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Playing Video Games as a Supplement to Identity: Insights on Former College Athlete Transitions

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Traditionally, researchers of sport and physical activity have considered playing video game to be an obstacle toward optimal health and social outcomes for youth. This study, however, posits video game play not as antithetical to health and physical activity, but as a meaningful forum utilized by former intercollegiate athletes to maintain salient aspects of their sport identities. Through a grounded theory analysis of a sample of 13 former intercollegiate athletes, this study takes initial steps toward a nuanced understanding of the manner in which video games can assist intercollegiate athletes who are transitioning out of elite athletic competition. The findings of the study demonstrate the patterns in the social processes underlying video game play for the former athletes in this sample. Ultimately, it is determined that these former athletes play videos games as an outlet for competition, with competition functioning as a channel through which to connect on an interpersonal level with others, and in turn using the opportunity for interpersonal connection as a means through which to reinforce salient aspects of their sport identities.

Introduction

A growing body of sport research considers the evolving role of technology in the lives of athletes and sport consumers. One often-overlooked aspect of technological innovation has occurred through video games. Although many emergent studies of sports video games focus on consumption-related impacts of, for example, in-game advertising, recent studies have expanded the theoretical treatment of sports video games to the realm of more psychosocial inquiry; for instance, exploring how playing sports video games facilitates the construction of personal narratives (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). The implication that sports video games may provide a forum through which players interactively construct meaning suggests the potential for video games to serve a valuable function in players' lives. One such function may lie in the supplemental capacity of video games to provide a space for former intercollegiate athletes to perpetuate or redefine their competitive sport identities. If this is indeed the case, then the use of sports video games to ease an athlete's transition out of intercollegiate sport may be indicative of an unexplored, perhaps even subconscious, coping mechanism.

From a systemic standpoint, the pyramid model of elite sport development is predicated on the pragmatic concept of an initially broad participation base providing the pool from which

to identify and select only the few highest-performing athletes for elite teams (Green, 2005). Although such a philosophy tends to emphasize those athletes who advance to the highest levels of competition, its corollary also merits examination. That is, as relatively few elite athletes advance to professional levels of competition, increasing numbers of intercollegiate athletes are discarded from the development pyramid. While historically an under-examined population, athletes who transition out of the sport development system (either due to retirement, injury, or comparative lack of talent/ability) may struggle with the loss or diminishment of their sport-based identities (cf. Gerdy, 2002; Sperber, 2000). In fact, within the literature dedicated to the study of athlete transitions, a prominent subset of the research has demonstrated the attendant identity crises that often accompany an individual's termination as a competitive athlete -- be it at the intercollegiate, professional, or international level (e.g., Messner, 1992; Stier, 2007).

In fact, individual athletes often construct highly salient competitive identities whereby they define themselves largely through their sport participation (Leonard & Schmitt, 1987). The present research explores the role of playing video games (both sports and non-sports) as a means of redefining or perpetuating one's sport identity among post-competitive intercollegiate athletes. This study endeavors to begin the process of understanding video games, not as antithetical to health and physical activity, but as an emerging theoretical component of an evolving sport development system. Previous field observations and personal industry experience suggest that playing video games may provide a salient social psychological context for the enactment of behaviors and meanings associated with an athlete's overarching identity, particularly for those former intercollegiate athletes who no longer have access to the same types of competitive outlets provided through elite sport. Video games, therefore, may facilitate the negotiation of one's identity during the transition out of intercollegiate sport participation and into stages of adulthood where, for example, the start of a career or enrollment in graduate school may not always afford the same types of identity maintenance opportunities.

The findings of this study have the potential to generate a more nuanced understanding of the manner in which former intercollegiate athletes leverage the technological developments associated with new media such as video games to compensate for threats or changes to their identities. Given a systemic sport development model in which more competitive athletes are transitioned out of sport than advanced to elite status, it is important that sport managers begin to understand the evolving processes that former athletes undertake to accommodate such an affront to these meaningful identities. From an application standpoint, the results of this study may inform the development of athlete-centered programs at the university level which could deal directly with the challenges that some athletes face in coping with the loss of their athletic identities when transitioning out of elite sport competition, (cf. Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Sparkes, 1998). For those former intercollegiate athletes struggling with their identities in a post-athletic world, video game play may facilitate the creation of a type of social environment that replicates and supplements elements of their athletic careers during this critical transition period.

