

Well Played

**a journal on video games,
value and meaning**

A Special Issue on The Sporting Mindset

EDITED BY JOHN SHARP

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A Journal on Video Games, Values, and Meaning
Special Issue on The Sporting Mindset

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN SHARP

Sports and games, despite their family resemblances, are often treated as completely isolated cultural phenomena. Yet their sameness is greater than the differences. Though they very much are games, sports are usually bracketed off from games, and are treated like a distinct phenomenon of human culture. Athletes, the players of sports, are often considered more physically than mentally skilled, a perception reinforced through propositions like Malcolm Gladwell's "physical genius." Games, often entering conversation with a silent, implied *video* in front of them, are viewed primarily as pastimes drawing more on intellect and interest than the dedicated attention necessary for athletic success. Yet the esports phenomenon clearly demands the same focused attention as sports, and demonstrate an even quicker physical skill decline than found in traditional sports.

Finding the commonalities between the physical, competitive games colloquially known as sports and the screen-based, competitive games typically called videogames brings our focus away from the material considerations including the way the games are performed, and toward players' mindsets about and during their play. Competitive. Success- and goal-oriented. Disciplined, focused. Motivated to improve their performance in

ways that will allow them to achieve success in their support. These instead are qualities associated with how someone approaches plays—a player’s mindset, in other words.

This special issue of *Well-Played* considers sports as an approach to play rather than as a category of game. The popular conception of the sporting mindset puts certain values ahead of others, and positioning games as a means to an end rather than an experience unto itself. Sometimes, the sporting mindset brings out the best in us; sometimes, the worst. Sports as community institutions play a complex role in our culture. Sports produce values, behaviors, and cultural conventions that simultaneously include and exclude; that encourage and nurture some while rejecting others; and that celebrate aesthetic performance and violent behavior all at once. These cultural and play values manifest in all manner of games: crossword puzzles, videogames, collectible card games, athletics, cooking competitions, and reality TV shows, to name a few.

This is the sporting mindset, or what happens when players bring values associated with sports into all manner of games. The essays here span a wide range of games—Crossfit but also *Android: Netrunner*; *Destiny* and baseball spectatorship; fantasy football in addition to streaming eSports. Each of the essays explores the way we think about play from a particular point of view either as players or as spectators. Ultimately, these essays unpack the ways games mean, and how that meaning is shaped by the attitudes of those who engage with games.

EXPLORING THE SPORTING METAGAMES OF COMPETITIVE ANDROID: NETRUNNER

It is increasingly difficult to separate discussions of games from sports. In early 2019, we are in the midst of an “esports” gold rush, where countless video games have now morphed into or been designed to work as competitive esports (from *Starcraft* and *Dota 2* to *Hearthstone* all the way to *Clash Royale* and even *Farming Simulator 19*). Given that games scholarship has often focused on the cultural practices around playful media, we are led to consider the communal and competitive activities that players create around gaming, including organized sports. Whether we are discussing on one hand an *Overwatch* friendly tournament or a *Hearthstone* national championship, or historical antecedents such as *Street Fighter’s* Daigo’s Official Evo Moment #37 or even *Chess’s* Fischer/Spasky showdown, the context of competitive play provides us a window into the connection between individual play and competitive structures, as well as organized circuits, leagues, and rewards.

At the same time, the conception of “sports” in game studies has broadened in recent years to include sports videogames (Consalvo, Mitgutsch, & Stein, 2013) and even, in some popular discourses, the play of non-digital card and board games (e.g., Titus Chalk’s 2017 revealing autobiography of involvement with competitive *Magic: the Gathering* card game tournaments). Perhaps, then, it is worth considering the ways that “sports” are wrestled with by the fans and players of things we more often think of as “games.” In their introduction to a discussion of sports videogames, Consalvo, Mitgutsch, and Stein state that “even if a videogame does not itself simulate a physical sport, the act of playing a game and competing seriously might constitute a sport for some people” (2013, p. 3). While this issue’s theme — “the sporting mindset” — provides us with a potentially useful

phrase that, on the face of it, seems to describe how individuals embody the term “sports,” we are still left considering what the boundaries are of “sports,” and how the term reflects considerations of games as platforms for social and cultural practices.

A discussion of “sporting mindsets” may potentially yield a better understanding of the ways “games” are considered by individuals as more than just “simply” games. However, in a similar vein, Boluk & LeMieux (2017) have recently provoked games scholarship to consider the ways that the plethora of socially- and culturally-situated “metagames” that sit atop games provide cultures and communities of players not only with new understandings of games, but also connection to institutions outside of gaming. Boluk & LeMieux state that their concept of “metagaming” takes on “renewed importance and political urgency in a media landscape in which videogames not only colonize and enclose the very concept of games, play, and leisure but ideologically conflate the creativity, criticality, and craft of play with the act of consumption” (2017). If so, and if we make the leap that a framing of games as “sports” constitutes an engagement with a form of “metagame,” then perhaps an investigation of individual “sporting mindsets” might provide us with ways of understanding the social “sporting metagames” that may challenge predominant, popular, consumerist models of games.

In this paper, then, I focus on “sporting metagames” as the adoption of a form of critical “metagame” or series of “metagames” utilizing elements of sports in fan-created, player-organized, competitive play atop a game. Many digital and analog gaming communities could serve as potential sites within which to address these kinds of “sporting metagames”; for this piece, I explore how it has taken hold in a small, customizable, largely-analog card game community. Since 2013, I have been a casual player, competitive tournament player, blogger, and critic

within the community for the card game *Android: Netrunner* (most recently published by Fantasy Flight Games). My previous and ongoing work on this game and its play communities (Duncan, 2016; Garcia and Duncan, 2019) has been based on a five years' worth of ethnographic field notes, supplemented by interviews with players.

This paper focuses in particular on two cases drawn from moments in the history of the game's community, both of which address the strange and interesting position that *Android: Netrunner* has taken in the space between "game" and "sport," as well as how fan-created and player-managed "sporting metagames" help to explicate community relationships with rewards and money. I track tensions between interpretations of the game in player communities and ultimately player ownership of the game to some degree, as the game has moved from a published product of Fantasy Flight Games to a murkier, fan-managed model (known as "NISEI"). As a consequence, we will find that the influence of various forms of reward (monetary, subcultural fame, or otherwise) may play a role, and point us back toward the ways that some fan-created "sporting metagames" may address the critical project that Boluk and LeMieux have laid out for us.

In the following sections, I will begin by describing how competitive *Android: Netrunner* arises from an interplay between design concerns, production concerns, and community goals. By first detailing the game and its history, I next discuss ways the community has overtly played with the tensions around "sporting" in the game's past, and will finally describe some of the current efforts to build a new, fan-created "sporting" structure to support the game after Fantasy Flight Games shuttered the game in October, 2018.

WHY ANDROID: NETRUNNER?

Android: Netrunner (ANR) is an unusual case that bears some justification. ANR is neither the first nor most popular collectible/customizable card game (that distinction typically goes to *Magic: the Gathering*). However, it has a fervent player base and one that has treaded that line between “game” and “sport” in interesting ways due to the game’s production history, its position as a mechanically distinct game from many other customizable card games, and through attention to diversity within the game’s theme.

Android: Netrunner is a competitive, two-player card game, set in a futuristic, “cybernoir” world. As with many customizable card games, players select cards from a collection of several hundred available cards, designing their “decks” (sets of cards of typically 40 to 54 cards in ANR) which are then played against another player’s complementary decks. During its redesign, helmed by by Lukas Litzsinger for Fantasy Flight Games in 2012, *Android: Netrunner* adapted the mechanics and updated the theme of the 1995 collectible, customizable card game *Netrunner* by Richard Garfield (creator of *Magic: the Gathering*, and the genre of collectible card games). The original *Netrunner*, while a cult classic, was an unsuccessful attempt at making a collectible, customizable card game featuring radically different mechanics from Garfield’s original *Magic: the Gathering* systems. Both games are asymmetrical — ANR and *Netrunner* players both play a “Runner” (a computer hacker) and a “Corp” (the megacorporation the Runner is trying to hack) — leading to, essentially, players needing to learn two simultaneous games at the same time. These mechanical differences are some of the game’s appeal for its adherents, but also the complexity and unfamiliarity of these mechanics compared to standard *Magic: the Gathering*-style combat likely hampered it in the competitive card game market.

Sometimes pejoratively labeled a “dudebasher” within *ANR* play communities, *Magic: the Gathering*’s core combat systems involve playing characters (“dudes”) that can attack or defend, with the ultimate goal of reducing (“bashing”) your opponent’s hit points to zero. These mechanics stand in stark contrast to *Netrunner*’s and *ANR*’s game of hidden information, bluffing, and interaction with simulated computer servers through the complex and unique set of mechanics of a conducting a “run” on that server. Although many in the *Android: Netrunner* player community cut their teeth on *Magic: the Gathering* or similar games and still view *ANR* from the lens of the constructed card game genre that *Magic: the Gathering* began, the “feel” of *ANR* is distinct, and has been an acquired taste for many.

These mechanical distinctions were largely my initial draw to the game, and why I fell in love with it so quickly. Unlike many other collectible card games, I found myself immersed in a set of game systems that played fast, rewarded risk and bluffing, but also seemed to have a high degree of verisimilitude with a form of fiction it was modeling. William Gibson’s classic “Burning Chrome” short story and his later *Sprawl* novels clearly served as a basis for *ANR*’s mechanical differences from other collectible card games, and I had never experienced a game that had such a deep “feel” for the fiction it was modeling. The actions of the Runner felt *invasive*, like you were risking your safety to steal something from a Corp’s well-hidden servers. Playing as a Corp felt vulnerable but also powerful, often just a few cards away from a game-changing agenda score or a punitive retribution on a sloppy Runner. Most importantly, playing them across the same table felt oddly like a *conversation*, one where two sets of perspectives and two sets of game mechanics intertwined in one, taut contest.

As such, game designer Naomi Clark described one of the appeals of *ANR* as being its “competitive intimacy” (Rubeck, 2015), with its asymmetry leading to an interesting form of

“yomi” (Sirlin, 2005) wherein players were not just trying to keep in mind what other players were strategizing, but also how other players were strategizing within a completely different network of game mechanics. This rise of public game designer discourse around the game was a key driver for my involvement, and, I suspect for others. I first became enamored with the game when *ANR* became a critical darling in game design circles around 2013, several months after the game’s initial release. Partially due to these mechanics, and bolstered by the vocal support of game designers on social media (including members of the NYU Game Center), positive discussions of the game, its novel thematic updates to cyberpunk fiction (Purdom, 2015), and its challenges in learning (Alexander & Smith, 2014) became popular public interpretations of game.

Additionally, I should note that *Fantasy Flight’s* dedication to diversity in the world of the game held appeal for me, but was even more significant for many others who had felt marginalized by other customizable card games, which are often aimed more at heteronormative, white, male, and American players. *ANR* was lauded for presenting a particularly diverse vision of the future, including creating a “cybernoir” world centered in Ecuador rather than Japan or North America (with cycles of cards set in futuristic India and Africa), playable trans* (Nero Severn) and transhuman (Quetzal) characters, as well as a dedication to representation of characters ranging widely in race, gender, sexuality, and age (e.g., the teen wunderkind Olivia Ortiz aka “Chaos Theory” and the elderly conspiracy theorist Omar Keung).

I suspect that attention to refining novel game mechanics and dedication to a diverse theme contributed to *ANR* becoming a “golf for game designers” as Clark put it (Purdom, 2014). As game designers and game scholars began to take a deeper look at the world and systems of the game, *ANR* has appeared in at least one instructional game design text (Macklin & Sharp,

2016) and *ANR*'s designer (Lukas Litzsinger, then an employee of Fantasy Flight Games) presented a detailed analysis of the game's redesign at NYU's PRACTICE conference (Litzsinger, 2014). *ANR* became the inspiration for at least one well-publicized game design experiment (i.e., Clark's *Lacerunner*, which re-imagined the game as a set in the world of 19th century manners; Purdom, 2015). *ANR* soon found itself cultivating a different, quite rabid player base than many other competitive card games. In terms of the community, the game spawned the central fan site Stimhack (<http://stimhack.com>; named after a core *ANR* card, and founded by Anthony Giovanetti, who would later develop the popular digital deckbuilder *Slay the Spire*). Additionally, the game spawned multiple podcasts from both fans and game professionals alike (e.g., *Terminal 7*, from former Campo Santo and current Caledonia developer Nels Anderson and Klei artist Jesse Turner).

Also notable was the economic model of the card game itself. For many consumers, one of the central appeals was that *ANR* was no longer a *collectible* card game. Fantasy Flight's "Living Card Game" (LCG) model for the game was an economic factor for many (this author included). In it, Fantasy Flight eschewed "boosters" of randomized cards for "datapacks" containing, typically, three cards apiece of twenty different cards, each unique to that datapack. The LCG model allowed for sequential narrative exploration across multiple packs and cycles of packs (see Duncan, 2016), and also provided players with an appealingly simple way to acquire the cards one needed for competitive play. If a player wanted the card "Rashida Jaheem," they would simply purchase a copy of the *The Devil and the Dragon* datapack (along with copies of around 19 other cards). If one was interested in using the card "I've Had Worse," one would purchase the *Order & Chaos* deluxe expansion for it (along with several hundred other cards). The game abandoned randomness for an ostensibly much more consumer-friendly approach; as

a consequence, purchasing an entire collection of *ANR* cards typically ranged on the order of \$300-\$500, and was a fraction of the cost of a single competitive *deck* for *Magic: the Gathering*.

This hints that the LCG model itself is an intriguing one to consider from the perspective of the creation “sporting metagames.” While the original, collectible *Netrunner* game was tied to a card game model that was originally designed for competitive, organized play (the *Netrunner* mechanics licensed from Wizards of the Coast), Fantasy Flight’s LCG approach seem to have been intended to cater to the *hobby board game market*. *ANR* required the purchase of a “core set” (see Figure 1 below) which could be played as a standalone game, with deluxe “expansions” following the nomenclature and smaller-box presentation of many traditional board game expansions. Their approach seemed intended to serve as a bridge between hobbyist board games (a domain that Fantasy Flight had succeeded at for several decades with games such as *Twilight Imperium* and *Cosmic Encounter*) and the competitive, organized world of collectible/customizable card games.

Ostensibly, the LCG model provided opportunities for anyone to dive into the game’s competitive play at whatever rate they wanted — adopting a “sporting mindset,” but only if one wished to. And, without any randomness in the collections of cards one would purchase, there was no secondary financial market for the game (as found in *Magic: the Gathering* and similar CCG games), meaning players could affordably adopt specific levels of competitiveness as they desired. The LCG model could afford levels or degrees of “sporting,” according to the player’s desires and level of economic commitment.



Figure 1. A promotional image of the Android: Netrunner Revised Core Set, with a display of the game's asymmetrical gameplay.

However, perhaps due to the lack of a secondary card market and without any real financial incentives to continue to collect cards and play, the excitement of the game's initial release began to dwindle over time. Fantasy Flight Games' Organized Play rewarded players for participating in tournament through promotional cards (alternate art cards), playmats, and sundry other material goods (trophies, "click trackers," deck boxes, acrylic tokens, and so on). The top prize for winning the top-level tournaments — the North American Championships, European Championships, and World Championships — was the opportunity to work with the game's design team in creating new cards which, typically, would take at least two years to see publication. Described as "the best prize in gaming" by Fantasy Flight, this was often seen cynically by *ANR's* community: as a means for game development labor to be passed on to successful members of the competitive community, and, alternately, as simply a reward that had no clear monetary value (unlike

alternate art cards and playmats, which could be resold by players).

At the final World Championship in September, 2018, a backlog of many of these “greatest prizes in gaming” was rapidly dumped on the *ANR* community, without significant playtesting, and using art that was not commissioned for these specific cards. Due to the ending of the production of the game in October, 2018, there was finally an end to new card releases and to the official design of the game’s formal, organized play systems. With no more official Game Night Kits/Critical Run Kits, Store Championships, Regional Championships, National Championships, North American Championship and European Championships, not to mention World Championships, the future of the formal game was at least initially unclear.

For some competitive players, this end of an “official” game was literally the end of the game, and yet, this is also perhaps one of the most interesting moments in which to think about “sporting” with this particular game. As the official game ended — while the game was in the midst of a creative and sales resurgence, to boot — players were left to make decisions on how best to continue the game’s organized play structures, and how to consider the roles of rewards and money in the design of any new “sporting metagames.”

In the next sections, I will unpack two evocative cases from the history of *ANR* involving the organization of competitive, “sporting metagames.” First, I revisit a moment from the early stages of the game’s community that reveals tensions between the competitive view of the game and assumptions from the hobbyist board game player community regarding rewards. Then, I move to a discussion of the post-October, 2018 future of the competitive game, and how players have wrestled with the tensions of what an unofficial future of *ANR* should be, vis-a-vis competition, community, and money.

!RUINED FROM CONTROVERSY TO MEME

In April of 2015, the “*Android: Netrunner Pro Circuit*” or ANRPC was announced. Organized by prominent competitive players, the ANRPC was originally intended to provide a series of player-run tournaments with a series of feeder tournaments of competitive play that would lead to participation in the official, Fantasy Flight Games World Championship weekend. Structured into multiple sub-circuits based, originally, in American regions such as the Great Lakes Circuit (the “GLC” in the Midwestern United States) or the Southern Megacity Circuit (the “SMC,” based in Atlanta, Georgia), organizers created punny acronyms for each circuit based around commonly used abbreviations for cards the game (e.g., SMC is also a common abbreviation for the card Self-Modifying Code). The ANRPC’s initial attempts to organize, led by Scott Pagliaroni (a prominent and successful American competitive player from Wisconsin) was an eager attempt to connect multiple, smaller playgroups into a larger, organized system of play, with the goal of supporting players where Fantasy Flight’s support was lacking.

As the Fantasy Flight World Championship weekend registration had historically been open to any potential, interested participant, the ANRPC was organized originally to attempt to facilitate bringing more successful, competitive players to Worlds with guaranteed tickets. An arrangement with Fantasy Flight to guarantee a World Championship seat for ANRPC tournaments was unfeasible, however, and so the ANRPC shifted to providing simple monetary rewards (e.g., \$300 in cash rather than a hotel reservation and guaranteed ticket). Smaller “qualifier” tournaments were organized within each sub-circuit, leading to a “finals” for each of the larger circuits where the top prize was a pool of money intended to support the winner’s registration, travel, and lodging to the World Championships in Roseville, Minnesota. The amount of money awarded at each tournament was still rather small, but it was the first concerted

effort by players of the game to organize tournaments with monetary rewards, and, as such, was an early small controversy regarding prizes.

For a game that was marketed as different from collectible card games, and which followed a very different release/production model than randomized booster packs (the LCG model), some players found it difficult to understand how money was now being used as overt rewards for play. In an announcement thread on ANR's BoardGameGeek forums — a key, early affinity space (Duncan, 2013) for hobbyist board games — a discussion between concerned players and the ANRPC organizers (primarily Pagliaroni) arose about the use of monetary rewards. While many were encouraging of the ANRPC's efforts, some critical comments included:

“Adding cash prizes and creating ‘pros’ can’t add anything good to ANR.”

“I generally agree that adding cash prizes will degrade the friendliness of Netrunner tournaments. I like the fact that Netrunner tournaments are different than [Magic: the Gathering] tournaments.”

“I won’t make a blanket statement of ‘this is bad for Netrunner’, but I worry that putting cash on the line will have a negative impact on the competitive players.”

These yielded several responses from Pagliaroni, who stated: “[T]he idea is not just the money. It is to focus on the players, which currently is not done. Interviews, streaming, bios, commentary... these are all things we want to accentuate... And, if you think money isn't involved in the game, you're wrong. Check eBay any time. People are constantly selling their prizes. FFG doesn't support a cash tourney scene, but they are already fueling... a grey market, whether you believe it or not” (emphasis added by

author). The “problem” of overt monetary rewards in the game became one that, at least initially, was used by critics to demarcate how ANR was “not like *Magic: the Gathering*,” but for organizers and proponents, this was a non-issue, as money was seen as already a key part of the competitive game (the “grey market”).

Tackling first the criticisms and then the response, we can see here that some of the critics seemed to be motivated by concern for what money might do to the community: Degrading the “friendliness” of ANR, and creating levels of perhaps more-legitimate play (“pro”, which was part of the initial ANRPC acronym). But, beyond this, the call to avoid *Magic: the Gathering* (“I like the fact that Netrunner tournaments are different than [Magic: the Gathering] tournaments”) was intriguing. As the original and most dominant organized “sport” for competitive, collectible card games, the specter of *Magic: the Gathering* and its monetary prizes seems to have loomed large for some of these critics, and was also an early concern for this author. With its secondary card market, its organization into a “Pro Tour” with monetary rewards and its often combative competitive player base, some of us were concerned that the ANRPC was beginning a first step into a troubling shift from a gaming community toward something that seemed more like a competitive community. The rise of a “sporting metagame” through the ANRPC had too many associations with troubling, established “sporting metagames” where money had shown itself to warp the player community in unsavory ways.

But, as Pagliaroni also pointed out, the concern over money ignored the role that money had *already* played in competitive ANR. Though the ANRPC’s prizes made the monetary rewards for the game overt and readily apparent, he was correct that there was already a “grey market” for the prizes awarded from official Fantasy Flight tournaments. Rare alternate art cards, playmats, and sundry other prizes that could only be acquired through

participation in and success at competitive tournaments were finding their way onto ebay and similar sites. The prizes were not *cash*, of course, but they were convertible into money, and thus served, if Pagliaroni's argument is to be believed, as an existing incentive for top players to perform in the game's tournament scene. In Boluk & LeMieux's terms, the labor of these competitive players to contribute to and drive the official competitive scene of *ANR* was an "undercurrency" which had a rare opportunity to be "cashed out" into material rewards.

