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Continuous play: leisure engagement in competitive fighting games and taekwondo

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ABSTRACT

In order to better understand the development of play and games in modern lives, this article examines two competitive leisure groups: digital fighting game players and traditional taekwondo practitioners. Drawing on qualitative offline/online interviews ($n = 56$) and close reading of externally documented life narratives ($n = 14$), we explore how the modes and motives of engagement fluctuate in competitive players over time. The study provides a new developmental approach to continuous competitive play as leisure. Our results show rather than making linear progress from 'casual' to 'serious' leisure, individuals in both groups perceive their lasting relationships with these activities gradually evolving through their lives in three stages: acquaintance, attachment, and accommodation. The players fluctuate between casual and serious engagement, occasionally reaching a state of subjectively meaningful and socially cemented life permanence. The study suggests that the patterns of long-term play and gaming may not differ much between digital and non-digital domains.

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Introduction

In a critical examination of subcultural theory, Wheaton (2007) observes how the ongoing proliferation of online activities might offer new forms of identity formation, and more research is required 'to explore the significance of these new virtual subcultural spaces, such as online sport communities, fanzines, and gaming communities' (292). In this study, we respond to that call by investigating how individual lives evolve in digital and non-digital competitive play, online as well as offline. Our theoretical point of departure is rooted in the premise that, on a macro level, players in all spaces begin with various unstructured modes of casual play and eventually move to the routines of 'serious leisure,' (Stebbins 1982), via 'the development of skills and knowledge, the accumulation of experience, and the expending of effort' (267). Here we take a different theoretical approach to Stebbins's premise exploring how the modes and motives of engagement fluctuate in competitive players. Rather than making linear progress from 'casual' to

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'serious' leisure, competitive players across these different spaces seem to keep negotiating their relationship with the activity as an evolving component of their lives.

Such patterns of development have also been noted in various leisure-specific contexts, especially in travel research. Notably, Getz (2008) coined the notion of 'event travel careers' as a frame through which to organize the longitudinal paths of touristic behaviour. This frame has been used, for instance, by Buning and Gibson (2015) who explored the competitive context of amateur cyclists and found that

individual motivation to travel and participate in events was derived from several sources, although social connection, enjoyment, and accomplishment were the most important. The findings here reflect the distinctive qualities of serious leisure, [to which] perseverance, career potential, personal effort, durable benefits, a unique ethos, and identification with the leisure pursuit are fundamental. (n.p.)

Our focus is split between two materially distinct types of contest associated with martial arts: digital fighting games and traditional taekwondo. In previous research on online/offline leisure groups and communities, Wilson and Atkinson (2005) studied rave participants in both domains and found that the 'practitioners do not differentiate between on- and offline performance' (303). In a book-length study of online and offline leisure, Kyllis (2017), in turn, has recently argued that while participation in the two communities may follow similar patterns, online communities involve narrower identification than offline communities.

We also note that another key concept of this study, 'play', has been a defining term in leisure science for decades. Whereas the anthropological and sociological research lineages historically conceptualize play as form of (or a synonym for) leisure somewhat canonically (e.g. Giddens 1964; Ehrmann 1968), parallel discussions also distinguish between different types of play. Roger Caillois (1961) work is considered seminal in this respect, however, the research in contemporary leisure studies now divides play into various forms, the 'playfulness' of which ultimately depends on an individual's mode of engagement. Digital fighting games and traditional taekwondo can both be considered 'competitive play' that embrace and centralize the idea of contest, both as individual goals and economically relevant cultures of sport (e.g. Martončík 2015; Chee and Karhulahti 2020; see Hughson 2004).

Fighting games and taekwondo

Taekwondo is a martial art originating in Korea, which is practiced today on an Olympic level, with clubs and schools located around the globe. Research on the activity has centred on its professional aspects, and topics ranging from injuries of the athletes (e.g. Kazemi, Shearer, and Choung 2005) to athletic performance in general (e.g. Bridge et al. 2014). Some studies have also approached taekwondo as leisure; for instance, Kim and colleagues (2011) found long-time practitioners of taekwondo to exhibit qualities of serious leisure, from perseverance to career development, identification and unique ethos. Kim and colleagues (2015), in turn, employed questionnaire data from taekwondo practitioners to demonstrate a connection between serious leisure pursuits and personal growth and happiness.