Literature Review

Video game-related studies have traditionally focused on either the developmental and learning effects of playing games for children (e.g., Becker, 2007) or understanding the more universal processes of embodiment and identity for adult players (e.g., Murphy, 2004). Only within the last decade have researchers begun to explore the effect of commercial video game play for athletes. The first study to explore this effect utilized a golf video game to determine if

substitutive visual cues enhanced the learning of force control in putting for golfers (Fery & Ponserre, 2001). Although sport psychology research has since expanded the use of simulations for training athletes, the only research that explicitly references the effect of commercial video game play on athletes comes from a single researcher. Silberman (2005a) posited that not only does commercial sports video game play mediate the sports participation rates of college students, but that professional athletes actually use video game play to enhance their understanding and expertise of strategies, as well as to become more responsive to potential opponent strategies (Silberman, 2005b). Hayes and Silberman (2007) have provided the only comprehensive assessment of the benefits of commercial sports video game play for athlete learning. In their non-empirical account, the authors outlined eight key benefits that playing sports video games can have as an instructional tool for athletes: 1) construction of mental models; 2) learning of tactics and strategy; 3) acquisition of the language of the sport; 4) practice in a physiologically- and psychologically-safe environment; 5) differentiated instruction; 6) enhanced motivation; 7) collaboration and teamwork; and, 8) technological proficiency.

Recently, sport scholarship into video games has sought to examine the more social and psychological aspects of sports video games (e.g., Crawford & Gosling, 2009; Plymire, 2009). Even these studies, however, focus as much on the experience of sports fans as they do athletes themselves. In terms of understanding the social and psychological processes associated with video game play for intercollegiate athletes, even less empirical terrain has been mapped. Yet, based on this researcher's two decades of experience as an athlete and a video game player, video gaming represents an indelible component of athlete culture, particularly during and after college. Consequently, this study endeavored to begin the process of articulating and interpreting the constructed meanings associated with playing video games for athletes, and to build off of this understanding to consider the role of video games in helping former intercollegiate athletes to attend to sport identities.

Grounded Theory as a Methodological Approach

Given the relative nascence of research into the social processes underlying playing sports video games, a grounded theory approach utilizing constant comparative analysis is employed to investigate this proposition (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory offers researchers a flexible analytic lens through which to explore individual and social processes, and allows them to understand the temporal sequences and links which comprise these processes (Charmaz, 2006). As the foundations of grounded theory derive from a social constructivist epistemological framework, the methodology situates the individual as the basis for constructing meaning in the world. More directly, grounded theory is predicated on a symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969). Although the perspective originated with the assertion in Max Weber's foundational works that individuals act based on their interpretation of the meanings of the world within which they live -- which also informed George Herbert Mead's use of the perspective within the field of sociology -- Blumer (1969), a student of Mead's, is credited with coining the actual term "symbolic interactionism" and elaborating its methodological framework. Ostensibly, symbolic interactionists contend that individuals act according to the meaning that objects have for them, and that this meaning emerges from social interactions with others. Further, these meanings are constantly negotiated and re-interpreted to help the individual construct the reality in which he/she lives.

In this particular research context, grounded theory is an appropriate methodology for two primary reasons. First, although the playing of video games has historically been subjected to mischaracterizations asserting pejorative outcomes related to social deviance and isolation, the act itself represents an increasingly complex and interactive social process (Johnson, 2005). Although the popular media have largely demonized the impact of playing video games for children, there has been comparatively minimal discourse pertaining to the processes -- good or bad -- that may precede or result from the act itself, particularly for adults. Second, the intricacies of this process in terms of the convergence of new media with the constructed realities of participants are still vastly under-articulated (Jenkins, 2006). Grounded theory, therefore, provides a methodological conduit for enabling the processes undergirding the playing of video games by former athletes to emerge within a flexible, responsive analytic framework aimed at identifying the patterns in these processes.

It is also instructive to preface this manuscript by first briefly discussing the distinction between how a traditional literature review is conducted and how one is integrated into a grounded theory framework. As Charmaz (2006) notes, "the place of the literature review in grounded theory research has long been both disputed and misunderstood" (p. 165). Classical grounded theorists have traditionally advocated for delaying the literature review until after having completed the analysis in order to allow the theory to emerge without being unencumbered by pre-existing conceptualizations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992). However, Charmaz (2006) concedes that the expectations of modern scholarship often require researchers to adhere to procedures and formats that necessitate the inclusion of at least a cursory examination of the relevant contributions in a research area. To accommodate both the classical intent and the modern demands associated with a review of the literature, Charmaz recommends weaving the relevant literature throughout the article in order to "clarify ideas," "make intriguing comparisons," and "show how and where the work extends knowledge" (p. 167).