Clearly, critics of the *ANRPC*'s monetary rewards seemed to value a specific kind of tournament play and community "feel" — one in which distal rewards were not in play, and where the perceived "friendliness" of the tournament scene was not sullied by "playing for money." Thus we might interpret these critical comments as a framing of *ANR* as away from that of a "sport," favoring the "game" framing of these play spaces that dominate much of BoardGameGeek. The creation and advertisement of a new "sporting metagame" as well as Pagliaroni's reactions both highlight the "board gamer's" concern about monetary rewards while extolling the potential benefits of more of a "sporting" type framing for the game ("Interviews, streaming, bios, commentary"). Shortly after this small controversy, the *ANRPC* altered its acronym to the "*Android: Netrunner* Players Circuit" (dropping "Pro"), perhaps to better communicate these goals.

This incident became well-known within the *ANR* community, and morphed into a recurring in-joke in online *ANR* discussions. As many *ANR* players began to seek out ongoing spaces to chat about the game, a Slack (<http://slack.com>) for the game's most prominent fan-run site, *Stimhack*, was organized in 2016. Akin to an ongoing IRC channel accessible via computer or mobile device, Slack discussions of the game continued through a generally unmoderated #general channel, as well as dozens of other channels focusing on designing decks for *ANR* (#deckbuilding, #maxxclub, #adamlounge), specific events

(#gencon, #worlds, #regionals_2018), channels for regional subcommunities (#uk, #new-england, #louisville), and numerous other topics of interest to *ANR* players (#pokemon, #esports, #fantasy-bachelor). Slack's numerous means of interacting and multiple avenues for accessing it (e.g., computer or phone) provided the community with new opportunities to comment in real time on any number of topics related to *ANR*, sharing files, tagging in other community members in public and private conversations, and adding emojis to individual posts. Perhaps unsurprising in any gaming community, this further gave rise to the community developing and sharing its own in-joke memes (Milner, 2016) with new and simple means of easily being inserted into a conversation.

One of the most persistent memes within the Slack community was “!ruined,” named after the command one types within this Slack to pull from a randomized set of images of money “ruining” *ANR*. !ruined was a direct continuation of the earlier conversations about the ANRPC's monetary rewards, illustrating exactly how little money was provided as rewards for these tournaments. Within many of the public channels on Stimhack Slack, one simply needed to type “!ruined” to summon a bot that inserts in a picture taken from one of the *ANR* events since 2015 that included a monetary reward (see Figure 2 below).



Figure 2. Two “!ruined” results from Stimhack Slack. In both, meager monetary rewards (three \$20 bills, and a small pile of \$1 and \$5 bills) are presented.

Thus, a small contingent of very committed *ANR* players began to play *with* the very idea of money being controversial in the game, converting it to a community meme. The creation of a “sporting metagame” drove a persistent in-joke, often raised within Stimhack Slack when discussions turned to rewards, prizes, or tensions between the competitive *ANR* community and “casuals” who decried monetary rewards. As !ruined became ingrained within Stimhack Slack, and as Stimhack Slack overtook the Stimhack website as the central hub for discussions about the game, the meme looped back from an online meme referencing a (largely online) critique of fan-organized play, to become a physical card (created by Pagliaroni) which was distributed at ANRPC and later even at official Fantasy Flight events (see Figure 3, below).



Figure 3. A !ruined fan-made promo card. Featuring Pagliaroni sorting money from a King of Servers tournament, the card is a functional proxy for an existing card within the game.

It should also be noted that the !ruined card was an *economic* card (a functional proxy for the common Runner card “Sure Gamble”). The !ruined card served both as a commentary on the tensions between players in the overall ANR community as well as serving a playable role with economic impact in any game played with it. It was given to players to play with in place of another card, one that was most typically acquired by purchasing an additional core set of cards (thus, in a way, becoming a way for players to actually save some money). The card referenced an online Slack meme that referenced moments of physical card play, which was commentary on a (mostly) online discussion over monetary rewards. The tensions over monetary rewards and what they revealed about assumptions about the game became *playable*, to an extent.

And it's this playability that is most interesting insofar as this represents the material elements of a "sporting metagame." As the !ruined cards were also only legally playable within limited context (ANRPC events and Fantasy Flight events below a certain tier of competition, they were created by a subset of the community to comment on a particular tension within the community. Ostensibly a bit of a mockery of those who would claim that the game was ruined by money, the !ruined cards presented a case where its role as a *reaction* illustrated multiple levels of interaction by the community over these tensions. For !ruined served a complex set of purposes within the community — to simultaneously defuse differing perspectives of competitive and casual play as well as bring together like-minded players through humor and play. In both mocking critics of the fan-created "sporting metagames" around *ANR* while also providing new tools for social cohesion within it (memes as well as playable cards), !ruined illustrated that the differences in focus between multiple communities (board gamers and competitive card players) could be leveraged to support an evolving competitive community while acknowledging the history of the tensions that gave rise to it.

As the number of players shrank between 2016 and 2018, many of the game's most committed, competitive players began to shift efforts from primarily face-to-face tournament play to play online via the unofficial play site jinteki.net (as recently presented in Duncan, 2018). The game's competitive community organized events within the online space, and online tournaments became a regular staple of the site. As the game has changed, the organization and play of "sporting metagames" has also increasingly moved online. In the next section, I will present a different case from the end of the formal game and beyond, which presents a new set of tensions between game, sport, and financial rewards.

THE RISE OF NISEI

As stated earlier, Fantasy Flight officially ceased production and sales of *ANR* on October 22, 2018. While this had been rumored for several months, the abrupt announcement of the game's "end" on June 8th, 2018 took many by surprise, since *ANR* seemed to be on an upswing in some play communities. A revised version of the core set had been released at the end of 2017, and card rotation (the expiry of hundreds of cards from the competitive game) was enacted as well, reducing some barriers to entry for new players. While the game seemed to be poised for a potential renaissance and its final box set (*Reign & Reverie*, released in summer, 2018) provided a new creative direction for the game, it was "over" for many by the end of 2018. No new additional cards, no reprints of product, and no new organized play events (or prize support) would occur past October, 2018, based on decisions by Fantasy Flight and Wizards of the Coast which had not been made public at the time of this paper's writing.

This left the *ANR* community facing a new challenge over how to proceed. What does a play community do, if it has focused primarily on owner-supported competitive tournament structures? While many competitive players saw this as the end (see Garcia & Duncan, 2019), some began to work towards creating a fan-supported, player-managed future, and the crafting of new "sporting metagames." Stimhack Slack again became the locus of new discussions about the community, with, initially, a new channel (#future) for open discussion of the future of the game. Within a week, players had contributed over 120,000 words toward proposals for *ANR*'s post-Fantasy Flight future. Even with the common understanding that fan efforts to "save" the game would likely be in violation of Fantasy Flight Games and Wizards of the Coasts' intellectual property rights, a new effort began to design an *organization* for the continuing of *Android: Netrunner* in some form.

The channel was open to participation from anyone on Stimhack Slack, was advertised in relevant *Android: Netrunner* Facebook groups and the /r/netrunner subreddit, and utilized multiple working documents (via Google Drive), ranging from sheets of interested participants, to an ongoing, often-revised FAQ, to tentative announcement text for when the project would be announced to the playing public at large. Early, active members of the #future channel began by attempting to lay down a structure for organization, and, very quickly, the discussion began to turn to roles that might be needed within such a group (organized play, promotion, new card design, etc). Additionally, within each of these groups, domains began to become carved out; see Figure 4 below, for a discussion of the ways organized play regions were discussed by early participants in the channel.



Figure 4. Mobile view of a discussion in Stimhack Slack's #future channel on ways to organize the initial selection committee for the Netrunner Expanded Universe (later NISEI). (Stimhack Slack usernames obscured on request).

After a week of multiple proposals, the group morphed from the “Netrunner Extended Universe” project into “The Black File” (the name of an ANR card that forestalls the end of a game) to the acronym NISEI, which stood for “Nextrunner International Support & Expansion Initiative” (as well as being a not-unproblematic repurposing of a Japanese term for “second generation,” used for several characters in the *Android* universe). By June 15th, 2018, the organizers of NISEI had released an

official announcement indicating that they were planning new initiatives to keep the game going (emphases added):

*The Nexrunner International Support & Expansion Initiative (NISEI) is a fan-run organization to keep the game alive and thriving by establishing a new, non-FFG, means of supporting the player-base and creating content: Rules updates, ban list updates, tournaments, prizes, and more. Basically, everything is on the table — provided we can get the hands and brains together for it. And we'd love your help... At this stage of the project we need people to volunteer, help select, curate, and build a sustainable framework for continued efforts. This starts with an initial on-boarding of the following roles: **President, Lead Designer, Lead Developer, Rules Manager, Creative Director, Community Manager, and OP Manager**. We'll be on the lookout for people interested in taking on an unpaid passion project and willing to dedicate their free time. Application details coming soon!*¹

The definition of roles and of structures that could provide a framework for further efforts was clearly important for NISEI and its initial interim, founding President, Jacob Morris (of the fan-created Android Netrunner Comprehensive Unofficial Rules project; a fan effort to document the game's rules which was later given a formal role and status with the Fantasy Flight design team). NISEI's recruitment announcement mirrored the language of Fantasy Flight's previous structures to support tournament engagement ("OP" or "organized play"), and set into motion the planning of potential, new competitive tournament play. All of these roles, to some extent, were predicated on the idea that NISEI would serve to continue organized, competitive play — adopting the structures of Fantasy Flight's existing

1. In the spirit of full disclosure, I note that I contributed minor copy-editing to this announcement before its release, and later joined NISEI for several months (after initial submission of this paper, leaving NISEI before final revisions of this paper). As such, my involvement with NISEI is a complex influence on this paper: NISEI was initially an object of study, later a group I was eager to help, and I was later removed from the project in January, 2019.

“sporting metagame.” While the end of the Fantasy Flight game seems to have shrunk the community further, those remaining reacted positively to this effort, even given the understanding that such efforts run counter to the intellectual property rights of the game’s multiple owners.

After initial recruitment of leadership positions, NISEI quickly grew to several dozen volunteers, organized in clusters related to design, development, organized play, creative (art and narrative) design, rules management, and community management. Much of these early days for NISEI involved determination of what forms the game would take in the NISEI-managed future, as well as setting the groundwork for the further development of the game. Key to these changes were establishing supported play formats (including an updated, “Standard” format, central to most of the official tournament play for the game) as well as solidifying its status as a non-profit organization. As NISEI became a sort of playable fan fiction (a la, Johnson, 2009), it began to wrestle with what changes it might enact to the game’s systems, lore, community, and organized play.

The organized play of the game is where the most interesting relationships to money, rewards, and the “sporting metagame” of *ANR* would proceed. In September, 2018, before I became officially involved with NISEI, I interviewed Austin Mills, the newly-appointed organized play manager for NISEI. Our conversation covered organized play formats, general goals for NISEI, and the differences Austin saw between Fantasy Flight’s previous approach to fostering *ANR* as a “sport” versus NISEI approaches. Austin stated:

[The] primary differences from [Fantasy Flight Games], I think, are going to be *accessibility instead of profit*. (Emphasis mine). FFG charges a lot of money for certain events, especially ones that they host like [the final Fantasy Flight World Championships] at the FFG Center.

And we're trying to move away from that. [We] want to obviously cover our costs but being a non-profit organization, we're not interested in making money from this. We are interested in appealing to the largest player base possible. So another thing that we'll be doing kind of in that vein is rotating where the World Championship happens.

Austin continued to describe a variety of other concerns, reframing the goals of NISEI from profit to accessibility. Implying that impediments to competitive play limited participation in the game's evolving community, Austin stated that "I really hate the casual versus competitive element of card games and card game communities. I wanted to remove as much of that as possible. I don't want to keep casual players from attending the World Championship for *Netrunner* because they think they're going to do poorly or because they've done poorly in other tournaments and just can't attend. I just don't want that." As the Fantasy Flight game was "dead," Austin's goals seem to have been about restarting it as not a profit-making venture, but as an open community of players.

It is interesting, then, that in contrast to the ANRPC case, the NISEI management of the game privileges its position as a non-profit organization, partially out of necessity (as they are presumably contravening Fantasy Flight and Wizards of the Coast copyright), but also for the intent of creating this more accessible play community. If the creation of a "sporting metagame" of the ANRPC case led to quick controversy around financial rewards (and a socially-cohesive use of memes about those rewards), NISEI seemed to be interested in avoiding those same issues. The framing of "accessibility" was presented as an off-hand comment, but one that seemed to reflect Austin's desire to create a new vision for the organized play of the game (e.g., other claims, such as "Really, I think that the end of *Netrunner* is

actually a good thing, this is opening a lot of doors for Netrunner that I don't think existed in the past").

Will this succeed in the long term? That is, of course, unclear at this point, but the act of attempting to develop a complex fan organization gives us some sense of this branch of the *ANR* community's immediate priorities. Their structures imply that they are setting the groundwork for a long involvement with the design and management of the game, or, at least, are hoping to long-term change perspectives of the organized play community for the game. While initially adopting the organized play structures of the Fantasy Flight game, and building off of the previous work of the ANRPC, the current approach taken by NISEI seems to be one aimed at sidelining monetary rewards for physical prizes, such as new alternate art cards and new playmats (see Figure 5, below).



Figure 5. The 2019 NISEI Store Championship kit, with custom art playmats, alternate art cards, and a first-round “bye” for a 2019 NISEI Regionals tournament.

While NISEI can be seen as a continuation or extension of earlier ANRPC efforts, Austin’s comments reinforce that they also desire to prevent *ANR* from reverting to becoming yet another “dead game in a box.” While new card design and new rules interpretations seem to be further on down the road, multiple players and tournament organizers have expressed interest in continuing the game’s tournament play as a means of continuing community engagement, and not letting monetary prizes interfere with this goal. Tournament events have historically been the centerpiece of *Android: Netrunner* for NISEI’s interim organizers and many other players of the game, and so it should be no surprise that the first efforts to organize a future for the game has focused on continuing these activities in ways that keep

the dwindling player base from further eroding in an era when stores no longer carry it as a product.

SPORTING METAGAMES AS OPPOSITIONAL

We've seen then, that in this particular niche card game, there are interesting roles that tensions around incentives (money) have played as well as potential for new organizations inspired by existing competitive, "sporting" play groups to reify existing emphases within a game's community. But, what does all of this mean? If these controversies over financial rewards and fan organized efforts to keep a game's tournament scene alive are meaningful, exactly how can they help us to understand play and sport beyond this particular case? In what ways do "sporting metagames" reveal *critical* perspectives on gaming as financially and economically situated?

First, I wish to return to the idea of Boluk and Lemieux's (2016) "metagames" and the related concept of an "undercurrency." In their work, player labor was seen through a particularly cynical lens as a reduction to a logic of productivity. This may be accurate for certain esports, and there are certainly some similarities with the organized "sports" around *ANR*, but both the *!ruined* and *NISEI* cases illustrate a different relationship between player labor, incentives, and community. Perhaps due to the niche that *ANR* resides within — a much smaller community of players within a more marginalized hobby — player labor seems to be in opposition to the organizational structures of the formal game. First, with the *ANRPC*'s focus on monetary rewards and the design of the *ANRPC* circuits, then with the new *NISEI* initiative, fan labor around *ANR* has been overtly in service of the "sport" (tournament play) to supplement or replace efforts made by the legal stakeholders of the game.

The pathway illustrated here, then, seems to be one where monetary rewards were used for multiple purposes by the

original ANRPC efforts: To demarcate the competitive “sport” from the casual game of *ANR*, while also as a tool to build the game’s community. As Pagliaroni stated, the creation of the ANRPC was to promote the ancillary media that surround actual play, such as interviews, streaming, “bios” and more. !ruined illustrates that players were cognizant of these tensions and openly incorporated the irony of creating “sporting metagames.” Beyond “metagames,” the ANRPC’s monetary rewards seem intended to build a *sporting community* that was different from the one supported by Fantasy Flight, which could foster media and subcultural celebrity of a sort around the game.

To some extent, !ruined illustrates that it succeeded (at least at the level of celebrity, memes, and productive in-jokes), and that these forms of engagement had utility in maintaining the game’s community through the latter years of Fantasy Flight’s official game. The model of the ANRPC circuits themselves were ultimately not sustainable due to a number of factors, but the impact seems clear: By building a sport around the game, a community of players and audiences evolved into one which perpetuated the game *regardless* of what Fantasy Flight contributed further, and which was interested in moving forward beyond the game’s “death.” NISEI, like the ANRPC, continued to center its activities around the structure of the tournament as a starting point, but with the goal of changing the accessibility and, perhaps, the future player base of the game. That is, in contrast to the ANRPC case where monetary rewards were used to build a sporting community, NISEI appears interested in leveraging the existing sporting community toward the *potential continued evolution of the game itself*. With the design of future cards and revisions of the game’s rules within the (intellectual property violating) purview of the players, NISEI’s seems to wish to change the “sporting metagame” beyond just organized play, and toward the design evolution and card design

tasks that Fantasy Flight would otherwise be responsible for, were the game to have continued under their guidance.

In both cases, “sporting metagames” serve interesting mediating roles between the “game” and the “community.” With a population of players who have a great deal of gaming expertise and gaming literacy, perhaps this is unsurprising. But, it does point us toward a provocative, potentially generalizable conclusion: Organized sports can serve as vehicles for some games to develop oppositional practices to the goals and actions of the official stakeholders of a game. Both the ANRPC and NISEI have utilized the organization and incentives of sports to build alternate communities to those fostered by Fantasy Flight, and seem to have the potential to drive the future design of *Android: Netrunner* more broadly. The ANR case illustrates that sports are not simply structures within which people play games, but are *agentive*; the act of organizing has social, economic, and political implications that can mobilize, challenge, and motivate communities of play. In this way, then, perhaps these ANR cases can give us hope that Boluk & LeMieux’s earlier suggestion of the critical impact of metagames might be at play, even in these niche card game communities.

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PLAYING THE CROSSFIT OPEN 2018

USVA FRIMAN & RIIKKA TURTIAINEN

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 prize) 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 themselves (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).

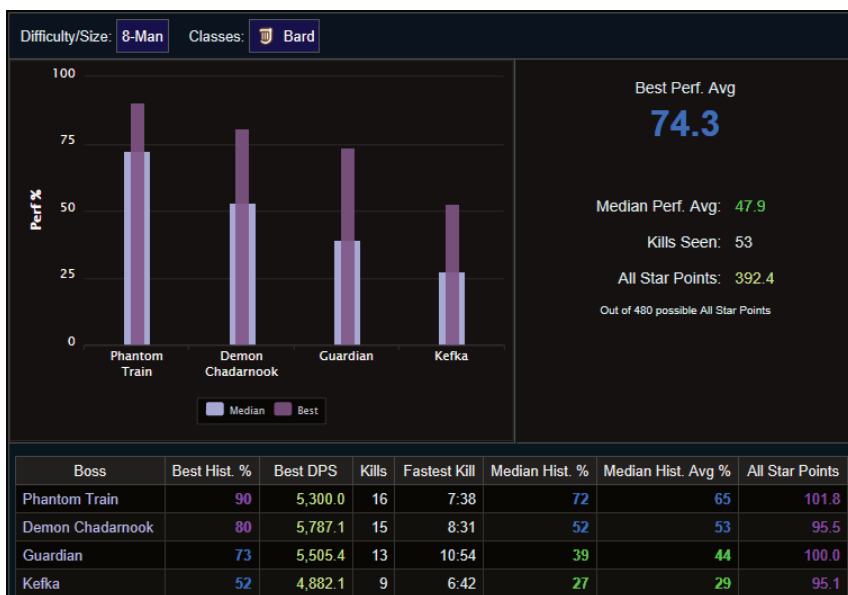


Image 1. An example of a Final Fantasy XIV player’s rankings as presented on FF Logs.

Worldwide Men

Europe

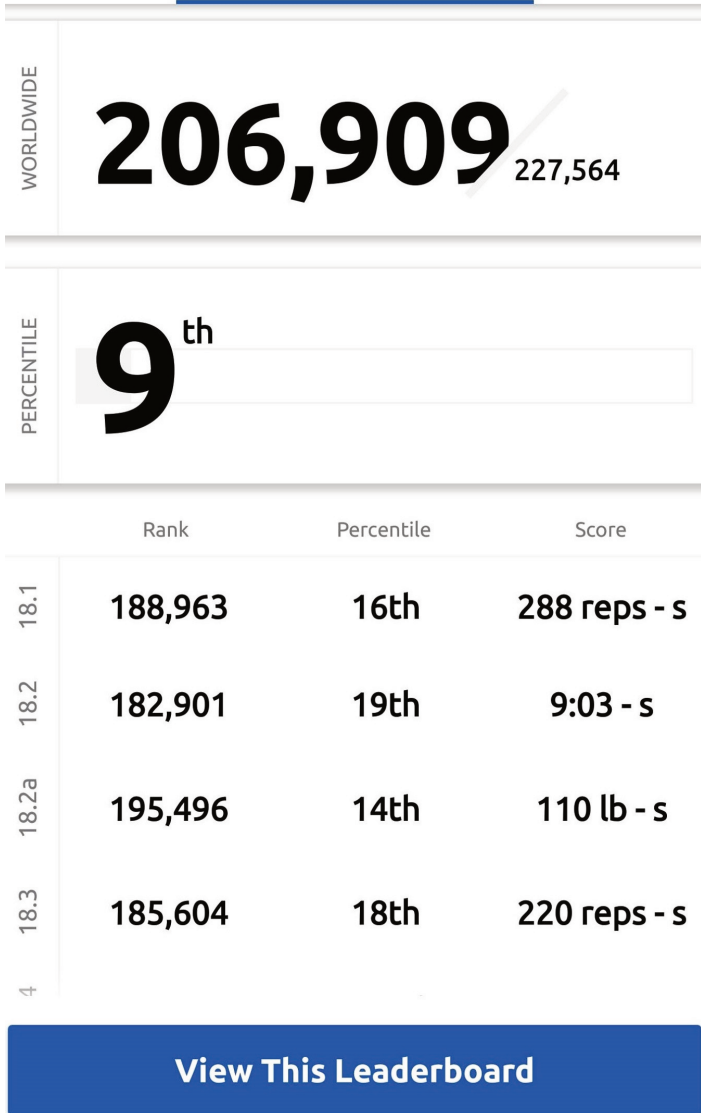


Image 2. An example of a CrossFit Open 2018 participant's rankings as presented on the CrossFit Games mobile application.