Fighting games can be defined as competitive videogames of 'close-quarters combat [where] characters ... have standard and special attacks, or "moves" [and] match

parameters are quantified on-screen in some way' (Harper 2013, 13–14). Almost two decades ago, Bryce et al. (2003) called for more varied investigations on gaming as serious leisure, emphasizing that nowadays 'gaming forms part of a varied leisure lifestyle for many adolescents and young adults' (14). It is still not uncommon for scholars to remind us, as does Consalvo (2019), that videogames research to date has focused on the exceptional stories 'but not sufficiently investigated them as part of lived reality, the everydayness, the boring, and the banal' (n.p.). While more studies on gaming as serious leisure begun to emerge in the 2000s (e.g. Taylor 2006), they rarely discuss how and why the individuals in question end up pursuing these paths and in what way their play develops. Hence, our aim in this article is to explore the development of competitive play as a leisure pursuit in these two different leisure contexts, from the first steps of involvement through to when it becomes (potentially and with fluctuation) 'serious', and then finally, for some, a career.

Method

Process and sample

We make use of two qualitative interview tools: traditional structured face-to-face interviews with participants recruited at tournaments, and structured online interviews by text-only interaction (e.g. Wirman 2011). All of these interviews were based on the following questions, which were the basis of more open-ended discussions:

- (1) How they become fighting game players / taekwondo practitioners?
- (2) Participants current relationship with fighting games; for instance, how much do they play and in what style?
- (3) In addition to playing or practicing, what other related activities they do?
- (4) How their relationship with the activity changed over the years?
- (5) What's the role of the community and physical spaces in fighting games/taekwondo?
- (6) How long do they think fighting games / taekwondo will be a significant part of life?

All respondents were encouraged to discuss topics that they considered relevant beyond the structured questions, and some individuals were later asked to elaborate on their accounts via private communication. We would have excluded responses indicating minimal familiarity or short-term engagement, but no such responses emerged.

For the forum interviews, we chose the 'Fighters Subreddit' section of Reddit, which is dedicated to fighting games discussion in general. We asked a moderator of that forum for a research permission, which was granted. Participants were informed about the details of the study and offered the chance to participate voluntarily. In addition to the listed questions, we requested that players share and talk about their personal stories concerning the relationships they have formed with fighting games. Respondents were given the option to reply in the open forum or privately. The call resulted in 14 responses between November 2017 and February 2018. We repeated the procedure in the 'Martial Talk Community' forum, which yielded nine responses within the same timeframe.

Onsite interviews were conducted in two fighting game tournaments and one international taekwondo event: DreamHack Summer '17 (Sweden), Koneistamo Tournament

'17 (Finland), and the Olympic Taekwondo Training Camp '18 (Finland). We collected 25 interviews from fighting game players (interview length ~25 min) and eight interviews from taekwondo practitioners (interview length ~20 min). The interviewees were recruited primarily by contacting event organizers, who aided in finding participants. In DreamHack the research permission was acquired prior to the event, after which the fighting game community was approached by informing potential participants about the study and consent. All onsite interviews were recorded using mobile audio-recording, laptop computer recording, and hand-written documentation. Our primary language of communication was English (19 interviews), but we also used Finnish and Swedish (14 interviews). The latter responses were translated into English. All researchers participated in data collection.

As an unexpected result of our call for participants, we were contacted by a party affiliated with various taekwondo institutions. They offered exclusive access to an unpublished version of a 204-page document 'Taekwondo Masters' Essays' with 14 personal reports written by long-term taekwondo practitioners (collected by the World Taekwondo Federation in 2007). The original purpose of collecting the reports had been a public contest where taekwondo masters were invited to share their life narratives. We include the essays to our overall dataset but do not discuss them directly here.

The total number of interviews and essays acquired by the processes described is 70, with a somewhat balanced distribution among the two subject groups. The saturation of this data was determined by the reoccurrence of pattern units in the interview responses (see later). Ultimately, all interview data were transcribed and merged into a single text file, in which the average length of an individual's narrative or response was 549 words.

A significant majority of the interviewees were boys or men. They represented a variety of nationalities from Asian and Western cultures, and the fighting game players were relatively young (mainly in their 20s) compared to the taekwondo practitioners (mainly middle-aged). However, we did not focus on the age, gender, or other demographic details explicitly, as our interest here was across players of all demographics.

Lastly, we did not distinguish between the players of different fighting games. We did, however, take the differences into consideration by often asking explicit follow-up questions related to the specific fighting games in which the interviewees engaged. The answers indicated that the differences between different fighting games (and their cultures) were small enough to be comparable for the present analysis. Due to the (even) smaller differences between the varying styles of our taekwondo interviewees, we did not pose them similar follow-up questions.

