

A Comparative Study of Attachment: Fighting Games and Taekwondo in Life

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INTRODUCTION

Over the present decade, analog play and its relation to digital phenomena has begun to gather increasing academic attention in the fields of game research (for general references, e.g. Stenros & Waern 2011; Apperley & Jayemanne 2012; Bateman 2016). A recent point of intersection in this conversation is the relationship between contemporary esports and the so-called traditional sports (for particular references, e.g. Witkowski 2012; von Hilvoorde 2016; Jenny et al 2017). The study at hand does not participate in these analog-digital discussions explicitly but analyzes an empirical dataset of two parallel respondent groups, digital fighting game players and analog taekwondo practitioners, with a goal to find tentative evidence for points of connection and disconnection among such activities that are arguably very similar and different at the same time (see Su 2010; Elmezeny & Wimmer 2015; Adams 2016).

Methodologically, the study makes use of two distinct qualitatively oriented tools: forum and onsite interviews. In the former, we entered the “Fighters” sub-Reddit forum (dedicated to fighting games) and requested the players to share their personal stories concerning the relationships they have formed with fighting games. Respondents were given the option to reply openly in the forum or by contacting the authors privately. We received 14 unique narratives in total with a response average of 620 words. We repeated this in a forum dedicated to taekwondo (Martial Talk community), which resulted in 9 unique narratives with an average response length of 740 words.

The above accounts were accompanied by semi-structured onsite interviews that were conducted in three major fighting game tournaments and one international taekwondo event: DreamHack Summer 2016, DreamHack Summer 2017, Koneistamo Tournament 2017, and International Olympic Training Camp 2018. Altogether, we completed 15 unique interviews with fighting game players (an approximate length of 20 minutes) and

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8 unique interviews from taekwondo practitioners (an approximate length of 20 minutes). During this research, we also managed to gain exclusive access to a 204-page document *Taekwondo Masters' Essays* (2007) that consists of 14 personal reports of long-term taekwondo practitioners (collected by World Taekwondo Federation). We use these 14 essays as complimentary data due to the smaller sample size of our taekwondo respondents. The word limit of this abstract does not allow a detailed explication of the data, for which the following is but a brief summary of our key findings.

Data Source	Fighting games	Taekwondo
Onsite interviews	15	8
Online interviews	14	9
Essays	-	14
Total	29	31

First, the life-specific development of the two interests are very similar. In both cases the respondents had started doing the activity with a friend to mostly have fun. As they learned more of their practice and got to know the community around it, their dedication increased and led to actively participating in various online and offline events, often as a competitor. In fighting games, this change was marked by moving from “button smashing” to strategically thinking how to defeat the opponent (cf. Sirlin 2005); in taekwondo, the change was typically marked by participating an official tournament (cf. Johnson & Woodcock 2017). The two groups also tended to consider their future plans in an identical fashion; for instance, whereas one fighting game interviewee believed to continue playing “as long as my wrist can take it,” a taekwondo respondent said that they would keep on practicing “as long as my body and head can take it.” The ethos of commitment is thus strong in both ludic divisions.

Second, both groups also placed high importance on their respective communities. They considered the community to be the major reason why they continued playing and practicing for several years. Many taekwondo interviewees called their community as their “taekwondo family,” and similar expressions like “brotherhood of taekwondo” were also used. Likewise, a large part of the fighting gamers stated that they would not play anymore without the dedicated local offline community that they had become part of. Similar sentiments have been found also in earlier studies; for instance, Todd Harper’s (2013) and James Thompson’s (2014) book-length studies both stress the significance of the community in long-term fighting game play. However, a critical difference between the fighting game and taekwondo communities was regionality: the former community was considered relatively local, involving mostly participants of national tournaments, whereas the latter community was considered international, often involving frequent travels to compete and practice with long-distance peers.

We are fully aware of the formal diversity of our mixed method data, and this has been taken into consideration carefully in both sample acquirement and analysis. For instance, including and analyzing the *Taekwondo Masters' Essays* document as part of our dataset was a deliberate act to gain counterparts for our professional and semi-professional fighting game player interviews in DreamHack. Moreover, we explicitly stress that our data is not representative of the overall player or practice base of fighting games and taekwondo; all individuals in our dataset have been dedicated to their respective interest for multiple years, and as such, the narratives at hand are scientifically interesting primarily as qualitative examples of individual cross-ludic development that appears to

involve at least two fundamental phases: that of “attaching” to the activity by giving it a specific (possibly goal-driven) meaning, and that of entering and integrating to a community that enables one to become part of a specific (activity-related) social structure.

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