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 Sigmundsdóttir, 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).



The CrossFit Games

20 February · Facebook Creator ·



"18.1" —Dave Castro



Like

Comment

Share

1.7K

Most relevant

260 shares

241 comments

Write a comment...



Almost too easy this time.

Statue of father of ascension, Balboa Park, San Diego.

Ascension: Ascending Reps

Balboa Park -> Rocky -> Boxing -> Box Jump (over)

Two fingers: couplet, re do

Plus the new standards and the fact that Briggs is facing off with Holte again.

18.1 iiiiiiis.... 17.1

Like · Reply · 13w · Edited

304

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.



The CrossFit Games is with
4 March · Facebook Creator · 🌐

and 3 others. ⋮

What grip did you go with? 🇳🇱 CrossFit Batteraof 🇳🇱

18.2 ❤️🔥 #intheopen #18point2



👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

👍❤️😂 2.1K

Most relevant ▾

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).



The CrossFit Games

21 February · 🌐



The Open starts tomorrow.



Update your Profile picture with this frame from [The CrossFit Games](#).

Try It



Like



Comment



Share



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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BEATING A FAKE NORMALITY

The phenomenon of e-athletes with special needs on Twitch.tv

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INTRODUCTION

Public competitions that are based on digital games—what we know as eSports—are thriving all around the world. According to NewZoo (see <https://newzoo.com/resources/> for updated data), the sector has generated almost \$700 million in revenues involving 194 million people in 2017. This phenomenon is not only about people playing sports; it also impacts digital entertainment as people watch eSporting events. This typically happens through Twitch.tv, a popular live-streaming portal with social media features counting over 10 million daily viewers (Twitch.tv, 2018). The most popular streamers show their own playing to thousand viewers, *reshaping practices and expectations related to eSports and the sporting mindset*.

Such a claim is particularly relevant for streamers with special needs. Indeed, this media platform has been working as a crossroad where peculiar platform-native practices (e.g., streaming and interacting in real time with a larger audience, absence of post-editing/production, etc.) are affecting the definitions of disability and diversity, from promoting equality and related discussions to normalizing alternative conditions by just showing them. Moreover, several para e-athletes are

streaming their own matches with the support of organizations like The AbleGamers and Twitch.tv itself.

This article addresses a unique participant in the digital sporting mindset—the rise of the eSports player with special needs (e.g., para e-athletes). It addresses the larger question of who might get excluded in some sporting formats and how are they now being included in eSports. The hypothesis driving this study is that eSports and their competitive and entertainment dimension on Twitch.tv can trigger affinity spaces able to overturn stigmas against special needs, which are strongly affected by social representations and metaphors (Edberg, 2012). The authors directed an exploratory ethnography and then an empirical investigation of six twitchers (i.e., streamers on Twitch.tv) with special needs. The latter analysis targeted 24 hours of streaming collecting in-game action, streamers' behavior, and chat discussions with a discourse analysis technique (Gee, 2012). The key concepts leading the inquiry spanned performing style, affinity space, and debating patterns and values. The article is structured as follows: the first section addresses the relationship between sports, digital games, and special needs; the research design is then introduced; the final two sections present the results and discussion of the outcomes. Findings provide an overview of this phenomenon with best practices and reference patterns of interaction and performance. Implications are noteworthy for both practitioners and scholars, from harnessing this practice for more inclusive processes to directing further studies about the sporting mindset of non-traditional participants.

SPECIAL NEEDS, (E)SPORTS, AND MEDIA AUDIENCES

Sports and special needs

Data provides evidence that individuals with special needs (e.g., physical, cognitive and even socio-cultural conditions than

require specific interventions in everyday life routines, learning activities, general accessibility, etc.) tend to benefit from sports. For instance, such participation improves social inclusion and psycho-physical status (Cottingham et al., 2014; Di Palma & Tafuri, 2016). Sports have been found to increase autonomy and self-confidence in students with disabilities (Beyer, Flores & Vargas-Tonsing, 2009), improving the quality of their life (Groff, Lundberg & Zabriskie, 2009) and supporting the development of an athletic identity (Peers, 2012) which can have a significant impact on their ability to deal with real life issues (Smith, Bundon & Best, 2016). The increasing number of disciplines involved and the establishment of Paralympic Games have strongly supported such an intention, which is still growing (Shapiro et al., 2012) and consolidating; indeed, one of the main current challenges is to engage the public at large (Legg & Steadward, 2011).

In the last few decades, academia has dealt with the term *disability* from a multitude of perspectives. However, three main approaches have emerged and proliferated across disciplines and specializations. The first and oldest is the medical/clinical one, in which disability is addressed through a medical lens (Carlson, 2001). Special needs become a disease to cure, fix and keep under control. The second is the social one, which is led by the so-called *social model* (Bickenbach et al., 1999). According to its supporters, disabilities have a social dimension that must be deepened and eventually changed. If people with disabilities struggle with shared norms and conditions, it is up to institutions to intervene for achieving more inclusive standards. From this attention, Disability Studies originated and spread as a broad disciplinary field (from Law to Humanities and Media Studies) (Lennard, 2006). Finally, a third angle emerged with a more cultural focus (e.g., Raphael, 2008; Shakespeare, 1994). Instead of addressing the organizational issues concerning disability, the spotlight switches to the shared representations and boundaries through which normality and abnormality are

defined. Therefore, cultural models and archetypes become central in understanding how disability and related biases are constructed as factors of segregation. Aside from medical impairments, disability is also a contextual tag that relies on relative and dynamic ideas of normality, well-being and acceptance.

Proposals such as *ableism* and the ones developed within Feminist Media Studies can be listed in this broad perspective, which is characterized by a deconstructive and critical attitude. Ableism is interpreted as a social discrimination toward people lacking specific abilities and, then, characterized by disabilities (Wolbring, 2008). Campbell (2009) suggests the concept of *ableist normativity*, whose rules enforce a counter-position between who is compatible with the accepted norms and who is not. Involving the whole society becomes a crucial step and the popularity of sports represents one key step to support this strategy. However, some special needs are not compatible with traditional sports and there are several disabled groups that cannot be included in this rising phenomenon. Digital entertainment can address this issue with eSports, which provide customized interactions, assistive features, and a remarkable visibility via streaming platforms. The resulting representation of special needs can foster the third lens mentioned above – the cultural one. Media become an essential front to inhabit in order to detect and potentially re-frame bias-related stereotypes (Mulvey, 1975; Silverman, 1988).

Video games and special needs

Digital entertainment implies multiple considerations involving human computer interaction, technological accessibility, and media engagement, which are fundamental fronts in dealing with disabilities and related requirements. The medium has already been exploited for helping individuals with special needs. For instance, video games were harnessed to increase youth mental

health (Huen et al., 2016), fight depression (Li et al., 2014), and engage individuals with impaired sight (e.g., the games *Blind Legend* by Dowino and *Three Monkeys* by Incus Games). Supportive and communicative efforts of foundations like The AbleGamers Charity and Special Effect are increasing all around the world, and Game Studies are starting to develop a specific attention to disabilities as core themes in shedding light on ludic experiences (e.g., Champlin, 2014; Ledder, 2015). Research studies have provided evidence that video games can facilitate learning, well-being, and reflection in individuals with special needs (e.g., Lim & Nardi, 2011, Tzanetakos et al., 2017). Nevertheless, eSports are a still overlooked topic in game research (for some exceptions, see Jenny et al., 2017; Keiper et al., 2017), especially when they may engage *special* populations. These competitions based on video games flourished with the rise of internet in the Nineties. Since then, tournaments and leagues have been thriving, from the Cyberathlete Professional League to the World Cyber Games (Consalvo, Mitgutsch & Stein, 2013; Taylor, 2012).

The increasing importance of Twitch.tv has affected this trend in a peculiar way, making it a public spectacle where millions of viewers can attend and watch their favorite e-athletes. Twitch.tv is the leading live-streaming platform with more than 10 million daily users and over 2 million active streamers (Twitch.tv, 2018). It was launched in 2011 as a section of another streaming portal (Justin.tv), and Amazon purchased it in 2014 for 970 million dollars. Its focus has mainly been on digital entertainment, but other content categories are emerging, from talk shows to creative videos. In essence, twitchers film themselves during the performance they want to show and users can watch, comment and even financially support them. Streamers can have their own channels and be followed by their fans, mimicking Twitter's mechanics. In addition, Twitch.tv has many social features including chat, preferences, and thematic sections.

This portal has recently been the subject of some studies that tried to shed light on its core trends and dynamics. Gandolfi (2016, 2017) found that streamers are the key motivation for someone to watch, and that related online debates are able to deal with serious topics and issues rather than being mere divertissement. Hu, Zhang and Wan (2017) observed that the viewer exchange with the streamer can entail parasocial interaction, actual and ideal self-congruity, and participation. Therefore, engagement, involvement, and socialization are particularly high among viewers (Gros et al., 2017; Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017). Finally, twitchers are becoming celebrities who are increasingly aware of their role (Bingham, 2017). The community of streamers with disabilities is growing as well and also due to the support of Twitch.tv itself, which has strongly promoted it partnering with the The AbleGamers Charity foundation in several events. Channels of disabled players' groups are emerging (e.g., Deaf Gamers TV), and several of them (e.g., theRealHandi, LoOP, BrolyLegs, mackenseize, NoHandsKen, Stacey Rebecca, Guldbrandsen, HalfCoordinated) have thousands of followers.

This pro-active front is characterized by a more accessible sport practice (and mindset) partially aligned to the tendency among social media celebrities to interact with fans (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Para e-athletes can show their skills but also interact with their followers and normalize what it is seen as diverse. The chat spaces of their shows can work as positive spaces, where video games are just premises for discussing disability, acceptance, and inclusion. The potential in terms of fairplay, positive sportsmanship and collaboration may be significant in fostering an special need-related sportiveness with an impact on society at large (Kavussanu & Spray, 2006; Weiss, Smith & Stuntz, 2008).

Research Design

Following the aforementioned premises, the correlated research questions leading this article are the following:

RQ1: What are the current trends in para-eSports channels in terms of behavior, performance style, and interactions?

RQ2: How do para-eSports channels on Twitch.tv act as “affinity spaces” (e.g., places where individuals share positive values especially referring to sports and a sporting mindset)?

These research questions originated and were refined during an exploratory investigation (Caliandro, 2018) of Twitch.tv live streaming staged in Winter/Spring 2018 by the authors, who are currently directing multiple studies about the platform (ranging from sportiveness to well-being factors and leadership to coping). This initial phase was inspired by the digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013) that considers media environments as: 1) sources of novel practices; and, 2) crossroads through which viewpoints and frames are reformulated beyond the difference between on and off line with a self-critical attitude (Smith 1999) that reflects researchers’ biases and preconceptions.

Discourse analyses of six para e-athletes’ Twitch.tv shows (henceforth T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6) (n=4 hours each, gathered from the saved videos on their profile) were conducted with the intention of collecting streamer’s behaviors, in-game activity, and chat comments (see Table 1 for the protocol adopted). Three *building tasks* (Gee, 2012) were followed: 1) significance – relevant actors, topics; 2) practice – what actions are under the spotlight; and, 3) connection – what relations are occurring between elements (e.g. streamer, game, viewers; Gee, 2012). The unit of analysis for textual data was the *stance* or the *clumps* of tone units that deal with a unitary topic or perspective, and which appear (from various linguistic details) to have been

planned together (e.g., a progressive and correlated exchange of messages on the Twitch.tv chat).

The analysis follows a two-step cycle (Saldana, 2016) with the support of NVivo Software Version 10. First, sentences were labelled in great detail; then, broader reference categories were adopted spanning the game itself, game expertise/ability, streamer's behavior, streamers' prompts, digital entertainment, streamer's opponent, streamer's special need, daily life, and game accessibility. In addition, data were re-framed with a narrative analysis (Bruner, 1991) toward understanding relations and values of such an interplay, which can go beyond the gaming activity itself.

Pursuing this line, two analytic fronts were addressed:

Interaction (user-user and twitcher-user) type – supporting (an aligned and legitimizing mood), debating (a constructive and proactive mood), and criticizing (a conflictual mood, which can also entail banning; inspired by the encoding/decoding model by Hall, 1973).

Interaction (user-user and twitcher-user) values – ludic (escapist and entertaining values), critical (critic and problematizing considerations), practical (pragmatic values, from ad hoc tips to technical commentary), and utopian (existential and ethical values); inspired by Floch (1995).

Twitchers' behavior was also labelled according to the three streaming styles suggested by Gandolfi (2016): the professional, who is mainly focused on the game itself with no or marginal interactions with his/her fans; the hedonist, who relies on his/her personal skills for entertaining followers; and the companion, who uses games as pretext for interacting with viewers.

Sensitizing concepts driving data interpretation were *stigma* and

affinity space. The former refers to a discriminatory metaphor that could be reversed. According to Goffman (1963), stigmas refer to constructed identities through which minorities (also disabled) are labeled and framed by the majority. The stigma entails a discriminatory status, which legitimates oppressions, biases, and inequality. Moreover, it is based on metaphors that associate the targeted person with negative traits and behaviors (e.g., the evil Jew, the promiscuous homosexual), and then motivate the negative attitude toward him/her (Douglas, 1966). The second “is a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, ethnicity, or gender” (Gee, 2004, 67). It is an environment where individuals learn from each other aside from standardized labels and affiliations; online settings are one possible venue for such a dynamic. As mentioned above, the hypothesis leading this article is that eSports on Twitch.tv can support a more inclusive perspective on special needs and related perceptions.

Performing style and audience were interpreted also through a sportiveness lens, reflecting on if and how ideal sport-related norms were followed and respected. Regarding twitchers, fair play worked as leading key concept; with this term, the reference goes to a playful attitude characterized by respect (e.g., of rules, teammates, opponents, etc.), interpersonal empathy, and proactive and positive behaviors toward others at large (e.g., community, society, etc.) (Păunescu, Gagea, Păunescu, & Pițigoi, 2013; Lumer, 1995). More specifically, steamers were observed in terms of: 1) respect of other players, from allies to enemies; 2) respect of game mechanics and presence of cheating/griefing activities; and, 3) positive behavior toward their audience. Viewers can be bearer of sportiveness as well. Sport participation may entail significant outcomes for spectators, spanning social cohesion, community feelings, and well-being (Zhou & Kaplanidou, 2018; Gibson, Kaplanidou, & Kang, 2012). For this

article, the presence of media toxicity (e.g., disruptive online behaviors) worked as a core parameter for understanding if these streamers' followers showed anti-sportive instances, such as: chat spamming, trolling, racial/minority harassment, and cyberbullying (including negative comments about the streaming) (Murnion Buchanan, Smales & Russell, 2018; Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015).

Data were collected and analyzed in the spring of 2018. The sample of streamers was picked according to popularity (over 1000 followers), eSport orientation (presence of games associated with eSports), and different special needs (trying to cover an heterogenous range of conditions) (see Table 2 for a snapshot; all but T5 are males). N:4 hours were observed studying at least 2 different clips for each twitcher. The videos were selected by relevance (number of viewers) and length of the shows (30 minutes or more). Names of users and performers were anonymized for privacy concerns. This study was approved and monitored by the authors' university I.R.B. committee.

Table 2. Overview of the twitchers analyzed.

Twitcher	Special need	N. followers	Main games
1	No limbs	140,600	iRacing/Counterstrike
2	Spinal Muscular Atrophy	1,365	Killer Instinct
3	Type 1 Diabetes/Deaf	2,190	Monster Hunter World/The Division/Rainbow Six Siege
4	No arms	9,136	Street Fighter V
5	Seizure disorder	38,334	Hearthstone
6	Partially blind/deaf	190,251	Fortnite/Counterstrike

Table 2: Overview of the twitchers analyzed.

RESULTS

The first exploratory phase started within a broader research initiative addressing game streaming. The lead author has been

involved with online gaming as both player and spectator since 2015, noticing a significant rise of diverse populations of streamers and yet a relevance disruptive and boyhood-related attitudes (Burrill, 2008). Twenty streaming shows of variable length (ranging from 20 minutes to one hour) of twitchers with special needs were observed live in early 2018, following both the performance and the chat activities. The first author kept a partially passive profile examining general trends pointed by the literature (Gandolfi, 2016), with sporadic comments about the matches observed. The preliminary expectation was to find special needs functioning as leading drivers during play and in chat debates, even with conflictual elements considering general trends in competitive gaming (Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015). Therefore, a *social model* lens with political implications was employed (e.g., Hall, 1973), anticipating these streaming shows to work as *battlegrounds* between widespread toxicity and a counter-empathy. On the contrary, this initial investigation pointed to a widespread fairness between viewers and streamers and to a marginal presence of disability-related discussions. In other words, the authors' presumption of staging a *proactive* investigation was quickly confuted by an already *alternative* phenomenon, echoing the cultural lens mentioned above. Para e-athletes did not need to be saved – they already did with their followers, also adopting an unusually interactive performing style able to overturn game streaming standards (Gandolfi, 2016).

Addressing the consequent analysis of the six twitchers, almost all of them show themselves (the only exception is T2) – and therefore their condition – during their streaming (using the combination of computer screen and web-camera). They all followed a thinking aloud method (Eccles & Arsal, 2017) where they commented on their performance (e.g., actions, emotions, plans) in real time via voice and/or chat comments (although T1 commented only before and after the match). For instance,

T2 comments “we just learn that in Instinct, when you cancel a shadow eclipse (...) so it is the best option. yes, you see (...) there is a pause. It is good to know” after having learnt a trick; T1 says “wow, that was rather disgusting (...) a terrible turn” nodding his head after losing a race; T5 anticipates that “I am pretty rusty, I am not going to play this game perfectly”. Their shows were competitions (T 1, 2, 3, 5, 6), training (T 2, 4, 5), or teaching (T4). The first refers to regular matches against other people; the second to learning instances (e.g., tutorials, trying new characters); the third is about teaching viewers how to play a game. Four videos analyzed were characterized by interactions between streamers and in-game mates (n=2) and streamers and real-life friends present with them (n=2); it can be argued that these exchanges strengthen streaming transparency and familiarity, promoting the performer as a “normal” player. The activity on screen was only focused on games for all the streamers aside from the initial minutes, which worked as a sort of “loading” screen.

Addressing the interaction, Table 3 shows results in terms of stances collected and unique users involved, type and value of the interaction, streamers’ style and participation, and highlights in the debating topics with the related number of instances. Although the performing styles were split between professional and companion (this difference can be noticed in the different prevalence of debating topics), the former instances showed a high level of interaction between users and streamer overturning the usual silence from this category of twitchers (Gandolfi, 2016). The performers tended to be part of the online conversations with secondary exceptions due to in-game urgencies (e.g., fighting an enemy just appeared).

Online conversations were supporting and debating, with no criticizing instances (neither spam nor trolling/toxic users). The leading values were ludic (e.g., jokes about playing and real life events discussions) and pragmatic (suggestions and reflections

on in-game best practices and heuristics). Utopian discussions emerged with an emphasis on streamers' virtuous examples and game accessibility (see Table 4 for some examples). No critical discussions emerged. All the twitchers analyzed replied to questions about their in-game activity, daily routines, and conditions in a proactive and accommodating way, and the majority made fun of themselves (the only exception was T2); moreover, they were also curious about their own viewers. For instance:

User1: [hello emoji]

T1: hey [user1], what's up man?

User1: Not too much and you? Waiting on the sister and the niece to come over to take them to a couple museums and the aquarium

T1: don't you live in (...) I mean, on the West coast?

User 1: Chicago

T1: I thought you lived in the West Coast (...) Chicago, ah. I am a Redskin super fan

User2: who makes your emotes? I paid this chick to make some for me but I think she just stole my money LOL

User1: I need someone reliable

T2: I sent you the recommendation

User2: yes you did, wasn't sure if thats who did it

User2: thanks man, I will hit her up

User1: how is your arm? Good?

T5: it is good dude, it is actually funny [she explained she helped her friend and that she has the carpal tunnel]

User1: carpal tunnel? that [xx]cks.

Finally, it is interesting that the topic of special needs was present but marginal, fostering the *normality* of these videos (see the presence of daily life instances in Table 3). When present, it was because of appreciation and practical reasons. For instance: "You

may see me stop playing occasionally to chat w/ the viewers in the chat so I won't leave my deaf/hard of hearing friends out of the loop ? #NoVoiceZone" by T3. In addition, it is a proof of the closeness of these streamers' fan-bases, which see them as persons rather than stressing their special conditions. There was often a strong group of followers that kept commenting, sometimes even replying to users' questions for the streamer (e.g., about his/her gaming habits or personal information), underlying a familiarity with him/her.

Addressing sportiveness, all the streamers showed a significant fair play and respect toward teammates, opponents, and game rules, it does not matter the specific genre or competition played. In case of defeat, they sometimes express frustration targeting themselves – e.g., “damn it, I should have [done a specific action]” – and never against others, which were often complimented – e.g., “he did right”; “good job, I never expected that”. In collaborative oriented matches (e.g., Monster Hunter: Worlds, Counterstrike: GO), communication and collaboration with teammates were positive and coral, even when negative events (e.g., losing) occurred. As observed above, such an approach was reiterated with the viewers, who did not show any instance of toxicity; even discourse types were either supportive or debating-oriented with no conflictual elements

Table 3. Results.

Twitcher	N. stances(n. unique users)	Type (n.stances)	Value(n.stances)	Style (stances attended by the streamer)	Main highlights (n. stances)
1	42(27)	Supportive(42)	Ludic(38) Pragmatic(3) Utopian(1)	Professional(38)	daily life(21) video games(12) accessibility(2)
2	48(51)	Supportive(44) Debating(4)	Ludic(32) Pragmatic(12) Critical(4)	Professional(44)	gaming expertise(34) daily life(7)
3	72(62)	Supportive(72)	Ludic(56) Pragmatic(16)	Companion(71)	video games(41) daily life(12) special need(5)
4	70(90)	Supportive(54) Debating(16)	Ludic(46) Pragmatic(18) Critical(6)	Professional (64)	gaming expertise(41) daily life(21)
5	84(115)	Supportive(78) Debating(6)	Ludic(74) Pragmatic(10)	Companion 84)	daily life(63) game expertise(12)
6	93(101)	Supportive(82) Debating(11)	Ludic(61) Pragmatic(24) Utopian(8)	Professional(89)	Game expertise(67) Appreciation(23)

Table 3: Results.