Analysis

The analysis of the data was done with an applied method involving triangulating hermeneutic meaning making (see Wilson and Hutchinson 1991) and the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994), as far as 'multiple perspectives must be systematically sought during the research inquiry [but] those of actors who sooner or later are judged to be significantly relevant must be incorporated into the emerging theory' (280). Our analytical process did not follow a strict hermeneutic or grounded theory ruleset, but combined aspects of these approaches: researchers examined each participant's text respectively with a goal to identify patterns of development – changes in the way in

which they practiced the activity – and these patterns were coded. Subsequently, a new round of analysis was started to combine similar changes into more general coded patterns until only three unifiable patterns were left. We employed *Nvivo 11* in the process to facilitate pattern recognition and to determine the saturation point (when new patterns stopped emerging). These patterns were verified via contextualized rereading by all researchers.

In the data collection phase, we took notes on the key elements of the onsite responses (2017) and integrated them into the follow-up inquiries both online and onsite (2017–2018), while being careful not to lead the interviewees toward specific answers. For instance, as we quickly learned about the key role of skill-related elements ('a' below) in the development process, we thus started inquiring for details thereof whenever such elements were brought up (not bringing them up ourselves). Likewise, the notion of stability ('c' below) was originally discussed merely as a 'willingness to continue,' but ultimately earned a stronger conceptualization.

Findings

The three strongest recurring patterns of development are listed below, and their more detailed analyses are provided in the below subsections respectively.

- (a) The respondents were inclined to perceive their relationship with the practice through gradual skill-related development and an increasing interest toward it.
- (b) The respondents were inclined to perceive the development of their relationship with the practice highly dependent on the community and social relationships.
- (c) The respondents were inclined to perceive their relationship with the practice as fairly stable and potentially everlasting.

(a) Acquaintance: skill-related development

In both player groups, the descriptions and narratives of personal development formed a certain *acquaintance stage*. This is roughly comparable to the initiation/introduction phases in earlier research (e.g. Buning and Gibson 2015) with the caveat that acquaintance is coined here explicitly as a stage though which individuals acquire the critical abilities and skills. Following a shared pattern, fighting game players and taekwondo practitioners habitually spoke of their relationship with the activity using terms like 'journey' and 'passage,' the early steps of which were consistently described as simple 'amusement' or 'leisure' (cf. Stebbins 2014).

Many of the fighting game players mentioned how their first experiences came from fun-driven play with friends or family. This was characteristically accompanied by phrases such as 'button smashing' and 'playing with eyes closed,' which implied an explicit lack of competitive knowledge. One of our fighting game players explicates:

I was first exposed to professional gaming in middle school (so around 12) and it always fascinated by the commitment to and skill in the games. ... Then in the beginning high school all of my friends began 'specializing' in certain games and I was stuck being bad at every game, so I decided to commit myself to 'specializing' in them ... From the

beginning it grew from fun entertainment to watch to something I want to take seriously and become a top player.

Likewise, most taekwondo practitioners had started the activity casually with a friend. For instance, one practitioner voiced taekwondo being first a ‘hobby where you went two times a week,’ the main motivation being ‘just for fun’ since ‘it was free and they had the best demonstration’ or one ‘could get there with one bus.’ This period was considered a relatively short one, though, as they soon began to take practice more seriously. This included participating in competitions and exerting ‘deliberate practice’ (see Ericsson and Charness 1994) in order to improve skills. The transition was specifically marked by a deeper understanding that enabled reconceptualizing taekwondo from ‘hobby’ to a competitive ‘sport.’

Fighting game players often expressed this transition by going beyond the status of a ‘casual player.’ Here the activity turns into a more nuanced practice, involving the desire to learn combos and strategies. According to one interviewee, the big change was ‘to move from completely casual button smashing to trying to actually win the games.’ Unlike in taekwondo, fighting game players seem to take this step before entering (or thinking about entering) official tournaments or local communities. In fact, for fighting game players the desire to become better appears to be one of the key reasons for starting to build social networks around the scene and entering social groups. Another player articulated:

I used to play at home online PvP at first. That sucked. I wanted to challenge myself and really get better, so I came here [the tournament]. It’s been so much more exciting since, this is where I want to be.

The ways in which social communities of fighting gamers tend to focus on skill development and specific playstyles has been noted in earlier research. In the most comprehensive study on fighting game culture to date, Harper (2013) points how the social communities of fighting game players online and offline focus on ‘adherence to and development of a particular way of playing’ (139). This coheres with our interviewees’ strong tendencies to construct and incorporate a specific (usually competitive) approach to play:

When I was 6, my brother and sisters bought the Super NES. We had Killer Instinct and Mortal Kombat ... In that time, I was clueless, so I button mashed like crazy, but I wanted to beat my brother. Fast forward to 7 or 8 years, I bought myself a PS2 with the pocket money my parents give to me every month. I discover Tekken 5, and I was in a youth center. They also had the game. My first tourneys were there. My first true wins and my first grain of salt too. This is where I discovered what fighting games truly are.