Data Collection

The starting point for this research began with Dave, a Caucasian male (age 24) who lettered four years in college football while playing for an NCAA Division-I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) National Championship-winning program. In addition to his athletic background, Dave has also played video games for the past nine years. The initial rationale behind this theoretical starting point was to begin the analysis by examining an individual with a more direct video game analog, or avatar. Given that football (and men's basketball) video games have become an integral part of the contemporary popular culture milieu, it is in the interest of proper theory development to initially focus on these athletes who might have a more salient identity link to the games (cf. Crawford & Gosling, 2009). Following the methodological tenants of grounded theory, theoretical sampling was employed after the initial interview with Dave in order to elaborate and refine the parameters of the emerging theory. In total, 13 former intercollegiate athletes from a range of backgrounds participated in the study. In spite of the typically high numbers of participants needed to reach saturation in a grounded theory analysis, for a relatively narrow domain such as video game play, a sample including 10-15 participants can be considered an appropriate size when the depth and quality of the data derived from the individuals in the sample facilitates reaching a point of data saturation at the smaller sample size (Wuest, 2007). This sample included 12 recently graduated (i.e., within one-to-four years of loss of cessation of play/loss of eligibility) males (five American Caucasian, three African-American,

two Hispanic, two European) and one recently-graduated female (African-American), and participants ranged in age from 22 to 27. Participants also played a broad spectrum of team (i.e., football, basketball, soccer, water polo) and individual sports (i.e., golf, track, tennis) at the Division-I, -II, and -III levels.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Participants*

| Pseudonym | Sport | Age | Years Out | Division | Gender | Ethnicity |
|-----------|-------------------|-----|-----------|----------|--------|--------------------|
| Dave | Football | 24 | 1 | I | Male | White |
| Seth | Basketball/Tennis | 27 | 3 | III | Male | White |
| Scott | Track | 24 | 2 | I | Male | White |
| Fred | Football | 22 | 1 | I | Male | Black |
| Steven | Soccer | 27 | 4 | III | Male | Hispanic |
| Kristen | Basketball | 23 | 1 | I | Female | Black |
| Tony | Soccer | 26 | 4 | III | Male | Non-White European |
| Chris | Golf | 25 | 3 | I | Male | White |
| Tim | Water Polo | 24 | 2 | I | Male | White |
| Matt | Soccer | 25 | 3 | II | Male | Hispanic |
| Victor | Track | 24 | 1 | I | Male | White European |
| Bruce | Football | 23 | 1 | II | Male | Black |
| Thomas | Basketball | 26 | 4 | II | Male | Black |

Data were collected through intensive interviews, which is a type of interview procedure that “permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic with a person who has had the relevant experiences” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). The interviews were conducted over the course of one 45-90 minute session in situ at a location of the participant’s choosing (which, incidentally, often ended up being on a couch while the researcher and the interviewee played video games). Although one might expect participation in an activity such as video game play during the interview to serve as a possible distraction, the relaxed setting afforded the predominantly male sample to talk about themselves in a more familiar and comfortable environment without the potential pressure of a face-to-face interview. In fact, when interviewing men, Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2003) suggest the potential usefulness of flexible interviewing tactics that draw from “indirect approaches to matters that evoke bonding ploys” (p. 66). In accordance with the methodology of grounded theory, interviews were relatively open-ended in nature, allowing the participants to elaborate at length on general prompts provided by the researcher. That is, the content of the interviews was largely driven by the participants, but typically focused on their backgrounds as competitive athletes, their history playing video games (particularly since the cessation of elite sport participation), and the role/value of video games in their day-to-day lives (see Appendix for sample questions). As the emergent theory became progressively more refined following each interview, the interviews took on a more semi-structured format to clarify and explore the relevant processes and issues raised in previous interviews.

Appropriate Institutional Review Board Human Subjects protocol was adhered to throughout this project. In addition to providing the participant with a letter informing him/her of the details and risks of participating in the study, the participant’s privacy was protected through replacing identifying information with pseudonyms, and maintaining the records of the data in locked filing cabinets and password-protected files.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data strictly followed the tenets of grounded theory explicated by Charmaz (2006). This particular approach has been utilized for its conceptual clarity, practical feasibility, and synthesis of divergent grounded theory methodologies (cf. Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this regard, Charmaz (2006) offers “a return to past grounded theory emphases on examining processes, making the study of action central, and creating abstract interpretive understandings of the data” (p. 9). Rather than adhere to the traditional grounded theory assumption that removes the experiences of the researcher from the emerging data, Charmaz (2006) asserts the importance of embracing the reality that “we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (p. 10). Given the researcher’s over twenty years of personal experience as both an athlete and a video game player this methodological concession opens the door to a more nuanced interpretive analysis than other grounded theory approaches.

After transcription of the recorded interview audio into an electronic word document, the transcribed documents were checked by the author against the original recordings for accuracy. Following this step, analysis of the data proceeded in accordance with Charmaz’s (2006) analytic framework, which afforded advantages over either Glaser’s (1978) or Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) frameworks because of its cogent synthesis of these two complex, often impractical methodological protocols. First, open, line-by-line in-vivo coding of participant responses was conducted in an effort to inductively identify patterns in the data while also preserving the voice and meanings of the participant (cf. Saldaña, 2009). Following the more descriptive, line-by-line exploration of the data, the analysis shifted to focused coding, a tactic which derives primarily from Glaser’s (1978) analytic framework for grounded theory. Focused coding was employed instead of Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) axial coding approach for its clarity in “using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). This process allows the researcher to begin to reflexively compare data to data, and the codes to the data as well. Next, the analysis progressed to theoretical coding (cf. Glaser, 1978). This level of coding encourages the identification of the central issues and processes through the theoretical lens of coding families. After unrelated categories were discarded from the analysis, theoretical sampling of the next participant was employed to further clarify relationships and concepts; this was also supplemented through theoretical sampling of the literature in order to help account for the emerging theory.