Table 4. Exchanges (examples).

Value	Example
Pragmatic	T1: I forgot what the default User2: I think default ARB is 3 on both? seeing as it's the middle ground User2: I always forget to change during a stint"
Pragmatic	T2: I am in game for 20 minutes and I have just learnt a lot of stuff User1: all good User2: I just learned how to lab more efficiently by watching you
Ludic	User1: what do vegan zombies eat? User2: Cabbages?" User3: if you meat a vegan zombie they will tell you what they eat in the 1st 5 minutes. they also probably crossfit T5: [laughs repeating the previous message] User1: it wasn't a joke, it was a legit question" User4: wouldn't vegan zombies be super successful? plants are readily available and the zombies' existence doesn't threaten them with extinction
Utopian	User1: HOLY [censored] So much respect dude T1: what's up [user1]? User1: what are you using to steer? T1: a mouse. Just one second, I will show you (...) this is the dpi button that normally changes your sensibility on the fly User1: I'm amazed how do you take your headphones off User1: I can't even do I clean lap & I use a wheel. Look at your damn
Pragmatic	T4: I am doing it for helping [user1]. User2:SFV seems really aggro compared to SF4 User3:why you doing survival again? User4: he's showing someone how it's done User1: [user3] he's showing scrubs like on how to beat it" User1: [user4] like me User5: Well it will be easier than the Starcraft I'm going to make you play User1: bruh ur cpu enemies looks easier than what i get even tho its the same xD User4: a good player makes it look easy User4: he's actually doing a lot of stuff on reaction User4: it looks like he just hitting buttons from our end User5: See that's what he wants you to think
Utopian	User1: [T6] legend User2: [T6] i think your such an amazing guy and your really an inspiration T6: thank you [user2], it means a lot (...) I got a lot of support User2: your really such a amazing person
Pragmatic	User1: you guys playing a private duo or you're open for subscribers User2: is he getting better with his problems? i can see he is a full time streamer now :) T6: So many people are asking me to do it right now lol User1: lol T6: don't worry [user1], I'll get you soon. User1: oh no no dont worry 'bout me User1: i mean, i do wanna play with you but if you wanna play with your close friends, then feel free User1: i'll play Fortnite with you whenever you want me to.

Table 4: Exchanges (examples).

DISCUSSION

eSports and Twitch.tv represents a novel front for promoting inclusion and self-confidence, helping us reconsider inclusion and exclusion in sports. It can be argued that the group of streamers analyzed provided an example of how game streaming can enrich individuals with special needs and educate larger audiences. Indeed, the prejudice against disabled people, what Perlin has defined *sanism* (2000), is spread in common perception (Hugenberg & Sacco, 2008) and even among new generations

(Hamdy et al., 2011). Self-perception (Corrigan et al., 2003) and families (Green, 2003) are affected as well by the stigma, which often depends on a lack of adequate knowledge; stigmas inform social identities, and then social expectations, criteria and demands to follow and envision (Goffman, 1963). Twitchers with special needs seem to overturn such a situation. They are characterized by an interactive and open-minded approach, dealing with their followers even when they are competing. Moreover, they are available to answer questions about their own situations, which are by the way marginal. Concerning RQ1—and despite the fact that their style may vary—patterns of interaction point to an ongoing listening to viewers by these twitchers, replying to almost each comment and staging transparent shows, where they stream themselves learning, failing, improving. They avoid the typical silence of professional streamers (Gandolfi, 2016), embracing a synergy between expertise and closeness to their audience. They are not self-centered but interactive and social (no hedonistic attitudes emerged) with high chat participation. This highlight is even more interesting considering that the video games streamed were varied, from reaction-based competitions (e.g., fighting games) to more strategic challenges (e.g., carding games). The outcomes of these communication frequency and style by the streamer are a proactive and supporting community, which appreciates and motivates the streamer, and the absence of toxic behaviors and comments. Such an environment sees competitive gaming and video games at large as an equalizing/triggering practice, which is accessible, customizable, and extremely popular, and streaming as an amplifier. In addition, Twitch.tv provides streamers ways to sustain themselves and charity initiatives – an opportunity that the whole sample analyzed is harnessing (especially T3 and T5). Finally, it can be argued that the *normality* (e.g., secondary references to disability, relevant presence of daily life discussions, etc.) characterizing these clips

is an effective instrument against stigmas (Goffman, 1963) because it makes them irrelevant.

Addressing RQ2, Twitch.tv can support affinity spaces, especially if we consider that behind this *trivial discussions* (e.g., jokes, everyday life) there are several examples of peer mentoring (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2014) between users and between streamers and users, where anyone learns from each other (e.g., picking the right card, finding the best setting, offering to play together). Moreover, there was an ongoing fairplay among viewers and performers. Regardless of the result or differences, streamers' opponents and other users are always treated fairly, which is a crucial behavior in sport and physical education in higher education (Keiper et al., 2017) and at large (Kavussanu & Spray, 2006). Such an attitude is essential in feeding a positive *sportspersonship*, which is linked to what we expect from others in general and our empathic capacity toward human beings (Weiss, Smith & Stuntz, 2008). Furthermore, it weakens the increasing toxicity in online environments, where the so-called *online disinhibition effect* is fostering discrimination and prejudice (Phillips, 2015; Suler, 2004). Cyberbullying, trolling practices and hate acts, which are even more frequent when disabled people are involved were not present in the shows analyzed. These hints are aligned with the potential of sports for promoting diversity and mutual understanding against biases and differences (Tonts, 2005; Schulenkorf, Thomson & Schlenker, 2011). This specific outcome has been advanced also involving competitive gaming and esports (Heere, 2018), and this study aims to support such a claim. Findings point to a proactive culture of sports, where inequalities are marginal and counter-balanced by equity and reciprocity good sportsmanship among athletes (Coakley, 1998).

Finally, all the twitchers analyzed do not hide their special needs but rather they describe them in their front page and/or during their streaming.

This work is promising in its ability to support inclusion and awareness toward individuals with different abilities in the game sector and beyond. It has provided evidence of the ability to examine the use of eSports and streaming by those who are often excluded in sports. Future research should address three next steps. First, future data collection should move beyond a snapshot of the whole phenomenon, which is heterogeneous and requires additional insight on different special needs, performers, and games. Second, continued research should focus on deeper and more extended investigations (e.g., surveys, interviews with streamers) including working with streamers beyond eSports (e.g., several streamers with disabilities do not stream competitive gaming). Finally, eSports are a growing phenomenon that is experienced in other venues than Twitch.tv (e.g., YouTube Gaming, mainstream social media, official competitions), which require proper attention to be explored.

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FANTASY FOOTBALL AS SPORT AND GAME

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In an issue that aims to explore questions and the relationship between sports and games, I propose that looking at fantasy sports is an important angle from which to explore this relationship. The term fantasy sports can be a broad term if looked at as incorporating elements of fantasy into sport. For example, many of the most popular sporting games, like *Madden* (Visual Concepts Entertainment, Inc., 1993), already form a relationship between sports and game by using recent player data and incorporating that information into a game. One could argue that such a game already constitutes a fantasy sport. Nonetheless, the agency required by players varies considerably in many video games, all the way from intensely participating in virtual sporting competitions like *Madden*, where players can take a weak team and with enough skill dominate competitions, to other videogames where players need to study statistics and make choices for who plays in a match in a text simulation like *Championship Manager* (Domark Software Ltd., 1992). Both games are using data from the sport to then inform gameplay, which is one type of classification of fantasy sports as simulations (Lomax, 2009). This article will focus primarily on another categorization from Lomax's taxonomy for fantasy sports, which he calls "Internet-based leagues" (2009, p. 386).

Internet-based leagues, Lomax states, are run by sports sites or internet companies and provide free content and services for leagues (Lomax, 2009). Nonetheless rather than use the term “internet-based leagues”, I will use the term **fantasy sports**. This article aims to provide an examination of one fantasy sport and hopes to demonstrate how social norms and rules within that fantasy sport have allowed its players to shift freely back and forth between thinking of fantasy sports as a game versus a sport, creating an interweave between the game and the sport it is based on.

Fantasy sports typically involve game players predicting which athletes will perform the best in real games in the future. They have been played across at least 19 different professional sports that range from fishing to skiing to sumo wrestling (Lomax, 2009). Each sport has different rules, but many of the most popular ones involve choosing professional athletes from a particular sport to form a new imaginary team. That imaginary team then uses data from real-life competitions to devise a score that is used to compete against another imaginary team. The first fantasy-style game that used this mechanic was devised by Wilfred Winkenbach in the 1950s, where his version of fantasy golf began when fans would each week, draft a team of professional golfers for a tournament and the fan who at the end of the weekly tournament had the lowest number of total strokes for their team for that tournament would win (Baerg, 2009; Esser, 1994; Fantasy Sports Trade Association, n.d.). It has since been adopted across many different sports, including all five major professional leagues (NFL, MLB, NBA, NHL & MLS) and NASCAR in the United States, and has grown from an estimated user base of 500,000 in 1988 to almost 60 million people in the US & Canada (FSTA, n.d.).

In this article, we will be taking a closer look at fantasy football, the most popular fantasy sport played in the US based on number of unique players (Gillies, 2016; Steinberg, 2014; Subramanian,

2013). In addition, I will focus on a single style of fantasy football within one application, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football*, which has the largest market share for fantasy football players (Evangelista, 2015) and has been where I have been playing since 2013. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football*, in tandem with network coverage of the National Football League and auxiliary media sports sites, dance the line between game and sport precisely. Yahoo's app itself does not follow the typical characteristics of what someone would think of when they first think of a video game, as videogames are often filled with graphics or real-time interactions (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). However, fantasy football is a game that is played by the tens of millions of people, matching the player counts of some of the most renowned AAA games. With a game that is so heavily focused on repeated competition with a small social group and one whose game's rules and norms vary from one small community to the next, examining further the sporting mindset within this context warrants discussion.

HEAD-TO-HEAD FANTASY FOOTBALL

While fantasy football has also grown to discuss a variety of different formats, including daily formats and the like, this article will focus further around what is termed a *head-to-head format* for a league. A league is typically anywhere from four to sixteen football fans who come together as a group to compete against one another. Since 2015, I have been a participant in two leagues, one which I'll call the *DJs* and other the *Midnight Owls*. The members of each league act as fantasy football team owners that leverage the present games played in the NFL by drafting current NFL athletes to their imaginary teams for that season. In this article, any reference to the term "team owner" will be in reference to the fantasy football team owners, the people playing fantasy football, while "athlete" will refer to the professional athletes who play for an NFL team. Once an athlete is drafted, they cannot appear on another fantasy team in that particular league. Because each of the team owners take turns picking

athletes from across the NFL, it's often that team owners end up having a hodgepodge of athletes on their rosters from a variety of NFL teams instead of just athletes from their favorite NFL team.

Each week, team owners put their fantasy teams to the test by facing off with another team owner from their respective league. Team owners must pick athletes to start for their fantasy team. Athletes that were started then earn points for their imaginary team based on their statistics from their real football match that week. Points are then scored by the individual's athletes according to rules set forth by the league which determines whether they won, lost, or tied that week. Team owners accumulate a win record based on these matches that translates into standings for the league. These standings are then used to determine who from the league goes to a playoff at the end of the season to decide the season's champion. While champions earn bragging rights, many also often win money or a trophy. In the two leagues that I've played in, the Midnight Owls requires every member to pay \$50, with the majority of the money going to the champion, while in the DJs league no money is transferred but the champion gets a trophy. In some leagues, the person who has the worst record also gets some form of punishment or humiliation. For example, in the DJs league, the loser holds on to a satirical trophy of a toilet. Each league also has a commissioner, who is responsible for running the administrative aspects of the league, enforcing the rules and taking on any other responsibilities needed to keep the league functioning.

Fantasy football's head-to-head system is unique in that it places a heavy emphasis on the small number of people that make up each league. While fantasy football is a game with a set of rules and a system that all team owners agree to, it is also closely tied to the sport of football. Members of a fantasy football league often share some social connection and generally develop a stronger camaraderie after participating in this game of weekly competitions (Stark, 2017). For example, the DJs league consists

of a social circle of ten people that I've known for more than 10 years. While this particular social group is geographically distributed, everyone in the DJs group knows every other member of the group, and there is a level of camaraderie that I have with this group that is rare and I wish to continue, similar to that of a DJ crew. The DJs league was started when one member suggested to all of us that way play fantasy football as a way to keep in touch more and share an experience year after year while we continue down our paths in life. I've been playing in that league since 2013, and feel like myself when playing with them. The Midnight Owls group on the other hand is a group of people that I have a stronger desire to impress, the overwhelming majority of which live in the same area that I do. My goal in that league is to earn some credibility and respect with members of that league, to earn some recognition that I am a good fantasy football player. The reason I was invited to play in the Midnight Owls group came up from a conversation I had with one of the members of the Midnight Owls after I began talking with them about my first seasons playing in the DJs league.

FANTASY FOOTBALL'S VARIED EXPERIENCE

The competition and winning in fantasy football is directly linked to the weekly occurrences and surprises that happen in real football matches. This means that your ability to win or lose in a particular week is directly a result of how your selected athletes score against your opponent's athletes. The points your team accrues in a week only matters in reference to your opponent's point total. For example, in week 6 of the DJs league this year, I was very happy that I had earned a score of 142.8, which was the highest score I tallied that season, and based on our league scoring system turned out to be the fourth highest score out of 170 scores that all teams posted throughout the entire 2018 season. Nonetheless, my opponent that week posted a score of 146.26 for the league, which ended up being the highest score that season. This meant that I ended up getting

a loss for the week and my opponent won. Meanwhile in that same week, in another matchup, another league member ended up getting a win with a point total that was almost half of my losing score (73.2), which was the second lowest score that week, and they won simply because they posted a better score than another member, who posted the worst score that week (69.8).

This particular matchup was not only memorable because of the point totals but because of what happened after the results posted. Points are immediately calculated and displayed in real time. With games starting on Thursday and ending on Monday, early on I led by a sizable margin of points, and felt fairly confident that I was going to win. On Monday night, fresh from the final results showing that I had actually lost, my opponent posted on my league's group chat a picture of animated GIF image from *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* (Nintendo R&D, 1987). That image showed the hero of that game, Little Mac, punching every enemy fighter that he must face in order to win the game. After posting the GIF, my opponent then said: "Came from behind this week!" and followed with: "I handled Osvaldo like little Mac handled Soda Popinski". For those who are unaware, Soda Popinski is one of the enemy fighters in *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!*. I did not respond until the next day, but another member of our league said "Don't punch Osvaldo. He's fragile". One could argue that there may be a slight tinge of competitive behavior or jostling from the competition, some of which is very overt like this example demonstrates. Nonetheless, there is also an air of covert competitive behavior that may result from some team owners. While my response in chat was just to say that the loss hurt and that I was going to go into hiding, I remember thinking that my priorities shifted. I wanted to win this season more so than before, and so my mindset was more that I needed to get even as my opponent assumed my place at the top. The game was one battle, but I wanted to win the war and become the league champion. The loss motivated me to say I want to win more,

but from an actionable standpoint, there wasn't much extra I did, other than check my phone more often. Now instead of spending 5 minutes a week in that league, I spent 15 minutes, which is not a whole priority shift compared to other sports, but I certainly would pay a lot of attention to my record and my opponent's record, giving myself a pat on the back when I would win a week, but then also saying "Dang-it!" (or something close to that) when I would realize I lost a week. At the end of this 2018 regular season, my opponent ended up as the first seed heading into the playoffs, while I finished in second.

This example highlights the social aspect of what can end up happening in leagues. This version of fantasy football puts you in head-to-head competition, which opens the game up to members actively trash talking the other members of the league, with the goal to intimidate or make fun of others. Whether such trash-talking occurs is heavily dependent on the league one participates in (Seppanen, 2017) but is also seen as a driver for some for fantasy football itself (Stark, 2017). While the overall feeling that I get when playing in the DJs league is more of a casual vibe, I still want to win and there is a bit of trash talking, though all of it is fairly playful. While I don't like or participate in overt trash talking, I feel like I would end up in more playful discussions about the results in the DJs league versus the Midnight Owls. The Midnight Owls is a league where I feel pressure to perform well, but to do so quietly, as I am seeking respect. I was invited to join the league after it had formed and while I know of everyone in the league, I have not had personal conversations with all of those folks, and so in my mind, there is added pressure to demonstrate that I belong in that league, as I want to be accepted by the league's members and recognized as a good fantasy football player. The difference in mindset between the two leagues demonstrates a shift in the norms and mindset that one has in playing what many consider to be the same game. This paper details how shifts in the game itself and the

experiences that people have in playing a competition in small social circles has contributed to having such varied experiences. This experience along with the affordances of the technology, have created an evolving meta-game that in turn could change the football sport itself.

To understand more of this argument, I will first start with providing a historical context of the game of fantasy football from a gaming perspective, and then move to highlighting some of the changes that were made since the original season of fantasy football was completed, and how once technology became part of fantasy football, it aided leagues in a way while still providing them with what they needed to be adopted and for the sport to continue to grow. Once it reached widespread adoption, fantasy football now has an effect on how the sport is consumed. The formal relationship between the sport of football and fantasy football is still in its infancy and could prove to be a symbiotic relationship, one where the sport created a game which is setting itself up to impact the sport.

EARLY FANTASY FOOTBALL

Fantasy football first started in 1968 by Winkenbach, who was part owner of the Oakland Raiders Football organization and two writers from the Oakland Tribune (Esser, 1994). The initial rules followed most of the aforementioned rules of having a draft and a weekly matchup where fictional teams generated points. The way that athletes would score points was on this scheme, “50 points for a rushing TD, 25 points for a thrown or caught TD, 25 points for a field goal, 10 points for an extra point, and 200 points for a kick or interception returned for a TD” (Esser, 1994, para. 18).

The original eight team fantasy league, called the GOPPPL, was formed and consisted of professional journalists, administrators of professional football teams or people who bought or sold many Oakland Raiders tickets (Burton, Hall, & Paul, 2013; Ross,

2016). This meant that the original fantasy teams tended to take the game very seriously from the start (Esser, 1994). The league had to go through their administrative football networks and news outlets to gather data each week on what happened. Then, those statistics would then be calculated each week by hand and tallied by a commissioner, who would then report and send out information to each fantasy league member on a weekly basis (Esser, 1994).

With so much work needed to be able to play, the first group of people that participated in fantasy football had to invest a large amount of time into the game in order to do well. Information was difficult to obtain in an era of no internet and devoid of stories specifically about athletes. Andrew Mousalimas, one of the original team owners of the game discussed in an interview how he would read out-of-town newspapers and sometimes even call those newspapers' offices to get information about who from their local team was hurt and unable to play that week (Ain, 2012; Sugerman, 2012; Wilner, 2015). This means that some fantasy team owners devoted time to gain a competitive edge, similar to how athletes may devote time to practice and improve. Aside from the team owners, commissioners and league statisticians needed to devote additional time. Leagues needed to keep track of fantasy team rosters, which athletes each team owner started that week, and information on individual athlete accomplishments for each game. Once all the data was gathered, then the league statistician and commissioner had to tally and double check each athlete's accomplishments, calculate all scores, write up the weekly report, and to top it all off settle disputes between the different members about disagreements that they had (Esser, 1994).

CHANGES TO RULES IN FANTASY FOOTBALL

In fantasy football, the rules that a league adopts generates the system that the team owners play by. Over the years, leagues have

tweaked the rules and most often the scoring that has been used for fantasy football. Some of the first tweaks were mentioned by Mousalimas in an interview with ESPN:

“The only trouble with Wink[elbach] was that he didn’t want to make any changes to the rules. He was stubborn as hell...In the GOPPPL, a return touchdown was 250 points and a receiving touchdown was 25 points. So I formed a rules committee to update the game. We were the first ones to put in a yardage rule. You had guys [football players] like Pete Banaszak, who would carry the ball four or five times and score two to three touchdowns from the 1-yard line, while you had other guys like O.J. [Simpson], who was running wild, but he wasn’t scoring, so he wasn’t getting any points. We fixed that.” (Ain, 2012, para. 5)

This is a great example of how fantasy football grew out of a sport to become a dynamic game, one that started to branch out by having different rules for each league. In playing the game, I would argue that Mousalimas may have felt cheated, as he may have picked what he felt was the right athlete, but the scoring system he was playing under caused his pick to not be as valued as other picks, whom may be viewed as inferior football players. In this case, instead of retraining oneself to become better under the current rules, or learning the nuances of picking the athletes that would play best under this first scoring system, Mousalimas wanted to change the league’s rules. However, as the quote demonstrates, the original commissioner was against the change, so Mousalimas created his own league where he changed the rule and subsequently his own version of the game. While sports do have rule changes, having a governing body allows such rules to be voted on. Change can be slow in a professional sport. For example, there was almost 40 years of controversies surrounding instant replay (Vecsey, 1998) before the MLB decided to adopt the technology in 2008. However, because of how fantasy football was structured in the 1960s as a small group game that grew organically via bars and offices (Baerg, 2009; Esser, 1994), one can argue that each fantasy football league was ultimately

responsible for creating and subsequently adopting its own rules, which made change happen much more rapidly.

Change happened quickly because as people played fantasy football, and experienced success or defeat, different team owners could propose new rules, revise old rules, or start a new league with different rules. With more leagues and each having different rules, I think this has caused even more so an idea that the rules should be tinkered with. In both leagues that I have played in there has been at least one change to the rules in the last few years, and while I have not advocated it myself, I have begun to empathize with how someone might become a strong proponent to change rules around. Since the rules don't feel static and with the change only needing to be agreed to by a small group of people and not an entire sport, people could experience something they feel is unjust, advocate and then implement a change to the way fantasy football is played.