Many taekwondo practitioners in our sample had already vacated (or were vacating) from active competition yields, yet: their personal skill development in relation to the activity still continued. Many of the older taekwondo practitioners started to perform actively as coaches, event organizers, and referees, which appears to grant them similar learning opportunities and skill development that competition-driven improvement once did. As a coaching taekwondo practitioner put it:

At some point I realized that this didn’t have to be only about improving myself, but others too. So, I became an assistant coach, which eventually allowed me to advance to more

demanding positions with greater responsibilities. Persistent development has thus become a way of living, I couldn't see my life without it anymore.

Along these lines, the taekwondo practitioners who still actively competed were inclined to assert that they would continue pursuing the activity as coaches or organizers later. While this element was not as prominently present among fighting game players (in this community coaching was less established in general), a few were already involved in organizing competitions and events for other players. Two interviewees were explicitly planning to turn their event organizing into a professional career.

I've been thinking if I could convert it into a job or something like that. It could be very interesting, but I don't know if this is such a big thing in Finland.

It started as a hobby I liked, it became an obsession, and now I wanna convert it into a job.

In summary, regardless of the present relationship that the interviewees had with their respective activities, they tended to recount their participation through continuous personal development. This development appears to begin with a certain acquaintance stage of 'getting to know' the activity, which potentially triggers a desire for competition and performance related skill development, later moving to other skills such as those of coaching, event-organizing, and refereeing. This pattern was also strongly present in the essays that we cite as a supplementary document: the taekwondo masters' initial passion for technical progress evolves gradually and, in time, turns into other pursuable interests that refresh and redefine their relationship with the activity.

This movement from fun-driven casual play to a more dedicated practice can partially be described as a shift from casual to serious leisure (Stebbins 1982; 1997; 2014). Unlike casual leisure, serious leisure is characterized by perseverance and effort, the participants having careers with continuity and different stages of involvement, continued practice with durable benefits, and communities with unique ethos that enable identifying with the activities. Similarly, long-term fighting game players and taekwondo practitioners exert effort to gain specialized knowledge and skills in order to make personal progress; the related communities and social worlds simultaneously beginning to provide support for their identification with the activities in question. That said, we consider the casual-serious leisure transition to be insufficient for describing this development process as a whole.

In Stebbins's (2014) serious leisure theory, the neophyte is introduced as the first category of participation in serious leisure. This neophyte means 'signalling to self, and often, certain other people the intention to get better [and manifesting] intention to get better by engaging in such formative activities as taking lessons, reading extensively, practicing fundamental skills, observing experienced participants, and the like' (31). In our data, gamers did express the explicit wish to become better at the activity, but this did not manifest socially. Social engagement, like joining local or online communities, occurred much later (see Stebbins 2014, 100). In taekwondo, on the other hand, the hobby started with supervised lessons and practice, thus including the formal element of structured development already in the beginning.

Stebbins further suggests that there are activities in which one cannot really dabble as they require 'a rudimentary level of competence before [one] can begin to do their

activity, even at its simplest' (Stebbins 2014, 33). We agree that activity type matters when it comes to the time and effort needed to develop one's leisure; however, our findings indicate that this is not so much a difference of leisure type but rather of degree. Both fighting game and taekwondo practitioners expressed clear awareness of what they were doing (developing skills) even in the beginning when their techniques were non-existent. Therefore, it seems more accurate to distinguish this early stage specifically by the acquaintance of those skills and techniques rather than dabbling, or a lack thereof.

(b) Attachment: community and social engagement

Nearly all the interviewees placed high importance on their local (and to a lesser degree also on the global) community. Such social elements tended to occur at a phase where the activity had already turned into a more stable part of the individual's identity and life, and with those factors, seemed to constitute a distinct development stage of its own. We call this the *attachment stage*.

For the fighting game players, finding a local community often marked the transition from the acquaintance stage to more dedicated engagement. Many said clearly that they would quit (or significantly reduce) playing if the community ceased to exist. To quote one player with a five-year fighting game history:

Of course, it's important that playing remains fun and the game interesting, but what really keeps me in month after month and year after year is the social part. I can't imagine anyone playing alone at home for such long times, they must be connected to other players if they keep playing.

In addition to being framed as the 'glue' that holds the player-game relationship together, social factors and friendships, in particular, were also considered critical for the competence-related skill development process. In fighting games, this was partly due to the present technological restraints:

There's a lag online, which really affects fighting games, so it's not optimal. I'm not in a life situation that would allow me to go arcades everyday [so] I play ranked online, which enables me to use my practice time somewhat efficiently, even though it's not the best way.