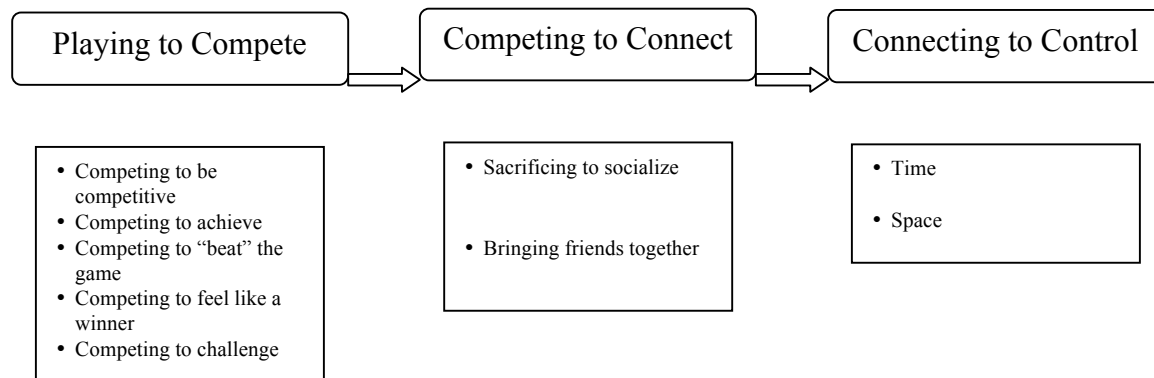
Throughout the research process, theoretical memos were written to chart the analytic processes guiding the development of the theory. The writing of these informal analytic notes ultimately provides the “pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers,” and constitutes “a crucial method in grounded theory because it prompts [the researcher] to analyze data and codes early in the process” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). In addition to serving as the framework for the writing of this report, theoretical memos also contributed to the trustworthiness of the data by facilitating self-reflexiveness for the researcher and encouraging “thick” description in the preliminary phases of the research (cf. Geertz, 1973). To further promote trustworthiness in the analysis, Charmaz’s methodology for grounded theory was precisely followed, an audit trail was created (including raw data, data reduction products, data reconstruction products, process notes, intention notes, and developmental notes), and another researcher was consulted throughout the research process to assist the author in establishing the trustworthiness of the author’s interpretation of the data.

Results

Despite the explicit emphasis on understanding social processes, the reporting of results in grounded theory ultimately takes many forms. Although some theorists have stressed the importance of reporting a “decontextualized analysis” (i.e., an analysis independent of any pre-established contextual framework) Charmaz (2006) counters that a contextualized grounded theory “can start with sensitizing concepts...and end with inductive analyses that theorize connections between local worlds and larger social structures” (p. 133). As the latter assertion is more in concert with the epistemological orientation of constructivist research, it will guide the reporting and transforming of the codes derived from the interviews into a theory to explain video game playing for post-competitive elite athletes.

For the former intercollegiate athletes in this study, playing video games represents a complex social psychological process that can be deconstructed into three interlinked phases: playing to compete, competing to connect, and connecting to control.

Figure 1. *Proposed theoretical framework for former athlete video game participation*



Individually, these phases each represent a significant motivation for an athlete to play video games; however, their collective meaningfulness may lie in the potential relationship of these individual motivations to explain processes of identity maintenance for former intercollegiate athletes. In essence, each phase may actually capture not an isolated construct, but an increasingly abstract process of attending to one’s constructed identity.

Playing to Compete

Without question, there is an inherent intuitiveness to the notion that video games provide an outlet for competition for former intercollegiate athletes who no longer have the daily, on-field forum through which to express this important component of their identity. While this certainly emerges from the data, the complexity and variety of the processes that underlie this pattern -- and the complexity and variety of the types of video games played by former athletes, ranging from sports games to war games/first-person shooters to party games -- seem remarkable given the quickness with which saturation was reached on this point. Clearly, competitiveness is a salient aspect of an intercollegiate athlete’s identity that may be diminished by a transition out of elite sport (cf. Blinde & Stratta, 1992; Lally, 2007), but what is noteworthy in this data are the

subtle variations in how and why athletes might enjoy video games for the competitive element that they afford. After examining the initial line-by-line, focused, and theoretical coding, five distinct types of “competing” seemed to resonate within the interviews.