For example, after having played in the Midnight Owls league for four years now, I have started to feel that some of the rules in the Midnight Owls league are unfair. Once the week's games are finished on Monday, team owners are allowed to swap in new NFL athletes that do not belong to any team onto their own roster. If an undrafted athlete had a good week, or if someone got injured, multiple team owners may be interested in trying to add a specific athlete. To help decide who can add the athlete to their roster, there is around a 24-hour window where those athletes are not served on a first come first serve basis but rather by placing a waiver claim to add that NFL player. In the Midnight Owls league, priority for the waivers is based on how often you use the waivers to claim athletes. After the waiver period ends, team owners are allowed to swap in whomever they want until Sunday, which does not affect their priority. The Midnight Owls league is much more competitive than the DJs, as certain team owners in the Midnight Owls often login every week at 1:30am on Wednesday, which is when the waiver period ends to claim

athletes. These owners do this so that they can swap NFL players in without using their priority, resulting in a competitive edge based on the league's rules, as they can see who hasn't been taken and pick up the best of who is still available. I would argue that such a system does not reward fairly the spirit of having to pick people on a week by week basis given a set of information. Having a limited amount of time means that I have to rely on making waiver claims each week to add athletes that I would like, as I risk not being able to add multiple athletes, while others can wait until 1:30am and be the first to pick from who else is still available. This allows them to not use the priority, and then when an important player becomes available, retain their priority to add that player. This type of waiver system has been criticized as not being as fair as alternative systems, like one where you are given a pool of money and bid on athletes that you'd like to add to your roster (Ludwig, 2016).

Since I have wanted to win the respect of the Midnight Owls, I have not and will not advocate to change the waiver system, but I have daydreamed about how nice it would be if this league's rules allowed for team owners to be able to bid on any available athlete and be able to add less important people without impacting their ability to use the waiver system fairly. Nonetheless, the DJs has the same set of rules, and I'm not as bothered by the rules there, which I recognize as being hypocritical. I think the reason for me not being as sensitive is two-fold, one being that I don't think it affects my play and two being that I don't take the DJs league as competitively as the Midnight Owls. The majority of the DJs team owners don't spend as much time in the league, so this feeling doesn't come up as often, unless they are quietly wishing I didn't swap as many athletes. In contrast, I feel that with the Midnight Owls, it has constantly hurt my chances as people that I would like to add have been added by others at 1:30am. This type of viewpoint tends to mirror sport psychology researchers when they discuss fans who have high identification with their team,

internalizing success and externalizing failures (Wann & Dolan, 1994), but instead of externalizing failures by attributing losses to say a referee, I think fantasy football team owners externalize defeat by taking up issue with rules and/or scoring. With early leagues being completely paper-based, rules for fantasy football could be easily changed and open to interpretation. Having ambiguous and volatile rules aligns with modern day notions that people should write the actual rules down in detail to diffuse potential future disagreements (Wenrich, 2018). Typically, rules only needed to be introduced by the commissioner or approved by a small group of league members in order to be incorporated, making them easy to change.

The variety of waiver systems is just one of the many subcomponents that have changed and evolved over the years in each league before any discussion of standardization occurred. Fantasy football was not covered extensively by traditional media until the first fantasy football magazine was released in 1992 (Hruby, 2013). The first known book about fantasy football came out in 1984, *Fantasy Football Digest* (Charpentier, 1984). This book was self-published and aimed to provide a streamlined set of rules based on all of the variations that had been created in each league (Vox Creative, 2017) in addition to providing statistics and projected analysis for individual athletes. Before the mid 1990s, this information was not widely available or easily accessible. Without a standard way to play or set of rules that computers could enforce, leagues organically created their own systems to play the game, and they did, as Martinez-Esquibel writes:

“With so many participants, new ideas sprouted and the scoring started to change. What was originally a TD-scoring league only, the various leagues added yardage and eventually point per reception [PPR]. Keepers were introduced, dynasty leagues were created, a super flex was added (where a QB can be in the flex position), and cutthroat ideas like Pirate leagues were put in place

where the winning team was able to choose a player from his opponent's roster.”(2017, para. 5)

While we explained how the yardage component was introduced, each of the terms Martinez-Esquibel discusses, like PPR, dynasty leagues and flex positions are variations that have grown and survived in *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* as options that each league can select. For example, the flex position allows team owners each week to use one of their team spots to start a running back, wide receiver or tight end. The aforementioned sprouting of ideas by Martinez-Esquibel and Yahoo's support of them provides evidence to how central the small-group league is to fantasy football. If there was a sanctioning body that governed the rules, similar to how most sports operate, there wouldn't be this many variations in how to play. While the internet and the release of fantasy football apps like *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* have helped to shape what rules become popular, most apps offer a tremendous amount of flexibility for how the league is scored, which pays homage to how technologies like *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* have aimed to support the leagues instead of fine tuning the game and its rules. This style of play and flexibility is evident in how the game's scoring has changed throughout the years. In the 80s, books were still mentioning the yardage versus touchdown scoring systems, which they referred to as basic and performance point scoring, and had even included a distance scoring system, which gave more points for touchdowns completed from a further distance away (Charpentier, 1989). The point system also differed from Winkenbach's original scoring and demonstrates the evolution that occurred in fantasy football's first two decades.

Even in today's fantasy football, there is no single predominant scoring rubric. Three scoring rubrics have prevailed though: Standard, PPR, and Half-PPR. While the Midnight Owls recently changed to Half-PPR, the DJs play with the Standard scoring system. All three of these scoring systems have been around since the mid-1990s, and all of them use yardage, where 10 yards

gained equates to 1 point in the league. For *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* as well as others, the Standard scoring scheme gives touchdowns the equivalent of a 60 yard bonus (Savill, 2017). The PPR scoring format works similar to Standard scoring, but also gives one point (or the equivalent of a 10 yard bonus) for each reception that athletes catch in football, hence point per reception or PPR for short. This tends to benefit or place more emphasis on wide receivers and tight ends than running backs, who in the late 90s ended up with most of the yards (Savill, 2017) and are thus the most relevant in Standard scoring. With running backs having most of the yards, Standard scoring leagues often place most of their attention solely on running backs (Paulsen, 2014). While some viewed the PPR scoring as more likely to reward athletes with skill (Behrens, 2017), it was a way to change the importance of focusing so much on running backs in Standard scoring. Nonetheless, PPR scoring also tended to over-emphasize athletes who caught the ball but did not move down the field (Paulsen, 2014).

A compromise then between Standard and PPR scoring would emerge. Enter Half-PPR, which provides a 5 yard or half point bonus for each reception. All three systems seem to have their fair share of media coverage and have emerged for the most part as the three most dominant systems in fantasy football. While these are the three dominant scoring strategies, pushes have been made to introduce bonuses for athletes who achieve first downs as well (Behrens, 2017; Paulsen, 2014) or to look specifically at those who have a first down reception in order to not influence running back totals as much (Pasquino, 2017). For the 2018 season Yahoo has switched their default scoring format from Standard to Half-PPR (Yahoo! Sports, n.d.), demonstrating how the technology nudges and suggests the default experience and rules, but still provides the flexibility needed for all leagues to use the rules they'd like.

To help provide a clearer picture of the scoring schemes, let's

provide an in-depth example that follows some of the history around the changes made in the game by comparing one game between two NFL athletes. Let's start with Pete Benaszak, the aforementioned running back that Mousalimas said only scored touchdowns. I found one game from October 26th, 1975 where Benaszak played against San Diego. In that game, he had nine carries for 29 yards, and two touchdowns (Pro Football Reference, n.d.). In the original Winkenbach scoring scheme, that would constitute 100 points for him. In Standard scoring, this would mean that for that game, he would have had the equivalent of 149 yards, or 14.9 points. Contrast that same game to that for O.J. Simpson, who in 1975 won the rushing title and was named NFL player of the year in 1975. For October 26h, 1975, Simpson had 19 carries for 88 yards and 1 touchdown , along with 2 receptions for 16 yards , which would place him in the original scoring with 50 points. With Standard scoring it would be 16.4 points. With PPR, that score would bump up to 18.4 or 17.4 in Half-PPR (see Table 1).

October 26 th , 1975 Game stats	Benaszak - 9 carries for 29 yds (3.2 ypc), 2 TD's	Simpson – 19 carries for 88 yds (4.6 ypc), 1 TD, 2 rec for 16 yds
Orig/Winkenbach (1962)	100	50
Basic Scoring (1989)	12	6
Performance Point (1989)	2	9
Standard (Modern)	14.9	16.4
PPR (Modern)	14.9	18.4
Half-PPR (Modern)	14.9	17.4

Table 1. An example of the points scored based on the different rubrics for October 26th, 1975

I can empathize with Mousalimas in this situation, as according to the data and statistics, Simpson would be considered the better NFL player, yet there were situations where Benaszak would score more points or what would feel an almost equivalent amount. The 80s scoring systems provide evidence for the shift in philosophy between valuing yardage, known as performance point, and touchdowns, which was labelled basic scoring. If we

look at modern day scoring systems, 14.9 points for Benaszak would be a healthy amount of points, and compared to 2017's statistics, could easily land Pat in the top 10 running backs on most weeks for Standard and in the top 15 for running backs in PPR. 14.9 points would also be higher than most wide receivers in the Standard format, but PPR would at least place him in a similar situation of being in the top 10. This highlights for many the importance of touchdowns to the game, in the sport of football, it is not exactly known when or who will score a touchdown. Touchdowns provide an element of chance that has persisted with time and predicting who will be the athlete that makes a touchdown an entertaining exercise for fantasy football. Needless to say, I think the changes that have occurred with leagues and fantasy teams are based on the experience and ritual of playing and trying to devise rules that best mimic reality and the effectiveness that the game has.

While having a paper-based game can afford having many changes, it may seem as if software and technology solutions would have difficulty tracking or developing all of the variations that have arisen. Nonetheless, the next section will detail some of the affordances of having a digital version of fantasy football like *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* and how technology has helped its meteoric rise with fantasy players and transformed the mindset that those players have.

TECHNOLOGIES ROLE IN TRANSFORMING THE GAME AWAY FROM ITS TIME INTENSIVE ROOTS

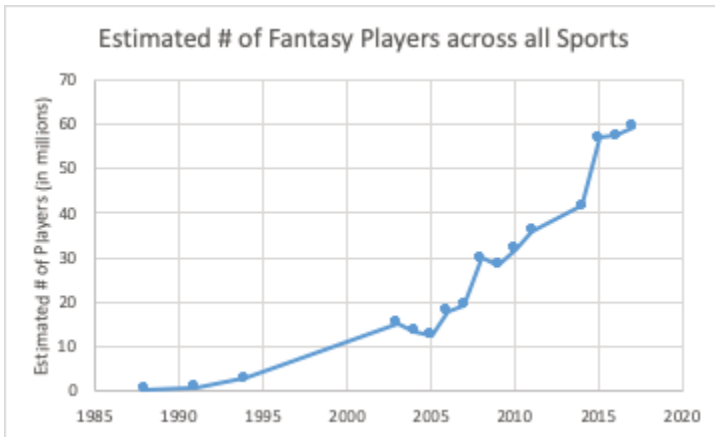


Figure 1: Chart based on data estimates provided by the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA, n.d.)

As Figure 1 demonstrates that the number of players for fantasy sports has enjoyed an impressive rise, I claim that the wider adoption of fantasy football is due to the advances in technology that have made it less time-consuming for commissioners to run a league. While earlier technologies like call-in phone systems did help fantasy owners and commissioners with some tasks, once the World Wide Web became popular in the late 90s, more sites emerged to reduce the time needed to play or run fantasy football (Burton et al., 2013). One such site was *commissioner.com*, which was later acquired by CBS Sports. In a press release from 1998, the commissioner site was touting features such as the providing a site and chat room for the league, the ability to send out weekly reports, draft online, and keep track of stats that are updated after each play in football. At the time, they were offering these features for the price of \$99.95 per league (Sportsline USA, 1998). In 1999, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* starting providing similar features to many of the paid sites for free

(Stromberg, 2014), removing more barriers for commissioners. Less barriers and time needed for commissioners and team owners could be a reason for more people to become commissioners and subsequently promote their social circles to join their own league and for that league to be a success. The technology also improved the experience for the people participating in the league, as team owners began having access to athlete stats and news not only on their computers but on phones. This information was provided in real time and updated after each play, which gave team owners up-to-the-minute insights on how athletes were doing. Having a computer system would take away the rule variations that many of the early leagues devised via paper. Nonetheless, with so many different customizations coming into play, it would make sense that the software would allow commissioners to change and adopt rules as they go.

With all the advances in technology, today's fantasy football experience differs from the first leagues in the 1960s. To provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the experience of playing modern fantasy football, I will first discuss the *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* app in its current iteration and then discuss the experiences that I have had in playing fantasy football.

YAHOO! FANTASY FOOTBALL

Yahoo! Fantasy Football has done a good job of catering to all of the historical rules that have been developed over the years. Simply going to the *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* page (football.fantasysports.yahoo.com) and creating a new league will provide you with a few options. On the initial page you could select options about how the draft will be conducted, the scoring system, and whether or not to have a flex position. These all have default values so that you could click finish without thinking about it, which would help new commissioners. However, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* also does a great job of catering to experienced

commissioners and leagues. As part of creating a league, commissioners can customize 26 different rules ranging from trades between fantasy teams to playoff seeding to how waivers for new NFL players are processed. League commissioners also have complete customization for how many position players and what positions each fantasy team needs to start for a given matchup including the number of athletes they can keep on the bench. Scoring is also completely customizable, with 84 different options that can be enabled or disabled, each with the option to have the commissioner detail the number of points that are given. Aside from PPR and Half-PPR settings, commissioners have complete control over all point values and whether fractional or negative points should be issued. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* even has the option of providing the aforementioned “first down reception” criteria.

These rule variations and customizations are all aspects that a normal sport or game might not provide, but the customizations are present because of its league-centric roots. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* has leveraged the use of technology to help shape the game in the way that each small league wants, which is well played. The focus is not on the rules per se, but on helping the fantasy teams and league form a unit that can move forward and play together. Having an app that helps offload many of the rule customizations that evolved while helping team owners play the game has helped people like myself be able to enjoy the camaraderie of a league without a heavy investment in time. The next section will go into a deeper dive about my thoughts and how the app helped me keep my involvement low while still inviting me to become more passionate about the sport.

PLAYING FANTASY FOOTBALL TODAY

The DJs league is where I first learned how *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* has made it easy for new team owners to enjoy the game without worrying as much about the logistics. Before joining the DJs

league, I knew nothing about fantasy football. My main goal in playing was simply to keep in contact with the people in this league. In fact, I remember not showing up or participating in the initial NFL player draft, which is a crucial component of the game (Signore, 2013). Because the draft happened virtually, while people might have known that I wasn't present for the draft, they may have assumed that I had placed in all of my votes or setup a draft board a priori, which would have allowed the system to pick for me based on my preferences. At the end of the draft, I not only had a fantasy team, the computer had picked a respectable team for me, one where no one questioned why I picked certain athletes. Up to this point I had done nothing to understand the rules, what I needed to do, or who I should pick, and the app had set me up to be as competitive as possible.

This experience differs from the early in-person drafts, as if you were not there, you would have to designate someone else to draft for you or have some complicated set of rules, or you just may not get any NFL players. Instead of not having any athletes, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* used the information and projections it had developed to draft all of my athletes for me. In addition, it set my starting lineup automatically for week 1 as well. I didn't actually check *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* at all until week 2 of the season. When I finally logged in, I was astonished to find out that I won the first week *despite* not making any choices or drafting any athletes. The feeling of surprise for me quickly changed however, as winning gave me a rush. Even though I really didn't have any input or had made any decisions up to that point, it was the luck of winning the first game that I internalized into the belief that I could be or already was a good fantasy football player. This new belief then changed my stance from merely wanting to keep social bonds to adding the goal of wanting to beat them all in fantasy football while keeping in touch with them. Because the application is handling so much of the work and helping all team owners, it's transforming a game that was

taken very seriously by many in its paper-based days to being a much more casual affair.

At that point my mindset was not that of a sport, but of a casual game, where I hadn't invested much in the thought of winning. Before the second week, I had succumbed to losing and moved on to the goal of playing the game socially. It was the fact that I had won that game, where I transformed my mindset into one where I quietly pursued winning. While having won did cause me to take the game more seriously from that point forward, it's one reason that I think it's enjoyed the popularity it has. Modern fantasy football has increased the chances of people being competitive in the game, making it more accessible. *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* provides access to a wealth of information to all team owners with a few clicks or taps. Team owners can even receive reminders if someone in their starting lineup is hurt or has been dropped by a large number of people in completely different leagues. This type of information sharing would not have happened in earlier decades of fantasy football. If folks were missing information, they would be allowed to make erroneous choices that would then be used to make fun of those members and increase the amount of trash talking toward them (Ain, 2012; Hruby, 2013). What the technology has done is made it easier for people to make the core decisions and retain a competitive spirit that one often finds in sport.

Nonetheless, while technology has certainly made things easier for people to play, fantasy football is a combination of skill paired with luck (Getty, Li, Yano, Gao, & Hosoi, 2018). At the very least, some ideas or thoughts on processing football information and statistics would be needed to be able to play competitively. While *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* will draft for you and set your starting lineup for week 1, it won't go any further in making any changes to your team or your starting lineup for the rest of the season. Professional athletes can get injured and new athletes can become rising stars. To win, I needed to make decisions each

week as to who to play and who to add or drop from my fantasy team. Ultimately, I ended up winning the DJs league in my first year, not having drafted any NFL players myself, but I did use a lot of the data that is present in *Yahoo's Fantasy Football* and across the internet to help me decide who to start each week. In 2014, I came in second in the DJs league. In 2015 and 2016, I finished sixth while in 2017 I finished fourth. In 2018 after having the aforementioned week 6 matchup in the DJs league and stating I felt committed to beat my opponent from week 6, I was not able to catch-up to them. They ended the regular season with the most wins, my consolation up to that point was that I had racked up the most total points across all matchups. While that would leave some to be confident about their teams, I was humbled by the fact that I had the 3rd lowest score in the first round of the playoffs, and yet still ended up winning the championship to come in first again in 2018. It's taken a while, but I finally understand there is luck involved, and all I can do is to spend a small amount of time to make an educated guess.

What I think differs with fantasy football compared to other sports is that because you are mostly in small leagues, the amount of time that you need to devote in order to remain competitive can be quite low, compared to playing a sport at an elite level or having played fantasy football in its early years. In a way fantasy football feels more like playing a pickup game of basketball or soccer with some friends who haven't played in a while. It may not take much practice to win or to stay competitive. While I do want to win, I have to weigh that desire with everything else that life demands. What technology today has afforded team owners is a quicker and easier way to look at data to make educated guesses on what to do. While other fantasy sports also have a lot of data at their disposal, fantasy football also benefits from having a weekly schedule. You only need to set a lineup once a week, and depending on your league you may check in one or two more times before the week is over to remain competitive.

With my involvement with two leagues, I have noticed that I have begun to spend a little bit more time playing fantasy football, but my flow for playing in both leagues this past season formed into a routine, where I participate in fantasy football activities 2-3 times a week. During this past season, throughout the week, I sometimes spent my hour-long commute listening to a few episodes of a fantasy sports podcast, listening for names of athletes that could be claimed from waivers. On Monday or Tuesday, I would listen to that podcast and review the stats aggregated by *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* along with other sports sites to look to see if there is an athlete that I should claim off of waivers to replace a poor-performing or injured athlete on my team. Before Tuesday, I spent around 30-45 minutes analyzing and then placing claims on potential waiver candidates, looking at their previous week and history of game statistics, and combining that with articles and analyses by sports writers about that particular candidate's breakout potential or particularly enticing future matchup. The NFL player's game statistics from that season as well as the difficulty of the team's upcoming opponent were the main determinants that I used to evaluate who to claim and who to start for a week. On Wednesday morning, I looked to see which changes were processed and make an initial starting lineup, which typically takes no more than 10 minutes. On Sunday, if time permitted, I checked my starting lineup and made sure that no one is injured. When I was able to watch the games on Sunday that didn't involve my favorite team, I watch games that had my NFL players to see how they did, but I typically used the game to get real-time information on all athletes and who was doing well that week.

While I have become more passionate about football, I also realize my limitations. I am not a football expert. I don't have the eyes nor the angle of analysis that an NFL scout has, and so I need to rely on the statistics and information gathered from multiple sources to make predictions instead of believing that

watching games with my own eyes will make me more accurate. The only time that I think watching has given me some perspective is for receivers or others who I see have some big missed plays, but sometimes that could also be covered via data that is out there. There is a ritual to fantasy football, but the time I spent playing in two leagues ranged anywhere from less than an hour to a few hours if you include watching the games. This is a different level of involvement compared to something like Fantasy Baseball, where games and starters need to be changed on a daily basis. While people can invest the type of time in playing fantasy football that the original teams of the 60s did, *Yahoo! Fantasy Football* allows team owners to focus on making simple yet satisfying choices in games of chance, which tend to be incredibly motivating for team owners (Cordova & Lepper, 1996) to compete and have a desire of winning it all without putting in a Herculean effort to do so.

The level of commitment to be successful is not the same with each league either. In the Midnight Owls league I found myself slowly gravitating from having this overarching thought of “I want to be good at this game” to “I want to be an elite player of fantasy football”, which is why I started putting in a little bit more time. I feel that more of my attention was focused on the Midnight Owls, since I had yet to win it all in their league (and the monetary investment is stressful for me). Since playing in the league, out of 12 teams I’ve placed 7th, 4th, 3rd and 6th. While that’s not first place, I did place in the top two at the end of the regular season twice, which to me demonstrated that I was at least doing my part in being worthy to be in the league, with a small amount of effort. The small amount of effort that I was making in playing fantasy football not only made me competitive, but also changed my level of NFL fandom. The next section will put this finding in context with details on the effects that fantasy football has had on the sport itself.