Similar sentiments underlining the importance of the technologically aware fighting game communities have also been expressed in previous research. Elmezeny and Wimmer's (2015) analysis of the *Smash Bros.* fighting game community indicates that many of the players had met their best friends via the activity. Adams (2016) studied the way gender was perceived and acted upon in a parallel fighting game community and found friendly matches to be an important part of social interaction in general, allowing men and women to collaboratively improve their skills. Harper's (2013) study likewise stressed the role of social arcade play and personal friendships as recurring entities in fighting game memories.

A minority of our fighting game players did not consider themselves active participants of local communities yet were still inclined to prefer offline play to online play; moreover, they considered sociality as a component without which the phenomenon (universally speaking) would not even exist. As one player explained:

[The social and physical spaces are] vital. Without them, we don't have any FGCs [fighting game communities] to begin with. Online play will never replace local offline gatherings. Fighting games are an arcade video game genre, entirely built around local play. You cut this out, you cut the main substance of it. Its 'soul', if you want.

The same attitudes and opinions dominated the taekwondo practitioners' accounts. Three taekwondo practitioners called the social network around the activity 'a second family,' and one practitioner detailing how it had become 'very intimate after all these years spent together.' Some others thought of the community as a 'network of friends that gives support also in everyday life issues.' The element was also prominent in the essays that employed the notion 'brotherhood of taekwondo' multiple times and likewise compared their local taekwondo community to a family, or their teacher to a father. Likely due to the longer relationships that the taekwondo practitioners (contra fighting game players) had had with their activity, the way in which they described sociality was more eclectic, crossing over to daily matters more often.

Beside the local taekwondo community, some taekwondo interviewees also addressed having a relationship to a wider, national (or even global) community. A team coach explained how he considered the communication possibilities of online communities to be an important resource for him when he needed help with coaching. In a similar way, a club owner emphasized the importance of online communities when he needed support, saying that 'I think it's very important, even if I am a horrible hermit by nature.'

The interviewees in both groups were very much inclined to consider local events and physical spaces particularly meaningful in the construction of their social ties around the activity. This applied also to those who participated in the study online. Fighting game players, in particular, emphasized that joint gatherings are 'how the genre is meant to be played,' or as framed above, the 'soul' of the activity that functions as the 'environment for the community to grow.' While taekwondo practitioners likewise talked about the importance of non-digital interaction, they did not point at physicality or materiality to any notable degree, probably because the bodily nature of the activity was too taken for granted for them to articulate.

A social peculiarity within the taekwondo group was the participants' high tendency to be actively involved in various event and social infrastructures. Entering those infrastructures appeared to happen by 'accident' at first, subsequently leading to demanding responsibilities. One individual describes a series of developments where he somehow ended up being the person responsible for a club's online activities (Facebook, YouTube, etc.) and their workout music ('I now know for more about K-Pop than any fat old man should know'), soon to be followed by instruction and refereeing as well as event planning and tour organizing for the K-Tigers (a Korean taekwondo demonstration group). While such organizational pursuits were evidently lesser in the fighting games group (depending on interpretation, between eight and thirteen players were doing that), the pattern of shifting a ludic profile from 'player' to 'organizer,' when present, was still largely the same:

I wasn't sure in the beginning if I even want to organize, but that's probably the way it goes with all organizers. I just wanted to play and when no one else organized, I felt I had to. And now doing that is all the fun.

As an exception, one of the onsite interviewees saw the social dimension in taekwondo as irrelevant. In his own words, 'I am doing the sport here, that's the thing why I do taekwondo ... for me the community's role is not very big.' Nevertheless, this individual also self-diagnosed himself as an exception and considered that he was not representative of taekwondo practitioners overall.

To sum up, the initial acquisition stage of exploring and learning a competitive leisure activity seems to be followed by an attachment stage where the individual comes to accept the practice as part of their social lives. At this point, communities and shared spaces (offline and online) come to play a central role. For fighting game players this sociality is partially delineated by the present technological limitations: their desire to develop competence and skills is limited without an active non-digital peer-group. Since for taekwondo practitioners the activity is already integrated into physicality by default, they more often perceived interaction and sociality in terms of coaching, event organization, and other 'para-competitive' conventions. That said, many of them were also active users of online taekwondo spaces, which makes the split between non-digital/digital activities and communities misleading (see Wilson and Atkinson 2005).

(c) Accommodation: role transitions and permanence

Almost everyone in both groups stated that it was likely that they would follow their respective games for a very long time or the rest of their lives. In one interviewees' words:

I cannot imagine a life without fighting games somehow in it. There's like a 'connection' between me and the fighting games culture, it's connected to me and part of me.

