 2017, p. 174), but based on the participant comments on the CrossFit Games Facebook page, this is also what many

of them expect from the competition. However, while the participants wish to feel challenged, they may not enjoy facing a challenge they find impossible to beat. For example, the previously mentioned 18.3. workout was impossible to complete for many participants even as the easier, scaled version, because it required twelve chin-over-bar pull-ups. On the CrossFit Games Facebook page, the design of the workout inspired many negative comments from the participants, who felt they could not compete in this workout at all, not having mastered that one particular skill. At the same time, CrossFit is about pushing the boundaries of one's performance ever further, and the elite athletes were giving their all aiming to beat the quite nearly impossible Rx'd workout in time. Similarly to gaming, people participating in the Open are playing with different types of motivation: some enjoy trying to achieve what may well be impossible, while others are looking for challenging, yet definitely beatable, content.

Castro's role in the Open can be, in a way, compared to a game master in a role-playing game, who manages and controls the game (Tychen, 2008). He designs the challenges the players will face, keeping them secret yet giving carefully conceived hints – and, most likely, occasionally purposefully leading the players astray. While the game master's purpose is to plot and play against the players, he is also, in the end, on their side, wishing that they will succeed and rise as heroes, having beaten the nearly unbeatable challenges.

The Meme Game

Memes are a common form of play in an online platform which encourages a playful approach (Massanari, 2015). They are the image of playful online communication and commonly utilized in various contexts and environments (e.g., Massanari, 2015; Shifman, 2013). In the communication related to the Open 2018 on the CrossFit Games Facebook page, there is a variety of

memetic content posted in the forms of images, GIFs, and videos. The Facebook communication also includes playing with hashtags such as '#18pointtoomanyburpees'.

Most of the memes seem to be originally created and posted by the CrossFit community members and then reposted on the Games Facebook site. For example, there is a short video of the 2016, 2017, and 2018 CrossFit Games champion Mathew Fraser, calling 'the Open is coming' to the camera – referring to the famous line 'the winter is coming' from the popular TV show *Game of Thrones* (and the associated book series) – before scorching a field with a flamethrower. The video is reposted 21st February by the CrossFit Games account, titled 'Mat Fraser is in the Open'. There are also memes related to, for example, doing specific Open workouts from the perspective of either an athlete or a judge. One example is the 4th March repost from CrossFit Batteraof, containing a collection of images taken of people completing the Open 18.2 workout, holding two dumbbells on their shoulders. The post asks, 'What grip did you go with?' (image 4). The point of the meme (or at least one way to read it) is that while the Open participants could choose any way they wished to hold the dumbbells during the workout, after the numerous repetitions all the options felt equally bad – an embodied memory likely to awaken in a person seeing the image after having completed the workout. At the same time, the image signals this shared experience: the whole CrossFit Open community having been in the same situation with the nine people included in the image.

The motivations for creating and sharing memes and playing games are largely similar: it is fun and it connects like-minded individuals to the community (Massanari, 2015). Some of the memetic posts also invite the community to participate in the meme play, such as the one asking to 'Describe your Open experience in one GIF' (posted 27th March). Memes are popular representations among sports culture in general, and CrossFit

as a modern sport is native to the digital environment of play, meme play included. Sport memes can also be used as political statements as they allow fans the opportunity to reproduce narratives about a sport and its participants (Dickerson, 2016; Lee, 2017). What is interesting about the meme play in the Open, is its specific role in connecting the player's personal, physical play, performed in the offline environment during a competition workout, to the shared, participatory play located in the online social media environment.

[Image4.PNG]

Image 4. An example of the memetic image play related to the Open 2018 on the CrossFit Games Facebook page.

As with all the other forms of human play, the Open social media play is not entirely positive in its nature (on transgressive or 'bad' play, see Stenros, 2015, pp. 72–76). Some of the Open play on social media is performed under the hashtag #OpenHumiliation. The hashtag represents an online challenge created by CrossFit athlete Brent Fikowski. Every week the athletes taking part in the challenge compare their Open workout score for the week, and the athlete with the lowest score must carry out a punishment presented by Fikowski beforehand. The punishment is about public humiliation: the loser must complete an embarrassing task and then publicly share it on social media with the hashtag. The Open 2018 Facebook page shared one of these posts: a video of athlete Travis Williams reading a CrossFit themed love poem to a picture of Dave Castro. Many of the punishments are quite harmless in their nature, such as getting a pie thrown to one's face, or having a 'tattoo' of the winner's choice drawn on their back with a marker. Some of the punishments, however, contain undertones that can be interpreted as homophobic, transphobic or misogynistic, for example when the male athletes losing the challenges are 'humiliated' by being dressed as a woman or reading a love poem to another man.