Competing to be competitive. In other words, competitiveness is a trait that is valued both individually and socially, and video games provide a readily-available and innocuous brand of social comparison. Steven captured the sentiment expressed by many of the participants in noting,

I usually don't play video games by myself. I usually play them with friends because I find that much more enjoyable and I like to talk s**t to people when I play...When I was in high school, I would play all the time with my teammates because it was a good way to connect with your competitive spirit and go head-to-head.

Even as these former athletes have transitioned out of intercollegiate sport, video games have helped to perpetuate their competitive identity. As Dave admits, “I would say now that I like [video games] for the competition. I mean, since I'm not – I've just always been a competitive person.” Throughout each of the interviews, participants referenced competitiveness and alluded to the increased importance of video games in offering them an outlet for competition now that they no longer had athletic careers to fill that role. Their overall competitiveness leads them to engage in playing video games that allow them to measure their skill in order to make sure that, even if they are not the best, at least they are, as Chris put it, “not the worst one playing.” This attitude would seem like a natural extension of the type of competitive environment in which a former elite athlete has spent most of his/her formative years.

Competing to achieve. For these former athletes, however, it is not enough to simply compete; video games provide them with an opportunity to achieve a goal through the display of skill and mastery. Bruce, a former Division-II football player who now attends graduate school, contends that “what I kind of enjoy about them even more is that, aside from school and all that stuff, it kind of gives me something to do and gives me a goal.” While on the one hand, he was slightly embarrassed to admit that playing video games offered him the opportunity to pursue a tangible goal that filled a void in his new life (“hearing it out loud, it sounds really petty”), it is only logical that a person who has always trained in a structured manner toward accomplishing a task would seek out some means of reconnecting with this intrapersonal dynamic. For athletes, the goals that they strive to achieve may be synonymous, in some respects, with how they define themselves. Without some type of goal to achieve, they may lack a sense of purpose and direction, and video games help to “give me that back,” as Thomas put it.

Competing to “beat” the game. Although individual achievement was an integral outcome sought, at least indirectly, by the majority of the participants, many of these former intercollegiate athletes highlighted the similar-yet-distinct importance of “beating” games through collaborating with friends and working towards a superordinate goal. On a visceral level there appears to be a distinction that exists for former athletes like Bruce between achieving a goal for himself and “beating” a game with his friends:

If a buddy and I can spend a weekend beating a game, it almost feels like a mini-version of what it used to feel like to walk off the field with my teammates after a big win...not the same, but not as far off as you might think.

In this realm of competitive behavior, former athletes might re-create the feeling of working as a part of a group to achieve this superordinate goal, which is an extension of the process at play in the concept of “playing to achieve.” In essence, then, playing is not about finishing the game; instead, when friends “beat” a game, the term itself seems imbued with a richness characterizing a combination of social- and task-oriented success.

Competing to feel like a winner. When other aspects of life might be proving more trying, video games provide a physically- and psychologically-safe environment for participants to explore competition. Interestingly, video games were an aspect of these former athletes’ lives that, while purposefully random in their outcome (i.e., the games played the most often were the games on which the players were most evenly matched), afforded players opportunities for success that did not often exist on the sports field or the classroom. There was a particularly interesting anecdote in which Tony talked about how video games allowed him and his friends to “feel like a winner” when they “had taken a beating” in some other aspect of their lives. As Fred also noted, “the most important thing is if you play video games and win, you have bragging rights for the whole day.” In other words, video games appear, in this context, to offer the psychological benefits of winning without the drawbacks of losing, as losing apparently is regarded as ultimately fleeting. While many of the participants shared anecdotes about an important win over a friend or a devastating loss, both outcomes often highlighted the focus on enduring the temporary setbacks of losing in order to have the opportunity to experience the enjoyment of victory.

Competing to challenge. For young elite athletes, adults (in the form of parents and coaches) often exert a tremendous amount of authority over many aspects of their lives. In Dave’s case, his parents expressed assumptions about the lack of usefulness of playing video games during his childhood, which took the form of his mother refusing to buy him a video game system (“My mom wouldn’t buy me any video games”) unless he earned his own money to purchase it (which he did through starting a lawn-mowing service). Within many of the participants’ descriptions of video gaming during their adolescent years, there were definite undertones of rebellion in how they described their history playing video games and the obstacles that they had to overcome to gain the opportunity to play. In some sense, this may be an aspect of competitive character that is important to understand, especially when combined with admissions that Matt, like Dave and a few of the other participants, would argue with his parents about playing video games simply for the “challenge.”