A taekwondo practitioner used almost identical words; as she put it, 'These days it's a way of life; I can't separate taekwondo and the rest of my life from each other as they are kinda glued together or one and the same.'

Some participants still acknowledged that the future is always unpredictable and there are outside elements, such as work or family, which might force them to spend less time on the activity one day. Another common fear was the possibility of injuries, which was implied or stated frequently in both groups. For instance, one fighting game player was sure to keep on playing 'as long as my wrist can take it,' while a taekwondo practitioner would stay with the sport 'as long as my body can take it and my head can take it.' Both of these individuals emphasized that they would keep on following the scene even if they were not be able to compete or practice anymore.

Evidently, the previously discussed social engagement factors are relevant here. For instance, several fighting game players remarked that the time they invest in the activity would surely decrease if their friends stop playing. While the same mentality was strong among the taekwondo practitioners ('I wouldn't do this without the people around me'), they never worried about losing their friends or the community breaking up, which was an occasional fear in the fighting games group. A fighting game player specialized in *Tekken* stated:

If my wrist holds, I will keep playing for sure. But you know, I already had to quit *StarCraft* some years ago because it was too much for the wrist ... Anyway, if this game [*Tekken*] remains popular in the future too and people are playing it, I will be there as well. Actually, I think my problem now is more like being in this thing more intensely than is optimal haha

The taekwondo practitioners were also more confident and open about the foreseeable changes to their relationship with the activity. For them, a typical idea of their personal future involved a distinct transition from the physically active 'competitive' role to a position helping the community. One practitioner entertained her future as a 'Taekwondo Granny' who would take care of younger practitioners and support them in their path to competitive betterment; a channel of progression that she would no longer be able to pursue herself (cf. 'legends' in Beaumont and Brown 2015).

Donnelly and Young (1988) have argued the roles and identities of subculture members 'should not be thought of as static positions and entities [as they] are constantly undergoing revision and change due to a variety of processes both within and outside the subculture' (237). Studying windsurfers, in turn, Wheaton (2003) has evidenced how 'sub-cultural status and identity are central to [the participants'] sense of self' (93–94). While subcultural approaches have been under debate especially since Bennett's (1999) influential remarks – subcultures are hardly fixed but 'prime examples of the unstable and shifting cultural affiliations' (605) – our participants strongly voiced various processes that kept their relationship with activity as 'undergoing revision' and these revisions often reflected the cultural and personal status of the activity.

The documented taekwondo essays exemplify the activity's status as a life-long journey that does not end but evolves. An international referee in his 50s, for instance, asserted that 'the older I get [the] more I rely on taekwondo,' while a teacher in her 60s wrote that 'taekwondo is still the center of life.' With career paths such as these being acknowledged and idolized within taekwondo cultures, it is easy to perceive one's relationship with the activity advancing through and toward later phases of life. While fighting game players' lack of similar future visions can be partially explained by their lower age average, taekwondo's prominent status as an Olympic sport and cultural recreation should be given a note too: currently, fighting game players have few concrete models of what it means to live with the activity and engage with it as an older person. Moreover, taekwondo is a full-contact sport, so its practitioners might consider it more palpable that, with increasing age and the bodily changes brought by it, their engagement occurs under physiological limits. Physiological factors are less dominant in fighting games, for which their players might not perceive ageing in an equally prominent light.

Although commitment to fighting games or taekwondo, as such, was not the 'organizing principle in participants' whole lives' – as it was for Wheaton's (2003, 86) hard core windsurfers – our interviewees in both groups had a tendency to express their dedication in many ways and specifically by recounting the number of years or decades that they had spent with the activity. Those years occasionally functioned as the rationale for continuation; there is no reason to stop after the grand investments of time and effort already done. A fighting game player explains:

I've been in this for more than 10 years and now I know so much about everything, I cannot imagine a reason for quitting anymore. It's possible that a time comes when I play less because of other things in life, but I will never-ever quit.

Some of the interviewees also brought up the fact that they were left with very little time for other activities; nevertheless, this was hardly considered a problem, but rather a choice that they lived with. In light of these comments, it seems reasonable to conceptualize

some of the individuals in terms of an *accommodation stage*; a chapter of development where the activity has become a permanently conceived part of the person's life. Another fighting game player continues:

I have had an interest in fighting games for almost my entire life and have had an involvement in them to varying degrees for about as long. I don't think there will ever come a day where I won't be at least interested in fighting games, the people who make them, the people who organize events for them, and the people who play them.