EFFECTS OF FANTASY FOOTBALL

While fantasy football is a game that can be played with little effort, the way it has changed how people consume football has caused the NFL to more deeply intertwine the game into its sport. Since its inception, fantasy football has been linked to a deeper appreciation of football, as Hrubby mentioned when he cited one of the original documents from the first fantasy football league, “[A]s this league is formed only with owners having a deep interest and affection for the Oakland Raiders professional football team, it is felt that this tournament will automatically increase closer coverage of daily happenings in professional football.” (2013, para. 40) Hrubby also reported on writers that played fantasy football, “Writers who covered the Raiders and 49ers suddenly became NFL and AFL experts. Writers who covered other sports did, too.”(2013, para. 57). This linking between fantasy football and a deeper commitment to the sport has also been documented in other modern research as well, which has argued that individuals who play fantasy football are more likely to attend more games on average (Nesbit & King, 2010) and consume all forms and variety of media at higher levels (Drayer, Shapiro, Dwyer, Morse, & White, 2010) compared to fans who do not play, which one could argue makes them more valuable to the sport as fans.

The NFL realized this and has been making a push to promote more fantasy scores, by mandating stadium scoreboards show fantasy statistics during games (Leonard, 2011). This could also be the reason that not only the NFL but the other major professional leagues have also invested in fantasy sports (Gillies, 2016) and provide statistics on their own sites. Television broadcasts have also been updated in recent years to highlight fantasy statistics as they happen, providing information to football viewers of current fantasy leaders at their respective positions, something that I noticed I would pay attention to when watching. In examining this phenomenon from a personal

level, I have noticed my increased consumption of the NFL as well. Before, I would only pay attention to games that had my favorite NFL team, but over the past couple of years, I've noticed I watch with more interest football games that have my athletes or my opponent's athletes to keep track of statistics and its fantasy impact as it happens. When I went to a NFL game recently for a team that is not my favorite NFL team, I remember being ecstatic on one scoring play because the defense intercepted the ball and ran it back for 50+ yards, almost resulting in a touchdown – I owned that team's defense and remember cheering during the two interceptions, the two fumbles and the safety that the defense generated that day, which luckily for me was the home team. Since teams are made up of many athletes from different NFL teams, it's highly likely that a game will have athletes that impact your fantasy matchup, which provides people who play fantasy football a greater investment in watching football games.

Fantasy football has also transformed the way I talk with members of my leagues. With the Midnight Owls, whenever I see any of the members in person, the first thing substantive topic that we discuss during the football season is fantasy football and how our respective fantasy teams are doing, highlighting any particularly good performances that an athlete had during a particular week. Fantasy football has become so widespread that NFL players themselves have started playing (Associated Press, 2009). With widespread fantasy football still in its infancy, there are many questions that may arise in readers that are left unanswered, such as how fantasy football affects NFL athletes who play, the impending effects that the game and sport will have on each other, and how the trash-talking and involvement in fantasy football affects the mindset and fandom that one has for their own locally based team and of their bonds with their league as a whole. Fantasy football has converted me and others into more rabid consumers of the NFL.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored both the nature, history and evolution of fantasy football, to what it has become today and how it may affect the sport of football itself. Fantasy football is unique in that it focuses on a league, with its origins in leveraging existing social circles and having paper-based rules. This allowed leagues to evolve their own set of rules and scoring systems based on experiences and play, and for the mindset that one takes into each league differing based on the social connections and the norms that each group has. In addition to the leagues, technology has also been an important factor in the evolution of the game and dances a fine line between supporting the league and catalyzing a wider adoption of fantasy football as both a game and a sport. With effects documented and researched, we have slowly begun to see the effects of fantasy football become intertwined with the sport. While there have been reports of disconnects with fantasy football team owners and football athletes (Curtis, 2017; Heath, 2017), fantasy football deserves to be studied in more depth and with respect to the impact it can have on football in the future when looking at games and sport.

Readers were also presented with a first-hand, in-depth view into how the author's mindset has changed and transitioned from game to sport, having started in more of a casual game mindset and moving into a more devoted and committed fantasy football player. However, as I write this and the next season begins, I should provide an update that I have told the commissioner for the Midnight Owls that for the following season, I will not participate in the league. I want my mindset to go back to that of the more casual affair as I want to allow myself to concentrate on other tasks. I will still participate in the DJs league, as that has more of the mindset that I am looking for right now: something where I can be more casual in my play and juggle that desire to be feared in fantasy football with my other responsibilities outside of the game. This transition

back to thinking more about it as a game, is something that is unfinished, and leaves me thinking about whether my ability to play in just one league will be satisfying enough, or whether I will continually bounce back and forth between wanting to think of fantasy football as a sport versus a game.

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**THE RELATION OF PLAY, FAN CULTURE AND
SPORTS EXPERIENCE IN THE VIDEO GAME
DESTINY**

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how playing the video game *Destiny*, a massively multiplayer online (MMO) first-person shooter (FPS) with role playing elements, fosters sports-like engagement and fan cultures around the game. Similar to other video games in the MMO genre, one of *Destiny*'s key elements are interaction loops designed to keep players collecting scarce resources and waiting for specific hard-to-get loot drops. Another key element is cooperative play of up to six players. This combination has led to a strong community both in and around the game. Using a series of four case studies, this article outlines how playing an MMO and FPS interplays with sports experiences and fan culture around a game. The case studies are reflected on in the context of game and media studies literature. The following links between play, fan culture and sports are identified: the Meta, where players gather and analyze data to optimize gameplay strategies; the magnification of exploits and cheating as a consequence of social exchange; social behavior in and around the game caught between optimizing progress and socializing; the convergence of multiple media channels blurring the line between active and passive game consumption; also leading to a hybridization of play, permeating real life; sports-like narratives and experiences; and competitive behavior that bears analogy to sports.

KEYWORDS

play, fan studies, sports video games, media convergence, hybridization of play, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs)

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses how the design of the video game *Destiny*, a massively multiplayer online (MMO) first-person shooter (FPS) with role playing elements, impacts prolonged community engagement and fan cultures associated with the game, and how playing *Destiny* includes sports-like performance and experiences. Just like sports, we have started to consume games across a range of media channels encompassing online media, discussion forums, streaming and social communities. In this article I argue that a game like *Destiny*, although it is not a sports video game, contains aspects of sporting regarding the player experience and the fan cultures forming around the game. Playing games often contains facets of sports such as competition, fandom or mentoring – regardless of game genre. This article is an exploration of how my playing of *Destiny* triggered experiences similar to sporting and to sports fan experiences. Rather than a structural analysis of the game, the article discusses what kinds of meaningful sports and fan experiences can be found in the game.

I start this article with the prerequisite of expressing my subjective involvement with the presented research. At that time, I was an almost hardcore *Destiny* player, having logged 1,821 hours¹ of *Destiny* on Xbox One from 2014 through 2016. I put those hours in despite having (and not neglecting) a full-time professional life in academics and being a husband and father. It cost me a lot of sleep though. This perspective on the game is critical to the methodology used, where an auto-ethnographical approach is used to present an in-depth analysis of the relation between play, sports experiences and fan culture in the video game *Destiny*. I appreciate how video gaming can connect to real-life sports fan experiences, and how games can provide us with sports-like aspects such as competition, cooperation,

1. As of Aug 29th 2016; logged with the official Xbox App for iOS.

training and tactics. I have always been interested in how games can elicit emotions and behaviors which correspond to what I understand as a sporting mindset in games – heightened concentration and performance as a consequence of taking an activity more “serious”, while still maintaining the game frame, which enables explorative play without fear of failure. In terms of physical sports, I can relate to a sporting mindset, first from having played competitive basketball and later from doing CrossFit and tracking stats and body metrics. In the digital space, I have organized and partaken in Pro Evolution Soccer tournaments for more than 15 years. From an academic perspective, I have looked at ways in which Pro Evolution Soccer is a simulation of the real sport of football (Kayali & Purgathofer, 2008) and at how basketball video games interact with other media in deepening and extending fan experiences and sports narratives (Kayali, 2013). Crawford et al. (2018, p. 1) discuss how gaming experiences often also manifest by being narrated and states that “gamers often narrate their encounters with video games as they would any other experience, such as winning the Champions League in Football Manager becomes recounted by gamers like any other achievement.” Narratives have also been identified as important parts of sports video game experiences, basketball games in particular, in earlier works by Azzopardi (2015) and myself (Kayali, 2013). Crawford et al. take these views further by suggesting that any narrative stemming from a game can be shared and experienced in this sports-like manner. Also, playing a game can be a sports-like experience without an actual sport as theme of that particular game, or as Consalvo et al. (2013, p. 3) put it: “[.] even if a video game does not itself simulate a physical sport, the act of playing a game and competing seriously might constitute a sport for some people”. I share this feeling in my approach, not only towards sports video games, but also towards *Destiny* or more recently *Dark Souls 3* and *Bloodborne*. Poole (2000, p.8) also shares this perspective and states that “the closest thing to sport in video games is not

necessarily a sports game. Reflexes, speedy pattern recognition, spatial imagination – these are what video games demand.” Bogost (2015) further argues that sports video games, just like sports, escape narrow definitions and that they could be understood as adaptations of a sport to be played as a video game. Transferring this definition to players, I would argue that video games can also provide adaptations of sports-like experiences to players. These perspectives underline the sports lens I use for looking at *Destiny*, which includes media convergence, narrative, gameplay, cooperation, and competition.

Due to technical advances and the maturation of games as a medium, video games have become more integrated with players’ real lives (Crawford, 2012), in MMO games often to a point where the border between game and real life becomes blurry (Castronova, 2008). Also the reception of sports has changed as people check scores on devices on the go and sports events are streamed to mobile phones. Both, following a sport and playing video games, has gotten more immediate and also more related to each other over the last few years, as both games and sports have established a host of different, mostly digital, media channels that converge (Jenkins, 2006) and interact with one another. I described above how basketball can be followed through a wide range of media channels, including TV, games, and online sources (Kayali, 2013). My experience of *Destiny* was shaped through a similarly wide range of media channels: the game itself, Xbox live voice chat, matchmaking websites, online forums, Reddit, Twitch, Youtube, and fan sites. Video games, just like modern sports (Brookey & Oates, 2014), have blurred boundaries, with the game itself, its broadcasting and the discourse around it all having become parts of the fan experience. Nascimento et al. (2014) further found “a malleability between active and passive roles of users in live streams meaning that there is no traditional line between active (playing) and passive (watching a stream)”. For me, reading strategy guides

during work breaks for example would feel like an engagement similar to playing the game in the evening, and even an extension thereof.

Nansen and Apperley (2014) look at the hybridization of games, in particular interfaces between games and the real world. They cite *Destiny*'s time schedules as an example of games interfacing with real-time structures. E.g. the game resets its daily and weekly missions (which can be done once a day/week for special rewards) at 1 a.m. PT. Another example of hybridization they give, is the use of "paratexts" like cheats, exploits, and walkthroughs. In *Destiny*, this aspect is amplified by the strong online community around the game on [bungie.net](http://www.bungie.net)² and on Reddit. In her book about cheating in video games, Consalvo (2009a) regards these behaviors as part of a wider circle of player interaction with video games. Pearce (2011) explores emergent fan cultures in virtual worlds and also discusses their actions as "actions by players that do not coincide with the intentions of the game's designers". The line between cheating and players organizing themselves to optimize how a game is played is blurry. Using *World of Warcraft* as an example, Paul (2011) argues that player community efforts which generate and disseminate theoretical insights into a game on a meta level have changed how games are played and how game developers design them. When playing *Destiny*, I engaged with the community in finding and using exploits and explored the fine line between cheating and optimization myself.

Destiny falls into both the MMO and the FPS genres, combining the action of a futuristic shooter with role-playing elements like quests, loot, and raids. In *Destiny*, players take the role of guardians, which protect future Earth from the forces of darkness. Gaming website Kotaku also described *Destiny* as "a video game in which players travel the galaxy recreating the

2. <http://www.bungie.net> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

myth of Sisyphus” (Schreier, 2015). The quote refers to one of Destiny’s design paradigms, the grind. Grinding means to repeat an activity, while waiting for a specific loot drop. Similar to other video games in the MMO genre, Destiny is built around interaction loops designed to keep players collecting scarce resources and waiting for specific hard-to-get loot drops. Rauch (2016) bluntly calls this interplay the “workification of games” – as an opposite pole to gamification, meaning gameplay takes on aspects of everyday (work) routine. Sports also include routine, in particular in training. That way, my playing Destiny not only replicated the competitive and glorious aspects of sports experiences but also bore analogy to the tedious and repetitive aspects of training and slowly improving.

Destiny is built around cooperative play of up to six players. The combination of hard-to-reach goals and collaboration has led to a strong community associated with the game. In an interview with gamesradar magazine, engineering lead Luke Timmins (2015, pp. 43–45) said “Destiny is about [collecting] Exotics? No! That stuff’s an excuse for you to play with your friends!”. Yee (2006) identified achievement, social behavior and immersion as the three overarching motivations for play in online games. I have played Destiny in various social constellations – alone, with random online people, via online communities and with a regular group of friends. Playing with my friends not only happened online, but we sometimes also met and played on multiple screens with multiple Xboxes. Building on these different social settings, I explore a series of case studies with the goal of outlining how playing an MMO and FPS interplays with aspects of sports, the formation of an online community and fan culture for a game.

METHODS AND RESULTS

Subsequently, I will present and analyze a series of four different case studies incorporating a game design and a fan culture

perspective. The cases were selected to present the broadest possible range of aspects of the game Destiny. The cases are exploratory and reflective. The method is based on auto-ethnographic approaches to studying virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2012); playing research (Aarseth, 2003) in the sense of actively playing a game to study it; and more formal game analysis approaches where games are analyzed with regard to their areas of context, game overview and formal elements (Fernández-Vara, 2014). Throughout the analysis I follow Clifford Geertz's (1994) approach of *thick descriptions*, meaning that my own experience during the respective cases is presented alongside an interpretation that takes fan culture and sports gaming into consideration. One case study also includes a qualitative analysis of Reddit user comments: a thematic analysis is used to build clusters of topics (Adams et al., 2008, Braun & Clarke, 2006) discussed in these comments.

CASE STUDY 1: FLAWLESS RAIDER ACHIEVEMENT

The Flawless Raider achievement is considered the hardest-to-get achievement in Destiny. Only 7% of Destiny players have unlocked this achievement (tracked on the site [trueachievements.com](http://www.trueachievements.com)³, which specializes in tracking Xbox platform achievements). The task is to “*Complete a Raid without anyone in your fireteam dying*”. To understand the degree of difficulty, it is important to know that raids are the trickiest end-game activity in Destiny, designed to be tackled cooperatively by six players. On normal difficulty, players who die can be revived by other players. Only if the whole team dies, do they have to restart the section they are in. The Flawless Raider achievement is voided for the whole team if any player dies at any point of the raid, and you have to start the raid from scratch. I chose the *Crota's End* raid for obtaining this achievement, where a full run without any retries lasts for a little less than one hour.

3. <http://www.trueachievements.com/a189963/flawless-raider-achievement.htm> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

My own experience trying to obtain that achievement showed that it is very tough with a full team of six players, as this setup provides too many individual possibilities of failure, uncontrollable in a full run. After research on the Destiny Reddit⁴ it became apparent that many expert players had found ways of completing the raid on their own (i.e. without a team). After several weeks of practice, studying tactics on Reddit and YouTube, and engaging in what Destiny players call “The Meta”, I was able to consistently solo the raid, but not without dying at least once during the later, quite overwhelming, parts. “Meta-game” denotes the use of forums and Reddit for researching the best weapons and configurations for a certain task and thus optimizing your progress through the game. The meta-game is exemplified by projects such as Reddit user *Mercules904*'s massive breakdown of weapon stats⁵ in a public Google spreadsheet that includes lots of data that is not available in the game but is either self-measured or pulled from the official API (application program interface). “It’s great that we have such a big Reddit community, but one of our goals has been to make it so the game doesn’t require Reddit to play, or enjoy it.” said Destiny game director Chris Barrat (2016, p. 65), talking about the then upcoming *Rise of Iron* expansion.

In order to overcome the difficulty of the later parts and reduce the risk of coordinating too many players, a friend and I decided to go for the achievement as a team of two. After some weeks of training and failed attempts we completed the achievement, as evidenced by a Twitch stream recording of our final attempt⁶. We completed the four parts of the raid: The Abyss, a section I soloed with the Hunter character class, who can stay invisible for most parts with the optimal configuration of perks and equipment; The Bridge, a section where cheating is needed because more

4. <http://reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

5. https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/4fops1/mercules_massive_breakdown_weapon_stats/ [last accessed May 30th 2019]

6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQomyhOzb9M> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

than two players are required to stand on different plates which (after some time) activate a bridge that can be crossed. The cheat, or “cheese” as Destiny players call these kinds of tactics, involves crossing the gap without building the bridge but by using sword slashes in the air to float across; the third section, Ir Yût, the Deathsinger, is a rather straightforward time critical challenge comparably easy for two players; in the last section we defeated the boss Crota – one of us was shooting at him to bring him to his knees (again using highly optimized timing and equipment as this is designed to be done by five players) and the other one striking him with a sword. We both consider completing this challenge one of our fondest gaming memories, amplified by the fact that we did it cooperatively as a team.

Securing this achievement can be interpreted as sports-like behavior on many levels: it included research, leading to tactical planning and then to training, both alone and as a team; from a fan behavior perspective it meant engaging with the community to gather all the necessary information and also returning something by streaming and thus sharing the experience; furthermore, and probably most importantly, reaching the goal provided satisfaction in a social setting just like winning as a sports team, and an emotionally charged narrative of overcoming highly challenging obstacles together. A clear sporting mindset was involved here, both for us as a team and individually. With this mindset we focussed on the achievement, which was an equivalent to winning in sports. Engaging in that sporting mindset meant to take preparation, strategy, and execution seriously, which means the activity as a whole can be framed more as sporting than as play.



Figure 1. Watching my teammate cross the Bridge section by slashing with his sword in mid-air.

CASE STUDY 2: TWITCH STREAM CARRY – TRIALS OF OSIRIS COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER

Trials of Osiris is a weekly PvP game mode in Destiny's Crucible multiplayer environment set on a fixed multiplayer map. Teams of three engage in elimination matches. When all three players are dead at the same time (revives are possible), a team is eliminated and the other team is awarded a point. The first team to reach five points wins the match. The highest goal of Trials of Osiris and Destiny's pinnacle of PvP success is achieving a so-called *Flawless Run*. This means winning nine consecutive matches without losing. There are three consumables that can be used to ease this requirement to seven wins while losing once is allowed. After a flawless run, the team is allowed to go to the *Lighthouse*, a special social space with unique rewards. I have yet to experience this.

I have played Trials with a couple of friends, but we were never near good enough to get enough consecutive wins. I have become

a better PvP player over my time with Destiny (increasing my kill/death ratio from an initial 0.6 to close to 1.0), but despite putting in a lot of time I have never been really good at competitive multiplayer. Destiny also does not provide matchmaking for difficult end-game activities like Trials of Osiris, because the intention of the developers is that you should play these with a team of players you can communicate and coordinate with over voice chat. I have thus used online “Looking for Group” (LFG) matchmaking websites like destinylfg.com⁷ and destinylfg.net⁸ to find players to join me. The problem is that players there are either very casual, or they are elitist and look up your PvP stats on sites like destinytrialsreport.com⁹ to check if you are good enough. While looking for players on these sites, I noticed that some players offer to take you on a flawless run for money (mostly for something like 10–20\$); some good players also offer this for free. Playing that way is called a *Carry*, where a better player helps a bad player reach the Lighthouse.¹⁰

7. <http://www.destinylfg.com> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

8. <http://www.destinylfg.net> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

9. <http://destinytrialsreport.com/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

10. <https://www.twitch.tv/realcraftyy> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

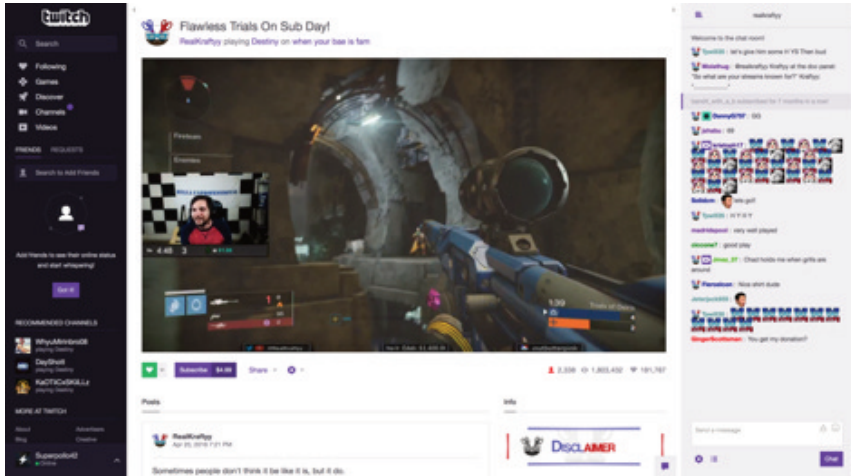


Figure 2. Twitch streamer RealKrafty streaming Trials of Osiris

Carrying players to the Lighthouse was also one of the most popular Destiny activities shown on Twitch at that time. To increase the follower count of their Twitch accounts, some Twitch streamers were also advertising *Carries* to the Lighthouse on Looking for Group websites. Some used a raffle system to choose one or two of their followers for a run. I have been lucky and won such a raffle. The streamer tried to do a so called *Double Carry*, meaning he alone needed to compensate for two lesser-skilled players, as opposed to the variant in which two good players would carry just one bad player. Initially this worked really well. Due to the streamer's high skills in controlling the map and putting the opposing team under pressure, we also experienced much more success in duels with other players than we normally did on our own. Trials matchmaking always tries to match teams with similar win counts. This means that with each point you gain, the matches are supposed to get more difficult. After having won seven games in a row we could not win the final two victories needed to go to the Lighthouse.