Competing to Connect

“Playing to compete” represents an integral component of identity formation and exploration in post-competitive intercollegiate athletes. What is not entirely captured in the above discussion about competition, however, is the somewhat counterintuitive element of social connectedness that binds together (and both enables and results from) all of these iterations of competitiveness. Unlike actual sports, in video games it seems that competing against a friend is akin to competing with him/her – there is little perceived distinction in the overall social outcomes of the experience. For Tim, playing video games can be “so impersonal unless you’re actually playing with someone, which I’ve always found to be a lot more fun.” In addition, at least half of the participants spoke at length of the staleness and hollowness of individual achievement in video games, and insinuated numerous times that they rarely played any games by themselves, nor valued the solitary experience in any notable manner. Playing video games

alone can be “very sterile,” according to Tim. In this regard, “competing” is the impetus for the enactment of these players’ deeper social desires to “connect” with their friends and peers.

Within this stage, differences begin to emerge with respect to the demographic characteristics of the athletes. According to those athletes in the sample who were not primarily involved in team sports during their childhood, video games tended not to persist as a salient means of expression or entertainment. Scott and Victor, both track athletes at different Division-I programs in college, never experienced the types of social bonding that the athletes who played team sports in the sample did. According to Scott, “I was kind of so late to the game that I wasn’t really a part of that culture [of playing video games]. It just never really crossed my mind as something I could do.” In fact, for those athletes who either participated primarily in an individual sport and/or did not play video games earlier in their childhood or adolescence, the long-term connection to video games as a competitive, social outlet did not seem to materialize. Similarly, as Kristen describes, the female athlete culture does not have the same willingness to embrace video games, and as a result, has not cultivated video games as a salient aspect of the social experience. The reasons underlying this difference could be many, and likely merit their own study to complement the findings related to male video game play reported in this article.

On the other hand, those male athletes who played video games during their childhood/adolescence and played team sports through college, all viewed the playing of video games as a meaningful experience that continues to provide them with the social space to connect and re-connect with their peers. In these cases, the process manifests itself in three primary ways.

Sacrificing to socialize. There were a number of instances in which participants indirectly alluded to minor sacrifices that they made in order to involve friends in the video game experience. In this manner, the competitive aspects of the identities that drive them to achieve (and strive to be the best) are superseded by an active desire to share their competitive experiences with friends -- even if that requires them to refocus their efforts from success to inclusion. The athletes in this study re-negotiated their competitive identities in three explicit behaviors. First, they “took turns” to modify the gaming experience in order to allow for everyone to share in the playing together, even when the format of a game is single-player. Seth captures this phenomenon well: “my roommate and I... we just take turns. It’s a lot more fun to play like that than to sit there by yourself and, you know, it’s cool to have somebody else there to be like ‘Oh! That was awesome’.”

Second, these former athletes consciously play games that allow more people to play during accepted social periods, like when Dave switches to playing Rock Band (a music game that simulates a band playing replica instruments together on a mock music tour) on the weekends when guests are over in order to involve more people in a game that is conducive to a fun, social atmosphere. As he says, “On the weekend we play Rock Band and stuff like that – kind of a more social thing, you know, when more people come over. It’s a good game because you can get more people involved.” Although elements of competitiveness still permeate even the more socially-oriented sessions, and Dave remarks with pride over his ability to convert his video game drum-playing on Rock Band into playing real drums, they appear to be consciously secondary motives.

Third, some players have refused to buy a video gaming console of their own. This requires that they use their friends’ consoles in order to play games. In fact, Steven boasted about how he had not purchased a new gaming system in many years and only used what his friends and roommates bought (“...a lot of what I’ve been playing is based on, like, whoever has the

console”). What this entails, for example, is that if his friend wants to play a sports game, he plays a sports game; if his friend wants to play Rock Band, he plays Rock Band. On the surface, one might interpret his comments as reflective of frugality, but they may be a deeper reflection of a subconscious orchestration on his part to ensure that he would always have to have someone else to play with if he wanted to play. If true, this speaks to the intensely social element of video games for Steven and many of the others in this study.

Bringing friends together. Ultimately, the competitive aspect of video games leads to another reason that these former intercollegiate athletes played (and continue to play), which is captured in the notion of video games as a social space for friends to come together. All of the gamers in this study spoke with ebullience about how video games connect them to their roommates and friends, and serve as a new type of “watering hole” around which they can congregate. As Tony eloquently noted,

It’s very communal... Video games are the American teenagers’ ‘going for espresso’; it’s mindless and kind of fun; or like the bar dice game two old men will play in any Mediterranean country: it’s there, it’s ubiquitous, everyone knows enough about how to do it, and you just talk about empty bulls**t. You can talk over it, which makes it a superior social medium to television...even now.

Not only do video games offer these former athletes and their friends a chance to be competitive, as has been described, but they also create a channel through which to reconnect with one another to discuss (and interpret) the day’s events. Now that Fred no longer has the practice field and the locker room to serve as this social space, video games provide a proxy for relating to his friends and former teammates:

The thing I probably miss most is being around the guys - the camaraderie...because it is such a big part of your life, especially when you get to the college level. To give an example, the group of lineman or whoever, would come over to the house after games, and they'd have all the inside jokes that I was a part of when I played, and so now they'll kind of throw out an inside joke or something and they're all laughing and I just, you know, don't get it - it goes right over my head. And so, I'd say that I miss that the most...the part that's really fun is having a group of guys that have...a common interest, you know, have really done something together and put a lot of time into something together.