While the actual permanence of this player-game relationship is obviously never absolute, some of the individuals in our sample had already spent several years or decades with their respective activities. For those to whom the activities had transformed into coaching, organizing, and other para-competitive pursuits, the activity was often also part of the lives financially, which adds a critical element to the picture.

In a book-length mixed method study on fighting games, Thompson (2014) offers a somewhat different picture from the above. Like our interviewees, he stresses the importance of the community for long-time players; however, for him the fighting game communities are rather 'communities of expertise' where the development of personal play skills is the core of the activity to such a degree that a lack of improvement will eventually lead to a dismissal from the community. While we obviously cannot speak for those who have quit, we found no evidence of personal playing skills to be a requirement of continued participation in fighting game or taekwondo communities. Instead, our study suggests that the communities have an expectation (or at least an understanding) that eventually life is likely to interfere with one's dedication. Keeping in mind that none of the interviewees considered it likely that they would quit playing or no more participate in the community, very little indicates a decrease in skill development would lead to leaving or being dismissed from the community. Instead, reduced dedication seems to lead to a different role in the community. One of our fighting game interviewees (she had played for multiple years) recaps:

My playing fluctuates along with my motivation and other life, but I still see myself being here as long as the games are here too. Going to events and practicing depends on what other things I'm doing at the time, but I keep on finding this 'spark' for fighting games over and over again and I don't think it will ever end. I know I'm never gonna be the best or even 'good' at these games, but that's ok since to me this activity means something else.

Two professional coaches among our taekwondo interviewees explicitly recalled being identified as amateurs in the past, whereas some of the fighting game players were hoping to turn their activities into a job. In this fashion, volunteering was also a more general way for individuals who practiced taekwondo or played fighting games to venture forth and help the community to which they belonged. Notably, this echoes Beaumont and Beaumont and Brown's (2015, 79) findings on surfers who, after several years of surfing, tend to include their partners, children, and friends in the leisure in order to accommodate the community to their lives in new, responsible ways.

Against the theoretical departure point of Stebbins, our participants did not perceive their progress with the activity as a 'career' but rather as an evolving part of life. While most human activities can be described in terms of the stages of Stebbins's (2014, 40) leisure career development – i.e. beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and decline, – our study indicates that such a conceptualization does not capture the

multidimensional nature of competitive leisure in life, which, based on our findings, evolves and fluctuates between communities, goals, and the roles in them. For example, the role transition from a competitor to an organizer (present in both taekwondo and fighting games) resulted in declines in competitive involvement, yet at the same time spawned new goals and development trees; followed by other kinds of establishment and maintenance that, again, could end up with a decline to be replaced by another related role such as that of a coach.

In sum, our findings support a view that perceives of the ultimate stage of the individual-leisure relationship as accommodation: not an endpoint, but a personal acceptance and stable integration of the activity into one's identity so that, regardless of one's ever-changing goals, roles, and the social world within the activity, the activity remains an important part of life.

Discussion

Our qualitative analysis of 56 interviews and 14 externally documented life narratives on a continuous long-term relationship with fighting games and taekwondo suggests that people evolve along with their competitive play activities through three stages: *acquaintance*, *attachment*, and *accommodation*. These stages are hardly exhaustive; rather, we propose them as a general frame through which such developments can be analysed and questioned not in terms of careers or linear progress, but rather in terms of multidimensional human attachment that involves various evolving elements.

Our findings add to both the empirical and theoretical understanding of human leisure development by providing a perspective that sheds further light on the variety of engagement modes and their evolution in competitive activities (cf. Donnelly and Young 1988; Getz 2008; Buning and Gibson 2015). In particular, our perspective provides an alternative to thinking of leisure development as a 'career.' Stebbins (2014) notes:

a leisure career is the typical course, or passage, of a type of amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer that carries the person from the stage of neophyte into and through a leisure role and possibly into and through a work role. (38)

In our study, the participants' modes of engagement did not correspond to this typical course or passage for two reasons: their continued engagement remained motivated by factors beyond the goal-drive pursuits, and their involvement did not progress by the serious leisure path. While progress was certainly part of our participants' development in many ways, the goals that directed that progress were often unstable and dependent on their fluctuating roles and levels of involvement. Hence, instead of looking at the individuals' development with the activity through their *progress* in it, our stages represent the individual's identity-based socioemotional *relationship* with the activity – fluctuating participation and movement back and forth between different kinds and modes of engagement.

The acquaintance stage is characterized mainly by ludic exploration; the individual is involved in order to have good time and learn what the activity is about. If their relationship with the activity continues (it need not), the attachment stage follows; here one has generally become interested in developing or performing their skills and affiliating with the social environment around them, thus incorporating the activity as part of their

identity. Eventually, the relationship may proceed to the accommodation stage where one comes to perceive their esteemed activity as a permanent part of life.