Engaging in this run felt sports-like in different ways: first, being

on the stream with a really good player meant a (still extremely rare) chance to succeed, thus increasing the importance of the moment and the pressure of playing well significantly – just like in a high-stakes sports competition; second, I played in front of a larger audience (~500 spectators) than ever before or after. Although people were watching the stream of the professional streamer and not mine, they also saw me through his eyes and judged my skills (or lack thereof); third, this live sports and fan experience was further emphasized by hearing the streamer respond to viewers' comments over voice chat, which we used to also coordinate play. Playing felt a bit like actually standing on the pitch during an important sports game. This feeling, emphasized by having an audience, is what made the sporting mindset prevalent in this case study.

CASE STUDY 3: SHERPA RUN – KING'S FALL RAID

As already outlined in the previous example of the Flawless Raider achievement, raids in *Destiny* are high-difficulty end-game activities designed to be played by six players cooperatively. The King's Fall raid is a raid added together with the large Taken King expansion in Fall 2015. In its design, Bungie learned from the many exploits and cheats discovered in the previous Crota's End raid, and six players are really a necessity to play the raid this time. I usually raid with groups from the aforementioned Looking for Group websites and also with more organized groups from the100.io¹¹, where you can make plans with people for a set time. But at that time we also had a clan of five friends playing together occasionally. While I had quite some experience with the raid already, my friends did not and mostly their levels were also lower than mine. We tried to complete the raid with a couple of persons from an LFG site but after around seven hours had to quit during the second to last section. Because finding opportunities to all raid together was hard, we

11. <https://www.the100.io/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

then decided to find a so-called sherpa for our next run. Sherpas are experienced players looking to help others with Destiny's hardest challenges and can be found by posting on the Destiny Sherpa Reddit¹². The idea of sherpa-ing is to guide players through a particular challenge, helping them improve rather than simply carrying them through it. There is a separate subreddit for Crucible (PvP) Sherpas expect players to be eager to learn and willing to listen¹³. The sherpa we had followed that mentality. Playing with him immediately felt like playing with a tourist guide, who points out interesting details about each place you visit. From the outset, he made clear that he would not carry us, instead leaving the difficult roles to us. He patiently played through the raid with us, explaining all the mechanics and thus made playing with him very comfortable and at the same time entertaining for us. The King's Fall raid's final boss, Oryx, has the most complicated mechanics and requires one player to be a "Relic Runner". Encouraged by the Sherpa Run, one of my friends who had never done this before volunteered.

The relic runner has to jump over a series of platforms in a time-critical sequence and with distorted vision (see figure 3), while the other players have to stand by and defend four pedestals. On the last platform, the runner collects a relic used to slam on a particular enemy. This leads to a sequence of actions enabling players to deal damage to the boss Oryx. My friend did a really good job at this, but the last boss fight took more time than expected due to real-world circumstances. While we were all located in Europe, our sherpa lived in the South-East USA where heavy storms cut his electricity several times. He needed to reconnect every time, and while we waited for his game to load we had time to chat and bond with him a bit.

12. <https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinySherpa/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

13. https://www.reddit.com/r/CrucibleSherpa/comments/3rmos4/how_to_be_a_sherpee_and_get_the_most_of_your_time/ [last accessed May 30th 2019]



Figure 3. The perspective of the relic runner shortly before collecting the relic on the last platform.

Engaging in this run demonstrated both mentoring and being mentored, as found in sports. The best analogies here might be climbing or hiking. I had the pleasure of being both mentored by the sherpa we found, and mentoring my friends and teammates who had less experience. Playing also led to a strong bond, as often present in team sports, forged between us and the sherpa as we overcame nagging technical difficulties to still complete the run. In addition, through this run I learned about forming planned and ad-hoc groups for gaming – something that might one day become as common as booking sports courses. Similar to case study 1, there was a shared sporting mindset present in the team as a whole. This sporting mindset was accentuated by the shared, hard-to-achieve goal, the adversities we faced together and the structure of the team, which had a clear leader.

CASE STUDY 4: GEAR GRIND

With the release of the Rise of Iron expansion approaching in Fall 2016, I decided to embark on a nostalgic journey. Over the two years I had been playing Destiny, I had collected many

different armor sets from different activities like raids. A full armor set consist of boots, a chest piece, gauntlets, a helmet, and a decorative class item. In most cases, a specific shader that colors the armor set is also included. Raid armor drops in certain parts of the raid and often only on hard difficulty levels, for example only the final raid boss drops raid helmets. The gear in Destiny's first raid, Vault of Glass (see figure 4), was infamously hard to get. Drops were completely random with very low probability of getting a specific piece. This prompted the "Forever 29" meme, denoting players stuck at level 29 (30 was the level cap back then) because all raid armor pieces were needed to reach max level at that time. In later expansions the drops got more predictable and rewards like a special shader were added when you completed a full armor set. Destiny also experimented with micro-transactions, the Desolate armor set (see figure 4) being an example. Some activities (like the raids) have a lockout, meaning you can only get rewards once a week per character. Others can be repeated infinitely, the Grasp of Malok pulse rifle being an example. As opposed to grinding for cosmetic items like the Desolate amor set, the Grasp of Malok holds actual gameplay relevance. In the Meta it is considered one of the best primary weapons for PvP. With an insanely low drop rate, players meet up to grind for it for hours, repeating the same activity over and over.



Figure 4. The Vault of Glass raid armor set (left) and the Desolate armor set (right).

I posted a total of 18 pictures of different armor sets with different shaders to the Destiny Reddit in a post headlined “Destiny Nostalgia! Many different pics of armor sets from Y1 and Y2 with different shaders.”¹⁴. From the comments I received, I learned that there also is a Destiny Fashion subreddit¹⁵, so I cross-posted there as well. The fashion subreddit has a smaller audience and the post was very popular there, remaining on the front page for three days. Overall this felt highly rewarding, because of the nostalgia aspect and the community feedback. The original post received 21 comments and the Destiny Fashion post received nine. The linked image gallery was viewed 2,574 times. A thematic analysis of the 30 comments resulted in:

- 12 instances of positive feedback on the images. Notably there was no negative feedback.

14. https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyTheGame/comments/51nyz9/destiny_nostalgia_many_different_pics_of_armor/ [last accessed May 30th 2019]

15. <https://www.reddit.com/r/DestinyFashion/> [last accessed May 30th 2019]

- 6 nostalgic comments. These were expectable, given the title of the post and its timing.
- 6 personal suggestions for me or other players. These mostly revolved around different gear sets and how to get specific pieces.
- 4 complaints about Destiny. These comments reflect the mood on the Destiny Reddit at that time, when people were mostly waiting for new content.
- 4 game-related suggestions and expert knowledge. These comments mostly were from commenters talking about possible features they wished for in the game.
- 3 mentions of socializing. These commenters were actively looking for other players to play with, in order to get some of the gear shown in my gallery.

On a fan level this was an exceptional experience. I have never had a reddit post with nearly as many upvotes nor have I ever engaged with such a specialized community as one revolving around fashion in a video game. Engaging with that community also meant immersing myself in the topics they were interested in, proper presentation of content and responding to comments. It provided me with unique insight into a smaller but very dedicated group of fans who managed to gather around one very specific and isolated aspect of a game with a lot of dedication. The sporting mindset had a different meaning here than in the other three case studies. While the first three case studies described a sporting mindset comparable to the one of athletes, this case study described an attitude similar to the engagement and mindset of sports fans.

DISCUSSION

The above presented comparative analysis through a sporting and fan-culture lens of the four case studies resulted in the following thematic clusters: the Meta, cheating, in-game social

structures, social structures around the game, hybridization and media convergence, narratives and experience, and competitive sports-like behavior.

The Meta

The case studies presented different community efforts on a meta-game level. Players publish analytics of gear, provide recommendations and guides for optimizing progression through the game and datamine the game's API to gather as much meta information as possible. These community efforts are mostly made visible on Reddit but also through dedicated websites and mobile apps. For game design, this means that loopholes in the design will be relentlessly exposed and exploited, especially in high-difficulty game modes like raids, and that balancing is very important. While Paul (2011) states that the game design of World of Warcraft is impacted by players' "theory-crafting", in games like Destiny, especially in competitive game modes, game design has to adapt to the Meta to ensure a fair environment. The use of gear needs to stay differentiated although there will be constant updates about what the optimal equipment configuration is at a given time. The meta is quite similar to what analytics have contributed to sports: a game's constant evolution based on data. While a sporting mindset of professional basketball players includes to only take shots with high scoring probability based on analytics, the sporting mindset in Destiny means to use the weapons, gear, and configurations established as the meta.

Cheating

As the Flawless Raider case study has illustrated, there is a fine line between community-based strategizing (as discussed above) and actual cheating. In the case of the particular case study, exploiting holes in the game's design facilitated an interesting and very rewarding challenge. Also, both the Meta and cheating

are important subjects around which the Destiny community gathers. Some parts of cheating can also be seen as a logical extension of the players' optimization efforts within a game's set of rules. Just as sports optimize their strategies using complex analytics, a game's community will eventually outline all opportunities to improve not explicitly restricted by the game. As is the case with the Meta, cheating puts even more pressure on game design to either avoid loopholes or to quickly close them once they are known. Destiny became infamous because of several exploits that were not shut down quickly enough by the developers. One of them is the loot cave as documented by Nansen and Apperley (2014); in order to get loot in the most efficient manner, players would stand at the same spot for hours, shooting into a cave where enemies were constantly spawning. Exploits like this one are harmful to a game, because in an MMO where progress often is slow, they devalue time and effort spent with regular activities. Conversely, difficulty and slow progress prompt players to look for and circulate exploits and cheats. Cheating is more prevalent in games than in sports, but a comparison can be drawn by athletes in soccer or basketball, who explore the fine line between what constitutes a foul, and what doesn't – both as the one committing a foul and the one receiving (and potentially exaggerating) physical contact.

In-game Socializing

In the two raid examples, for the protagonists Destiny has become more than just a game to play with friends. In fact, it evolved to a place for meeting and hanging out. Destiny and other MMOs share the ability to be hubs for social behavior. Raids in particular have the potential to bring people together due to their design which focuses on social mechanics and the cooperative play needed to tackle the hard end-game content. In the raids, Destiny's design also uses difficulty as a way to increase the need for cooperation and online discussion. Harder end-game activities do not offer automatic matchmaking, prompting

people to find partner players by themselves and to use voice chat. Following Yee (2006), especially the combination of a sense of achievement (due to tackling hard content) and social factors (doing it together) further attachment to the game. There are two types of socializing in *Destiny*, which are similar to sports and which are relevant to a sporting mindset: the formation of ad-hoc groups, and mentoring.

Socializing around the Game

The motivations to socialize around the game are much more diverse. The case studies have shown that there is a lot of activity around *Destiny* on Twitch, YouTube, and Reddit. In a manner similar to sports fans also actively engaging in that same sport, players gather to exchange knowledge on a meta level (Paul, 2011); playing the game itself while also watching others play and discussing theory has blurred the lines of the traditional distinction between active and passive media consumption (Nascimento et al., 2014). Lots of services exist to connect players outside of the game, catering to different motivations of players looking to play together with others: e.g. scheduled sessions to complete a specific activity, looking for guidance, showing off skills or in-game fashion, or looking to have a good time playing casually. This has created a whole ecosystem of websites and mobile applications helping players maximize gains from their playing time on the one hand, and facilitating social interaction and staying in touch with the game away from the console on the other hand. Microsoft has even started to integrate a “Looking for Group” feature into Xbox One’s operating system.

Media Convergence

In the sense of Henry Jenkins’ (2006) definition of media convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms”, the above examples also illustrate how games have moved from being restricted to the living room to spreading

across multiple media and platforms. Game design has to consider media convergence by providing an API which allows the above mentioned external services to interface with the game. The case studies illustrated some of these services in the areas of matchmaking, gear management, socializing, stats tracking and the Meta. Further game design has to consider that contemporary games are not only played but also watched by an increasing number of people.

Hybridisation

With media convergence also comes a hybridization of how we play games like *Destiny*. Above, I discussed the convergence of active and passive play. Similarly the case studies illustrated a series of concepts related to the workification of games (Rauch, 2016) – e.g. strong task-orientation, multiple currencies, randomness – showing the blurred intersection of gameplay and real life. These changes are not restricted to *Destiny* and MMOs and have prompted game scholars to critically reflect the magic circle concept (e.g. Consalvo, 2009b) which describes gameplay as separate from real life regarding time and space. The discussion points on Socializing around the Game, Media Convergence, and Hybridization all relate to the sporting mindset of fans rather than athletes, as described in case study 4.

Narratives and Experience

The case studies show that playing *Destiny* can also create narratives, which can be retold and which are similar to (success) stories experienced in sports and sports video games (Kayali, 2013, Azzopardi, 2015). Following Crawford et al. (2018), these narratives constitute an essential part of the experience of a sports video game. Similarly, in *Destiny* such stories form an important part of the fan communities around the game, just like they do for real sports fan communities.

Competitive sports-like behavior

Lastly, playing *Destiny* can feel like engaging in sports competitively. The case study on the *Trials*' PvP mode showed that emotions similar to those in real sports can also be experienced in a video game, especially when playing in front of an audience. These aspects of *Destiny* can be understood as adaptations of a sport to a video game (Bogost, 2015). Competitive behavior and thus an important part of a sporting mindset also manifests itself through studying tactics (outside of the game) and training (in-game).

CONCLUSIONS

This article spans a variety of aspects, bridging characteristics of playing an MMO game with considerations of fan behavior, sports experiences, and community engagement. Using a series of four case studies, I have illustrated that experiences within the first-person shooter and MMO *Destiny* can range from devising tactics for very hard activities done only by a small fraction of players, to cooperative and competitive play with friends and online acquaintances, to posting images of rare gear on a subreddit dedicated to *Destiny* fashion. I reflected on the four case studies in the context of game and media studies literature. Building on this reflection, areas suitable for describing the intersection of playing the game with fan and sports experiences and a sporting mindset are identified: the Meta, where players gather and analyze data to optimize gameplay strategies; the magnification of exploits and cheating as a consequence of social exchange; social behavior in and around the game caught between optimizing progress and socializing; the convergence of multiple media channels blurring the line between active and passive game consumption; also leading to a hybridization of play, permeating real life; sports-like narratives and experiences; and competitive behavior that bears analogy to sports. This article used an exploratory approach to identify these aspects.

Future studies have to deepen these insights by observing and evaluating gameplay and social interaction with a larger number of players.

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All images are screenshots taken by the author.

THE STORY OF BONEHEAD MERKLE

Appraising the Fictional Component of Sports

DR. RORY SUMMERLEY

ABSTRACT

Many games feature fictional worlds that inspire acts of make-believe or encourage us to willingly suspend our disbelief. Sports however, such as baseball or rugby, have no explicit fictional world whatsoever and yet there may still be things we can learn from them via analysis of their narratives. This paper takes on a provocative discussion of the fictional component of sports and how this might be understood. This essay takes on the case study of ‘Merkle’s Boner’, an infamous baseball play that catalyzed a change in the game’s ruleset, to stimulate a discussion on how seemingly non-fictional games still have much to say on how game fictions are understood or supplemented by game audiences. How stories, such as Merkle’s Boner, are reflected by journalistic reports of the event, folksong and through the rules of the game itself give us insight into how fiction is generally understood within games of all types. By defining the structure of fiction in games generally, the paper then examines how the stories that sports generate can be understood using Lisbeth Klastrup’s term ‘player stories’. The precedent of famous sporting moments or stories is significant and a given sport appears to be more than just abstract scorekeeping and professionally sponsored play. Indeed, it is argued that these games are ripe for

narrative analysis given the role that fiction plays in the sporting mindset.

Games seem on the face of it to be very different to stories and to offer opposing satisfactions. Stories do not require us to do anything except to pay attention as they are told. Games always involve some kind of activity and are often focused on the mastery of skills, whether the skill involves chess strategy or joystick twitching. Games generally use language only instrumentally (“checkmate,” “ball four”) rather than to convey the subtleties of description or to communicate complex emotions. They offer a schematized and purposely reductive vision of the world. Most of all, games are goal directed and structured around turn taking and score keeping. All of this would seem to have nothing to do with stories. —Janet Murray (1997, p.140)

Baseball, it is said, is only a game. True. And the Grand Canyon is only a hole in Arizona. Not all holes, or games, are created equal.—George Will (1990, p.294)

MERKLE’S BONER

In the 19th century, with the advent of modern sports, games began to take on a more prominent place in popular culture. The development and invention of association football, baseball, basketball, American football, test cricket, and rugby led to spectator sports that remain some of the most popular games on the planet. However, fiction is not integral to these multiplayer games. Tomlinson (1999, p.8) argues that modern sport is nothing more than a media package to entertain audiences; it is a socializer that no longer even requires play except by professional athletes. In the case of sports, it becomes abundantly clear how out of place a fiction might be when players are physically colliding with one another or making judgments about the physical world around them in order to play. The games themselves apparently contain no explicit fictional worlds, presenting highly abstract ludic achievements such as scoring runs, goals, or touchdowns as a core focus. The presence of other players calls to mind the prominence of reality. It is

hard to enter a fiction when you are physically interacting with another flesh and blood human.

While most competitive multiplayer games are not generally associated with fiction, they do possess something of a mythic potential that leads us to scrutinize the status of stories that players themselves create that may be external to the game as a text. This is true of both physical sports and video games. Lisbeth Klastrup terms these player-focused narratives 'player stories' (2008, p.143) as opposed to the embedded narratives that games independently portray through their fictional information. These stories are more of a player-reported record of a specific in-game event that is later narrativized. Likewise Watson (2015) has noted games, such as ice hockey, that do not feature explicit fictions yet do still present opportunities for stories to emerge: 'Like many sports, ice hockey... generates legend, myth, history, biography, autobiography, and other forms of narrative at a furious pace. In, around, and among instances of gameplay, hockey produces dramatic situations which resolve into a variety of public and private narratives' (Watson, 2015, p.106). This intersection between reality and fiction is something characteristic to multiplayer games in which the stories of players overtakes or substitutes the fiction that would normally be found in many single-player games. Multiplayer games (including physical sports and video games (especially e-sports, multiplayer video games, and abstract video games)) might possess a somewhat fictional quality that, this paper argues, is not an insignificant part of the sporting mindset. Perhaps it is the facilitation of player stories that warrants exploration in the discussion of fiction and multiplayer games. Is it possible that the stories multiplayer games generate, despite being a matter of actual historical record, can be considered a type of game fiction?

As historically-located, narrativized gaming events, typically found in multiplayer games (although not exclusively), player stories generally live and die with the communities that play

and spectate games and are not completely part of a game by themselves. Player stories can be observed in various famous sporting events: great plays, unlikely outcomes or reversals of fortune. Gay Talese's recollection of Joe DiMaggio's play, during an August 1965 pre-game exhibition, captures this process of narrativization as an example of a player story itself:

The banner had been held by hundreds of young boys whose dreams had been fulfilled so often by Mantle, but also seated in the grandstands were older men, paunchy and balding, in whose middle-aged minds DiMaggio was still vivid and invincible, and some of them remembered how one month before, during a pregame exhibition at Old-Timers' Day in Yankee Stadium, DiMaggio had hit a pitch into the left-field seats, and suddenly thousands of people had jumped wildly to their feet, joyously screaming – the great DiMaggio had returned, they were young again, it was yesterday. (Talese, 1966)

DiMaggio's storied career is notable for a consecutive hitting streak (games consecutively played with at least one base hit) of 56, a record still held today. Even though he is a retired player in the above account by Talese, his successes stimulate the continuing enjoyment of that same narrative of DiMaggio for older fans who remember tense games within his record-breaking streak. A streak where DiMaggio would go hitless and then make a similar hit to left-field. Talese's retelling is soaked in nostalgia and personal affect but the written words themselves stand alone as an example of a player story. It is not just for communicating Talese's personal response to this event (although it does this as well), it enriches the baseball spectator's understanding and enjoyment of the game beyond the records and rules themselves. Alan Tomlinson says of narrativized retellings of sporting moments such as Talese's: 'Sport has the capacity to do this sort of thing to people, to offer them unforgettably intense and meaningful moments' (1999, p.50).

Players of these games become tied to these events causing a rapid mythologizing that, despite technically being separate from the game, plays a central role in the appreciation of that game.

Player stories are considered so integral to some multiplayer games that achieving impressive records in a sport has been suggested, not without seriousness, as a form of immortality (Guttman, 1988, p.8). When Watson remarks that ‘Hockey is a creature of narrative – it eats it and excretes it – and yet, somewhat amazingly, it does not require any kind of centralized story department or author to spin its yarns’ (2015, pp.106-107). The sentiment Watson reflects is that games and their players automatically generate narratives not to fill a void left by the absence of fiction but because this narrativization is a necessary part of the game. To understand ways in which video games engage with fiction it is worth a brief examination of player stories in traditional games as has been suggested by Watson (2015, p.121).

Baseball would seem like an unlikely candidate for a discussion of game fictions but the presence of player stories in multiplayer games leads us to consider if those multiplayer games that have no fiction are being prematurely overlooked. Entertaining the idea of baseball having a fiction or at least parts that function like fiction is, I argue, useful as it may reveal things about games we might not have considered by excluding seemingly non-fictional works. Do spectators and players of these games understand them better through fiction? How much of a game is really fiction? What might the fiction of multiplayer games tell us about how fiction functions in other types of games? I would like to answer these questions by examining the importance of socially-shared player stories and plays that are significant to the history of a game or sport. The example from baseball I am about to discuss is noteworthy as it informs us as to how player stories form a core part of the game experience despite the lack of a

fictional world. One famous example from baseball is ‘Merkle’s boner’.