For Fred, whether it is playing with a group of former teammates at his house or playing online with an old roommate who has moved away to play football in the National Football League (NFL), video games offer an opportunity to come together to maintain relationships.

Creating shared memories. In addition to the two aforementioned social aspects, video games also provide athletes and former athletes a forum for the creation of “stories.” For example, Chris recounted recent memories when he and his friends “rocked too hard” and broke something in the house while playing Rock Band, and when he accidentally punched a hole in the wall after losing a close game to his roommate. These “stories” seemed to bring out the most pleasure in the participants during the interview, and trivial though they may appear, clearly hold an important place in the history of the relationships between friends and teammates. In fact, Bruce’s start to playing video games was when he and teammates in high school would use the coach’s film projector to play video games with one another before practice:

...high school is kind of what got me into playing [video games] a little bit more because what we would do was we'd have a couple guys that would bring their Xboxes up everyday and, especially when we had off periods before football, we would go and get the two film projectors that we would use for watching tape of the other teams and set 'em up in one of the meeting rooms on opposite walls and then connect them. And so it kind of became like that was what we would do before practice, and then we'd go out to practice and play, and so that was a lot of fun.

His memories of video games are all tied to the people with whom he shared the experience. Further illustrating the intense social aspect of both video games and sports for him was the recounting of his fondest memory on the football field – a play where he and his friend worked together to enable his friend to score a touchdown, a dynamic which is not dissimilar to the video game memories described by virtually all of the participants; however, as he no longer has the football field as a place to create these shared memories, video games have become even more prominent in his life.

Connecting to Control

Having illustrated the processes through which video games become an important forum for “competing,” and how this competition is integral to “connecting” with friends and fulfilling the deeper social needs of the participant, these two phases ultimately inform a more abstract process by which the former intercollegiate athletes leverage the social connectivity of video game play to manipulate and control time and space. Ostensibly, as video games have represented a salient supplemental outlet for the expression of their identities since they began competitive sport, playing video games appears to provide them with an opportunity to retrace patterns of childhood comfort. As these players leave childhood behind and graduate to adult responsibilities (evidenced by the cessation from playing competitive sports for all of these participants for the first time since childhood), video games offer an opportunity to proverbially “freeze” time for a period while allowing former athletes to recreate the experiences of playing video games in a social context that has changed very little over time.

One example of this was apparent as Matt spoke of playing “retro” sports games (i.e., sports games from earlier gaming eras, like NHL '95, a popular hockey game) with friends -- games which would have been played during his earlier childhood -- and how these games were often simpler and more enjoyable (“It’s a lot less intense and a lot less focused than the newer stuff, so it’s a bit more fun.”). Perhaps part of that perceived enjoyment stems from an enactment of nostalgia and childhood memories that transports him to a time when his adult responsibilities and concerns did not yet exist. Seth similarly recalls,

I don’t know why this sticks out to me, but NBA Live '95 would be one [of my all-time favorite game] – you can ask [name omitted] about this: I accused the game of cheating many times. When I think about my favorite video games, they all seem to link back to periods of my life that were really enjoyable. I mean, I was 13 years old. That was the first time I was going over to my friends’ houses and playing against them...that’s when I realized [competing] could be a social thing. I am always trying to get that back.

As Tim, a former Division-I national champion water polo player, also describes,

Growing up, when I was a little kid, what really got me hooked [on playing video games] was when you go over to a friend's house and you have a sleepover or something and you're totally stoked because you're like eight years old and you and your friends are doing whatever you want... You stay up late and play with your friends all night and your parents don't know that you're up... Now, at my friend's house, we literally have "Halo night." It is like a weekly thing where we order pizza, put a bunch of beers in the cooler, and like, we all just play. It sounds kind of nerdy, but when that's what all your friends are into, it's a really good time.

In responding to a question pertaining to his favorite video games of all-time, Dave alluded to the importance of ritual in his life, and spoke of how the poignancy of the memory of playing a particular game with his teammates ("Halo") everyday after practice in high school made it his favorite. In other words, his favorite memory of playing -- and part of the reason he still plays today -- stems from the convergence of his interest in sports and his interest in video games, and unites them in a ritualized social space. Perhaps by playing video games with friends and former teammates today, these former intercollegiate athletes can reenact their cherished memories in at least some approximated form.