Stebbins' (1982; 1997; 2014) categories of serious leisure (amateurism, hobbyism, volunteering) can be used to distinguish between some key roles in fighting games and taekwondo activities; however, such categories are incapable of capturing the fluidity and range of these roles. Individuals tend to act toward multiple goals and roles simultaneously (and sometimes none); moreover, what it means to take a 'volunteer' path in the Internet age for a digital fighting game (virtual forum moderation, strategy guide building, online video editing, etc.) can be difficult to compare to many other forms of volunteering due to their nature as 'playbour' (e.g. Kücklich, 2005). Since similar arguments can be made about amateurism, hobbyism, and almost any such category to be invented, we repeat that people too evolve with their leisure(s) and our study shows little evidence for fixedness of role categories.

Limitations of research

We recognize the culturally and socially complex nature of these experiences, which can be difficult to capture. Therefore, we highlight some reservations regarding the data and their collection.

First, the reliability of our interviews via open online forums are given a critical note (see Massanari 2015). The pseudonyms provided by environments of this kind arguably decrease the reliability of responses, which we took into consideration in data collection and analysis. While we did not (surprisingly) find any responses low enough quality to provoke explicit removal, we validated the quality of unclear responses by contacting the individuals privately with elaboration inquiries. It is also worth noting that our online responses derive from leisure communities that are regulated by active moderators; which, we believe, increases the reliability significantly compared to bigger and less intimate forums.

Second, the dependability of the study is partially constrained by the chosen interview locations. Due to our strategic choice of excluding demographic details, considerations in this area were left unmapped. Our study remains generally replicable and part of the data openly accessible – to be compared, (in)validated, and further studied in the future.

Third, the sample consists of no more than two competitive leisure activities. Future research should probe whether similar patterns occur in other forms of competitive play, not least the presently thriving esports scene (see Karhulahti 2020). Meanwhile, the patterns of longitudinal ludic development with playthings that do not involve competition might be different (e.g. Fine 1982; Weiss 2011; Heljakka 2013).

Fourth, following Hughson, Inglis, and Free (2005), we agree that sporting traditions 'have undoubtedly been disturbed by media intrusion, whether harmfully is a matter open to debate' (45). Our study does not yield evidence on the differences between non-digital and digital (or offline/online) sports *before* the present era. It is possible that recent technological developments have changed the nature of these sports to a degree that differences, which possibly prevailed earlier, have now vanished.

Lastly, we highlight that a qualitative study such as the present one yields little information about the potential pattern differences when it comes to gender, nationality, and other alike factors. Keeping in mind that sports 'presents a particularly problematic

research field in term of over-rapport [since it] is a classed, gendered, age differentiated and regionally marked cultural activity' (Hughson, Inglis, and Free 2005, 170), we believe our question set and study to be transferable to studies that wish to explore those differences, both between demographics and different kinds of ludic activities.

Conclusions

This study provides evidence for the ways people evolve along with their competitive leisure practices through patterned but hardly linear development – from *acquaintance* and *attachment* to *accommodation* – which appears protean and perpetual at the same time. This applies to both non-digital and digital competitive leisure, the differences of which seem to be fewer the more they are studied. In each domain, individuals evolve along with their activity over the years, constantly seeking to renew their relationship with the activity either due to an inherent exploratory need or because of the socio-physiological changes in their selves and the environments around them. Previous research on gaming leisure has repeatedly acknowledged communities, subcultures (or 'subcultures'), and skills as central dominators for the phenomenon, yet without merging those entities into a developmental frame of individual growth (beyond earlier cited work, see also Sirlin 2005; Su 2010; Kauwelo & Winter, 2016; Johnson and Woodcock 2017; cf. Seo 2016). In this respect, our study contributes to the general study of digital games as leisure practices by providing a developmental perspective.

We also add to the body of literature of sports leisure in general. With a nod toward Wheaton's (2007) suggestion to 'think about the ways in which sport might be culturally specific, or at least *different* from subcultures based around characteristics such as youth' (295), our findings indicate that both non-digital and digital sports (online and offline) are based on longitudinal and cross-generational characteristics, which support the continuation of the activities for lasting periods of time with increased emotional investments – perhaps to a greater degree than the characteristics of many fragmented 'subcultures' (see Kahn-Harris and Bennett 2004). As recent findings indicate 'post-youth' participants of other sports leisure forms to especially value 'being a role model for their children and grand-children' (Wheaton 2019, 403), it remains to be seen if digital gaming, as part of the rapidly changing technology, turns out dissimilar in the future in this regard.

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