On the 23rd of September 1908 a play, that has since been extensively documented and retold, was made during a game of baseball between the New York Giants and the Chicago Cubs (Anderson, 2000, p.172-173; Fleming, 2006, pp.244-245). At the bottom of the ninth inning the game was tied. The New York Giants had one last chance to score a run. With Moose McCormick on third, Fred Merkle on first and two outs, the current batter (Al Bridwell) needed only to hit a single for McCormick to score the game-winning run. Bridwell did so and the game appeared to be over. As Anderson (2000) notes, it was common for fans of the era to enter and exit across the playing field and, not wanting to be mobbed by fans (angry, drunk or elated), baserunner Merkle headed back to the dugout after leaving first base. Although the rule was rarely enforced at the time, the ‘force-out’ rule, or rule 59 as it was known at the time, stated:

One run shall be scored every time a baserunner, after having legally touched the first three bases, shall legally touch the home-base before three men are put out; provided, however, that if he reach home on or during a play in which the third man be forced out or be put out before reaching first base, a run shall not count. *A force-out can be made only when a baserunner legally loses the right to the base he occupies and is thereby obliged to advance as the result of a fair hit ball not caught on the fly.* [Italics are my emphasis] (Spalding’s Guide, 1908 In: Anderson, 2000, p.160)

This rule was remembered by Johnny Evers, a member, of the soon-to-lose Cubs who appealed to the umpires that because Merkle had not touched second base he could still be forced out, which the Cubs did attempt. The umpires (Hank O’Day and Bob Emslie) upheld the rule which drew the game to a tie. The rule is now prominently enforced in modern baseball as rule 5.08 (a)(EXCEPTION 2), rule 5.08(b) Comment and rule 5.09(b)(1 and

2) Comment which specifically describe hypothetical cases that mirror the Merkle game (Lepperd, 2017, p.37, 44; Lepperd, 2018, p.37, 43-44).¹ As night games were not played in the 'Dead-ball' era of baseball, the game did not go to extra innings. A replay was not played until October 8th that same year to resolve the tied game and decide the winner of that year's pennant race. The Cubs won that replay 4-2 (Anderson, 2000, pp.173-183).

Since this play, Merkle was dubbed 'Bonehead' or 'Bonehead Merkle' in reference to the play coming to be known as a 'boner' – a foolish mistake. Merkle was stereotyped as an idiot despite being an educated man and a skilled player. He would suffer harassment for the rest of his life, both on and off the field, for an unfortunate mistake. Since then this story has been examined with scrutiny by sports writers and historians. Players debated the fairness of the umpire's ruling which some argue was a necessary sacrifice in order that rule 5.08(a)(2) be enforced to avoid any future disagreements. The event has since been

1. In baseball rule 5.08 (a)(EXCEPTION 2) specifies that: 'A run is not scored if the runner advances to home base during a play in which the third out is made... (2) by any runner being forced out;' (Lepperd, 2017). Rule 5.08(a)(EXCEPTION 2) was not commonly enforced until the opposing teams in Merkle's game, and a few other games in 1908, demanded the umpire enforce it (Anderson, 2000, p.180). The rule is now commonly enforced to avoid a repeat of Merkle's Boner. There are also addenda to account for events such as the runner abandoning the bases or the crowd rushing the field which would prevent a base-runner from touching the bases. Rule 5.09b (1) and (2) Comment (Rule 7.08(a) Comment) specifies that: [block quote] Any runner after reaching first base who leaves the base path heading for his dugout or his position believing that there is no further play, may be declared out if the umpire judges the act of the runner to be considered abandoning his efforts to run the bases. Even though an out is called, the ball remains in play in regard to any other runner. This rule also covers the following and similar plays: Less than two out, score tied last of ninth inning, runner on first, batter hits a ball out of park for winning run, the runner on first passes second and thinking the home run automatically wins the game, cuts across diamond toward his bench as batter-runner circles bases. In this case, the base runner would be called out "for abandoning his effort to touch the next base" and batterrunner [sic] permitted to continue around bases to make his home run valid. If there are two out, home run would not count. (Lepperd, 2017) [block quote] To clarify in cases where the field is swarmed by fans (as was the case in Merkle's play) Rule 5.08(b) comment states: [block quote] An exception will be if fans rush onto the field and physically prevent the runner from touching home plate or the batter from touching first base. In such cases, the umpires shall award the runner the base because of the obstruction by the fans. [block quote]

recorded as one of baseball's most famously controversial stories and has even been immortalised in folk song (Brodsky, 2000)². Furthermore, in Fleming's (2006) collection of news stories published at the time, flavorful biases are prevalent in both defense and condemnation of the Merkle play. One such report that narrativizes the actions of the Chicago team in an unflattering light reads:

Directly after the argument on the field, which was brought about by Manager Chance and his fellow players developing that old yellow streak of claiming victories they can't win on the field, Murphy saw his opportunity to make a claim for yesterday's game on a cowardly technicality. Manager Chance and his players in fact incited a riot, and but for the fortunate presence of hundreds of New York's "finest" there would have been a serious riot.

Merkle did make a run for the clubhouse to escape the onrushing fans, as is the habit with the Giants, but he turned after going only a few feet and broke for second. Hofman did return the ball, but it went far over Evers' head, hit Tinker in the back and went on to Kling. Merkle was then on second with Mathewson, and as Evers, Tinker and Pfiester all rushed towards second, Matty, according to his own story, to which he will take an affidavit if such a ridiculous act is necessary, took Merkle by the arm and said: "Come on to the clubhouse; we don't want to mix up in this," and both Matty and Merkle left base together.

Chance was frantic; he rushed up to both Umpires O'Day and Emslie in the endeavor to make them listen to his

2. One extract from the folk song 'Bonehead Merkle' reads: [block quote]They dubbed him "Bonehead" Merkle!They made up Merkle wordsOne might "pull a Merkle"And "to Merkle" became a verbSome would yell "touch 2nd, Bonehead"When he stood on firstLittle kids yelled "moron"And the older kids much worse (Brodsky, 2000) [block quote]

unsportsmanlike claim, but both those officials waved him away and said, according to bystanders and players, “We didn’t see anything that warrants your claim or protest that Merkle didn’t run to second. He was there last we saw.” And these were the words of both umpires, as hundreds will swear to. (New York Herald, 1908 in: Fleming, 2006, p.250)

This example contradicts the eventual outcome of the game which was officially called, by Emslie and O’Day, to a tie (Anderson, 2000; Fleming 2006, pp.243-255). After the official result was called many lamented Merkle’s play, specifically characterizing him as unintelligent:

...If he would only remember to run to second base when it is required – which reminds us of a man who had a thousand dollar back and ten-cent head [a reference to the cash value of a professional player at the time]. (New York World, 1908 In: Fleming, 2006, p.246)

...But McGraw had enough of Merkle the day before [the day of the Merkle play] and called on Tenney for his brains. A one-legged man with a noodle is better than a bonehead. (Bagley, 1908 In: Fleming, 2006, p.255)

Every storyteller is using fiction to help understand what is really happening with this rule. Is it fair? Is it in the spirit of the game? Does it make for an exciting story for its own sake? The response, through narrative, seems to settle on Merkle being a key dramatic figure around which a rule dispute is expressed. A foolish youngster who must be sacrificed in order that similarly scandalous debates about the enforcement of the force-out rule not be repeated. Baseball historian Lawrence Ritter remarks on the narrative discourse of the 1908 baseball season which sums up the unusually dramatic situations and their later narrativization succinctly:

If the expression “Truth is stranger than fiction” did not originate in 1908, it should have. Because not even the most imaginative of storytellers could have dreamed up what actually happened that memorable year as the Pittsburgh pirates, New York Giants, and Chicago Cubs schemed and clawed their way in quest of the elusive National League Pennant. (Ritter in: Fleming, 2006, Foreword)

Although biases for either the Cubs or the Giants are clear in the reportage of the day, the official word on the ruling by the National League (likely swayed by a similar case in an earlier game involving the Pittsburgh pirates and Chicago cubs discussed below) appears to be what secured consistent enforcement of the force-out rule as well as Merkle’s lasting reputation as a ‘bonehead’. In sports journalist Keith Olbermann’s foreword to Anderson’s work, he passionately defends Merkle as a victim of circumstance where the ‘...never-enforced arcane baseball rule...suddenly began to *be* enforced...’ [Olbermann’s emphasis] (Olbermann in: Anderson, 2000, xi). Fear of a repeat of Merkle’s boner led to widespread enforcement by umpires under the National League, guaranteeing that players made for a base regardless of the outcome of the batter’s hit. It should be made clear that there were games prior to Merkle’s Boner where this rule could have been clarified which makes the Merkle game distinctive given the similarity to the hypothetical case in the related the rule description. Anderson (2000, p.161) notes that the enforcement in the Merkle game came nineteen days after a very similar play by first baseman Warren Gill (Pirates vs. Cubs – September 4th 1908). Arguably the rule should have been enforced in this case to avoid establishing a controversial precedent in which official rules were routinely ignored. Sports historian Bill James sums up this risky state of affairs writing ‘It is in principle most dangerous to have rules on the books which are not enforced, or have one

set of rules written down and another acted out' (James, 1988 in: Anderson, 2000, p.161). It is the Merkle Game specifically that the modern force-out rule's comments seem to refer to which would make sense given the greater fame of the Merkle play. Despite opportunities (in prior games) to clarify the force-out rule by then-national league president Harry Pulliam (Anderson, 2000, pp.91-92, 161, 179), Merkle broke the camel's back and became the unfortunate human sacrifice. What, if anything, does any of this have to do with fiction?

THE PLACE OF FICTION AND NARRATIVE IN SPORT

When discussing how a sport might constitute a game fiction, it is worth establishing some basic structural reference points for discussing game fiction generally. A tool I would like to employ to this end, is the concept of 'fictional information' and 'significant information' as discussed by Summerley (2018, pp.72-74) in the context of games. The theory is similar to Juul's (2005) assessment of games as 'Half-real', being made up of 'real rules' and 'fictional worlds' but re-examines the nature of fiction and structural elements unique to games. Fictional Information is defined as 'information that pertains *only* to the fictional world of a work (in short, its fiction)' and significant information is defined as 'information that relates only medium-specific meaning that is not otherwise fictional' (Summerley, 2018). In the case of games, fictional information relates to fictional statements made by the game and significant information would constitute the rules, goals, situations and materials (or anything else that is specific and 'significant' to the medium of games) that is not a case of fictional information. Summerley suggests that the two types of information work cyclically to reinforce each other in cases where fictional consistency is achieved in a given medium. Furthermore, any medium can also communicate fictional information alongside significant information (which may be why the discussion of fiction in games has centered around a dualistic interpretation between fiction and rules (a

medium-specific quality of games) as discussed by Juul (2005), Aarseth (2014) and Murray (1997)).

Fiction (as distinct from fictional information) is a little harder to define. There is an agreed understanding of what it means in most cases but for the sake of this discussion it should probably be pinned down before misunderstandings accumulate. Walton (1990) encountered similar difficulty in his examination of definitions that oppose fiction to reality, non-fiction or truth. He uses it quite broadly and interchangeably with the term 'representation' and links it closely to imagination. It is not restricted to literary fictions and includes all forms of depiction. Ultimately Walton does not settle on a definition as the very word is so ambiguous that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to come to an agreeable definition that is not incredibly vague or restrictively narrow. One thing Walton does focus on is the idea of fiction as possessing the function of '*servicing as a prop in games of make-believe*' (Walton, 1990, p. 91). This is to say that fiction is simply an anchorage point from which the audience's imagination may develop a 'game of make-believe' which, in practice, can be as simple as viewing a painting and imagining (making belief) that its depictive content exists in a fictional world.

Fiction's function, as Walton notes, can differ greatly depending on the context it is presented in and for what purpose its audience seeks it out.

What counts as fiction will depend on how its maker intended or expected it to be used; or on how, typically or traditionally, it actually is used; or on what uses people regard as proper or appropriate (whether or not they do so use it); or on how, according to principles, it is in fact to be used (whether or not people realize this); or on one or another combination of these (Walton, 1990, p91).

As is clear from this quote, defining fiction becomes a muddy task. I understand it to be identified in much the same way Walton's representations are defined: as a prop in a game of make-believe. To put it succinctly (but by no means conclusively) fiction is information that is constructed by an author for the sake of imagination by an audience. Fiction cannot exclusively be classed as 'what doesn't exist' or 'what is made-up' as this envelops many orbiting, but very tangential, discussions. A fiction can have both factual truth and relate to our own existence e.g. one could easily make a statement in a fiction that 'George Washington was the first president of the United States of America' which is both true inside and outside of the fiction and relates to a situation that once existed. Despite difficulties in pinning down what constitutes fictional status, Walton argues that fiction is not in opposition to reality. Many games (especially multiplayer games) often blend fiction with 'reality' given that a real player is often directly narrativized or interacting with fictional entities (1990, p.102). The fictional information of a game is therefore a prop in a game of make-believe – simply an imagination aid.

Following on from this, we might ask: can the hypothetical example described in the modern force-out rule, that asks the player to imagine a similar game to that of the Merkle game, be said to be an instance of fiction which forms a core part of the enjoyment and understanding of the game of baseball? The function of baseball's rule 5.08(a)(2) is to help the player (or spectator) of baseball understand, through narrativisation, its rules in a way that moves beyond a dry, systematic description of the rules. Merkle's boner serves as a good way of explaining a rule, by example, but the nature of the record of accounts of the Merkle game suggests a story or parable that is also a matter of historical document and incorporates elements of both. To be specific, the significant information in Merkle's Boner consists of: the rules of Baseball; the goals of the competing teams (to

win the game and ultimately the National League Pennant); the time of day and location the game was played at; and the players, tools and supporting staff used to play and keep track of the game. The fictional information then consists of those things that cannot be said to fall into the above category and that help us imagine the situation: characterizations of the teams, their players (especially Merkle) and their fans; the conflict brought about by the disputed rule; the interference of fans on the field; the tragic fate of Merkle; and the narrative order and flavor of the information above.

As I have said before, sports and other multiplayer games do not, at first glance, seem to possess a fiction. However, player stories like Merkle's give games an aspect of engagement which cannot really be said to be composed entirely of score-keeping and game mechanics. Player stories are not abstract records but narratives that enrich our understanding and enjoyment of games. Under Walton's definition of fiction, Merkle's play and other player stories can be considered props in understanding a game's significant information through imagination. Echoes of similar events can be found in all sports and multiplayer games which do not necessarily portray explicit fictions. Much like how multiplayer and abstract games do not *require* fiction to be played, player stories are not *required* to enjoy a game. Yet, there is a desire, a common motivation, by those that play and watch these games to generate, remember and enjoy them not only for their mythic quality but also to enhance their understanding of the game. In this way, player stories function analogously to fictional information that helps communicate functional rules. Player stories help us understand a game through more than purely 'the rules'. Merkle's Boner is credited as being one of the reasons for a major rule change that still affects baseball today (Anderson, 2000). Would rule 5.08(a)(2) be more understandable in raw, legalese form as it exists in the MLB rulebook or is it more helpful to imagine the Merkle game to help dramatize

the rule? Watson details a similar example in ice hockey. 'Icing', a tactic that proved effective in maintaining control over the opposition but boring for spectators, led to its own rule change after it became a narrativized phenomenon: 'News reports from the period describe tedious games where one team would take a lead, then proceed to ice the puck dozens of times in an attempt to run down the clock (Klein, 2013). Finally, in 1937, responding to increasingly urgent complaints from owners, fans, and players, the league implemented Rule 81...' (Watson, 2015, p.119). As Allen Guttman notes in his examination of the human element in baseball 'rulebooks...seldom adequately reflect the norms that regulate play' (1988, p.74) meaning that the authority of the rules is co-dependent on the actual cases where player stories cause edge cases to occur. Merkle's boner, as indirectly referenced by rules 5.08 and 5.09, negotiates the stories of the game towards consistency with its ruleset.

This idea of using narrativization for instrumental ends is not unheard of. Due to their rituals and drama Johann Huizinga (1949, p.173) argues the pomp of the courts of law, with their wigs, formalities and contests dictated by rules, are no exception to identifications as performed fiction (1949, p.76). Bruner (2002) reflects this observation in his own discussion of the importance of narrative in legal battles. Defendants and accusers take turns literally telling narratives that help their case (Bruner, 2002, pp.12-13). Even though the stories told in the court of law are about what factually happened Bruner emphasizes the need for stories to be told a certain way to make for a persuasive case or even that narrativization helps comprehension of a past series of events. In fact, legal precedents are often invoked in the form of narratives to uphold a disputed rule, much like how Merkle's Boner is remembered when enforcing rule 5.08(a)(2) in baseball. Of course, actual legal cases do not usually make for exciting reading and Bruner makes the distinction between legal narratives and what we would traditionally think of as fiction.

This is important if we are to see how player stories fit into the spectrum of fiction. Legal narratives deal with the actual, banal records of events that took place which, when compared to literature (as Bruner does (2002, pp.60-61)), lack the virtual, figurative and speculative qualities we usually expect of fiction. Much like how rules accrue in response to player stories over time Bruner notes how legal precedents are set with respect to prior cases that are narrativized. 'Insofar as the law insists on [precedents]...and insofar as 'cases' are narratives, the legal system imposes an orderly process of narrative accrual' (Bruner, 1991, p. 18 cited in Watson, 2015, p.119). The feedback loop of player story and game rules bears similarities to the way in which game fiction helps explain game functions and vice versa.

Rules and player stories form a 'chicken and the egg' cycle in the formation of many competitive multiplayer games. Watson describes ice hockey 'as a kind of cybernetic loop, or set of nested loops, wherein the state of the game gives rise to narratives which in turn modify the state of the game, giving rise to new narratives, and so on, across a range of time scales' (Watson, 2015, p.117) and so ice hockey can be understood as a confluence of its significant information and (comparably) fictional information. Games present situations and situations are a part of significant information which is given proper dramatic context when fictionalized or narrativized in player stories. Watson's cybernetic feedback loop argues that in games 'narrative and situation can thus be seen to exist in a strong feedback relationship with one another' (Watson, 2015 p.121). Thus, player stories help create a holistic understanding of these games that isn't located purely in abstract rules.

I use the case of Merkle because it is a well-known historical event but it must be said that the way in which people narrativize games is not always so exceptional or extreme. Merkle's Boner is a famous example but many mundane examples exist between friends and families who fondly remember an unlikely play or

a particular player's skill or good fortune that informs understanding and enjoyment of the game in the present. Watson notes that 'Slumps, streaks, momentum, and myriad other kinds of "storying" are just as integral to youth hockey and adult 116 recreational leagues as they are to the NHL' (Watson, 2015, pp.116-117). Player stories can range from superstitions about clean balls to a player's tendencies to 'jump in' to the way a player celebrates a goal. Watson even argues that narratives can 'take hold' in the form of internal psychological crises such as perceiving that one is 'having a bad night' as a player or that one needs to 'get their head in the game' (Watson, 2015, p.115). Player stories in sports (traditional sports and e-sports) from *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (HAL Laboratory, 2001) to baseball to *Street Fighter 3: Third Strike* (Capcom, 1999) to ice hockey have been noted as the core appeal of these games despite the lack of traditional narratives within these games (Innuendo Studios, 2015; Brooks, 2013; Watson, 2015; Cravens, 2014). I bring up examples from the realm of video-games, not to make the arbitrary connection to game studies as a field (concerning these types of games as a storytelling medium), but because these multiplayer games are aligned to the sporting mindset, being e-sports themselves. Ian Daskin argues of *Super Smash Bros. Melee* player stories that these 'stories feel true' and that 'competitive smash is built out of stories' (Innuendo Studios, 2015). Entire documentaries about competitive multiplayer games can be dedicated to specific player stories such as the infamous forfeit by Greg 'IddrA' Fields during an important *Starcraft 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010) match (Sutak, 2016). Fiction and narratives are, in a sense, a part of the contest.

CONCLUSION

In a webcomic by Brooks (2013), it is argued that we believe in player stories because they are pure distillations of chance occurrences informed by the context of play. Brooks claims they are *both* real-life and fiction. They are compelling for this reason

but are often interpreted as fictions because they seem ‘unreal’. The stories are compelling because nobody could have predicted them, there is no author scripting the events of player stories and when read retrospectively it can be hard to remember that these are factual accounts of what happened. Many player stories avoid the conflict between the author and player that so often leads to ludonarrative dissonance because the ‘author’ in these cases is understood as a combination of physics and fate narrativized by the community of the game after a play happens. Yet this ‘author’ still provides us with events that stimulate the imagination to narrativize them and thus our definition of fiction seems to hold true here. The conceits and shortcomings that lead to conceits in authored fictions are not present in player stories as they are partially guided by ludic systems which, by their nature, are not predictable and feature no traditional author when the game is in play. Thus, player stories are an instance of fiction that can be said to include reality as a co-author, the designers and players of the game being the other co-author. When we are asked to imagine Merkle’s boner to help understand the force-out rule, we are engaging with a fiction that has its genesis in the reality of a specific situation of Baseball.

While scholars such as Eskelinen (2001) make a clear separation between abstract goals and stories, the actual cultural output of competitive game consumption leads not just to records of goals but narratives that frame those ‘goals’. They are not so separate. Players and spectators fondly remember these narratives and they have significance for more than just the significant information at play. Their ‘reality’ is almost incidental. My arguing player stories as functionally analogous to fiction is not to downplay the historical outcomes of such events (Merkle, only 19 years old at the time, was unmercifully blamed long after the event and the play allegedly contributed to national league president Harry Pulliam’s suicide in 1909 (Anderson, 2000, p.xxiv)) but is meant to show how fiction manifests in sports

and competitive multiplayer games, an arena that rarely receives consideration for discussions as fiction. An additional layer of enjoyment is present in the game, through player stories for which there is a common desire to create and propagate. As Watson remarks: 'a game of hockey is more than merely the robotic execution of a set of rules and procedures – it is also a dynamic psychological landscape, the topology of which is determined by the accrual of narrative over time and across multiple contexts' (Watson, 2015, p.115). Stories in sports only live on because of the collaborative cultural preservation that surrounds multiplayer games where a common motivation for fiction is present. The understanding and enjoyment of sports (and other multiplayer games) is more than records of abstract score-based competition. Merkle's boner shows that understanding and enjoying sports through a lens of fiction reveals more than a purely ludological analysis of games that might be prematurely understood as abstract or multiplayer. Narrative analysis is certainly useful for many games which feature explicit fictional worlds but it should not be forgotten that games that do not feature explicit fictional worlds, such as Tetris, Chess, hockey, or baseball, are just as pregnant with fiction and are ripe for analysis.

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