#InTheOpen: How Everyone Is Invited to Play

In addition to the posts directly advertising the competition, there are many ways in which the Open, in its mediated communication, invites to participate and play. Perhaps the most significant one is the hashtag #InTheOpen, widely utilized in the page's own communication, but also spread effectively among the CrossFit community. The hashtag is a simple but effective way for the competition to invite participants, and for the participants to display their taking part in the competition as well as their belonging in the CrossFit community. There is of course also a 2018 Open Facebook profile picture frame available for those who want to express their participation in their profile (image 5).

Image 5. A humorous invitation to play, reminding of the Open starting and encouraging the Facebook page followers to show their participation with a profile picture frame.

Sharing images and videos of one's Open workouts is a central part of playing the Open online, for both the elite level athletes and everyday CrossFitters alike. The official CrossFit Games Facebook page also regularly reposts these contents from the Open participants. In these reposts, the spotlight is given not only to the elite athletes, but also everyday CrossFitters of every level, age, size, and ability. For example, in addition to reposting a video of the 18.3 winner Dakota Rager completing the workout in 13 minutes 25 seconds, the page also reposted a video of an adaptive CrossFitter Lindsay Hilton trying – and failing – to complete a single double-under in the same workout. Videos of other adaptive, elderly, and pregnant CrossFitters completing the workout with personal scaling for their current capability were also shared, even though not qualifying to enter their scores for the competition. In each Open workout live announcement broadcast as well as the CrossFit Games Facebook page and the website, many inspirational stories involving everyday CrossFitters were also shared, including new personal records achieved during the Open, as well as other stories involving CrossFit helping a person to overcome (usually health-related) obstacles in their life (e.g., CrossFit, 2018c). This practice of sharing a variety of Open performances from people with very different backgrounds, skills, and capabilities, emphasizes the message that the Open is for everyone, inviting and encouraging people to participate no matter what their background is.

CONCLUSIONS

The lines between games and sports are obscure, and in the end, both respond to the human need for playfulness and the will to compete. Games can be played as a sport, and sports are often defined as a type of games. Many team sports (like football and other goal games) are obvious games themselves with their rules and aims. There are also some sporting events presenting traditional sports in new, gamified forms, such as Zombie Runs and various obstacle course races (Friman & Turtiainen, 2017).

Competitive digital gaming, also known as electronic sports is, on the other hand, an example of sportified gaming (Turtiainen, Friman, & Ruotsalainen, 2018). At some level, gamification and sportification can be considered as synonyms. Bob Heere (2018) states that gamification is an offspring of sportification. According to him, CrossFit, which places workouts in a competitive setting, represents a contemporary way of sportification.

While CrossFit is unquestionably a sport, it is rarely considered a game. In this essay, we have found the CrossFit Open 2018 as a gameful, playful, and participatory media sport. It is played both offline and online in different ways and on various platforms, including the competition workouts themselves, but also on the online leaderboard, as well as on social media platforms through the gameful and playful hints, memes, challenges, and hashtags. It is not a novel idea for a sport to contain elements of gamification – or the other way around. In fact, games and sports have always shared features, and the barriers between the two have been increasingly blurred within the last decade due to the ever more popular trends of gamified exercise and sportified gaming. What is interesting about CrossFit is that it seems to take the hybridization of sports and games further than perhaps any other sport, combining playful forms of exercise with gamified measuring of performance, high-level competition, and participatory play in social media, extending the field of play from offline to online environments.

The CrossFit Open is a game in itself, containing many levels of gameful and playful challenges and various ways to participate both offline and online. While our analysis in this essay has focused on the previous year's competition, the Open 2019 seems to be taking this game rhetoric to a completely new level. In 2019, the Open is directly advertised as 'A Global Game', and the competition's slogan is 'Let's Play.' (image 6). The Open website now begins with a declaration: 'The Open is for Anyone',

assures that 'people of all ages and ability levels can play', and also includes instructions for 'How to Play' (CrossFit Open – Let's Play).

Image 6. The logo and the slogan of the CrossFit Open 2019 on the website.

Reading the CrossFit Open 2018 as spectators, we have been able to reach many levels of gamefulness and playfulness located within and in relation to the competition. While it is clear there are limits to the accessibility and openness of the sport, in the end, the competition is strongly presented as a game designed for everyone.

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