Thomas, and approximately one-third of the participants in the study, also talked about how playing video games allows people to do or be anything they want to be, and permits them to experience fantasies that range from being a soldier in WWII to simply having enough time and money to get out onto the golf course for a round:

I think that people in general need something...to do like it's become for me now; something that you put time towards and there's a goal at the end - there's an outcome. Part of the reason they've become so popular is because it's a way to do that without having to actually do anything... Video games have sort of replaced [commitment to achieving a goal], you know, and packaged it up and left it in a really tiny, neat little bundle that you can do over the course of a month and you know, feel satisfied at the end of it.

It was also intriguing how, in his interview, Fred noted playing last season's college football game by himself (unlike virtually all the other experiences he described) and choosing the team that he actually played for to try and win ("I wanted to win a national championship"). This would have been his last season as a player and, in a way, he might have been trying to replay history to fulfill some unrequited aspirations that he did not necessarily need companions to pursue. This otherwise aberrant behavior appeared in interviews with Dave as well, and seems to be in accordance with idea that video games afford these former athletes a moment of suspended time and space through which to explore their identities.

In describing their fondest memories (past and present) associated with playing video games, the participants often alluded to the ritual aspects of their experiences. Whether recalling how they and their high school teammates would set up their Xboxes and play on the film projectors everyday before practice, or how they and their current roommates now "play an hour or so every night" (Seth), the ability for these athletes to generate predictable patterns of play appears to be an essential aspect of their enjoyment of video games. Through reproducing these patterns over the course of time, they have created a comfortable space to re-engage with the aspects of their identities that they no longer have the athletic field to help enact. Video games are not a new activity since their retirement from intercollegiate sport; in fact, they are an

increasingly important link to their former lives as both athletes and video game players, and the cultural rituals that these lives entailed.

Discussion

In drawing from existing literature to augment and support the theoretical development of the findings of this particular study, it is instructive to consider the processes at work in this dynamic through the lens of liminality. Liminality is a concept introduced and popularized within the field of anthropology, and has been historically used to describe an interstitial state of time and space during cultural rituals when the traditional social order is temporarily suspended (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Handelman, 1990; Turner, 1967). Recent work has incorporated aspects of liminality to explain a range of processes within modern settings, including sport-related settings such as the Olympics (Green & Chalip, 1998), sled dog racing (Kemp, 1999), cricket (Manning, 1981), soccer (McCabe, 2006), and rodeo (Errington, 1990).

Generally, during occurrences of liminality (which may range from religious ritual to a sport event, and many things in between) participants' roles and statuses are temporarily de-emphasized, and a sense of "communitas" is engendered whereby participants share in a common humanity with one another (Turner, 1967). For example, in both Kemp's (1999) and Errington's (1990) aforementioned studies, the shared sociocultural context of sled dog racing and rodeo, respectively, facilitated the creation of a liminoid space which allowed competitors to come together in cooperation and in pursuit of a shared identity. In pragmatic terms, the individuals in these contexts were in competition with one another; however, the social meaningfulness of the experiences subordinated the competition and promoted feelings of togetherness, at least temporarily. In many respects, the experiences recounted by the former athletes in this study fit within this framework as they competed with one another in social settings that allowed them to enact their identities without the presence of threats to their self-concepts.

In essence, liminality (and communitas) represents the ritualized experience of suspending time and space for the pursuit of shared meaning construction. As this state is often characterized by feelings of joy and belonging, it is not surprising that these former intercollegiate athletes may be crafting their video game experiences to adhere to the characteristics of liminoid space. Whereas before, the football or soccer field may have represented a suspension of time and space, now the playing of video games offers a psychosocially similar experience that permits these former intercollegiate athletes to re-connect with their identities in a comfortable, familiar setting -- one that momentarily strips them of their status as a former athlete who is now an adult with responsibilities and allows them to return to a romanticized identity as a competitor and teammate.

The concept of video games potentially fostering liminality for the former intercollegiate athletes in this study speaks to a larger point reinforced by McGonigal (2011) in her book *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. In this book, McGonigal contends that individuals are increasingly turning to the virtual worlds created through video games as a result of the inability of the "real world" to provide opportunities that satisfy deep-rooted human desires to be challenged with fun-yet-difficult tasks:

The real world doesn't offer up as easily the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, and the powerful social bonding afforded by virtual environments. Reality

doesn't motivate us as effectively. Reality isn't engineered to maximize our potential. Reality wasn't designed from the bottom up to make us happy. (McGonigal, 2011, p. 3).

In fact, the crux of her argument revolves around the fact that video games have become such a meaningful outlet for so many people because they derive from fundamental game design principles that appeal to and cultivate intrinsic motivation for participation. She further argues that "computer and video games are fulfilling *genuine human needs* that the real world is unable to satisfy. Games are providing rewards that reality is not. They are teaching and inspiring and engaging us in ways that reality is not." (p. 4).

McGonigal (2011) makes a cogent, compelling argument for why video games matter to so many people. Yet, in spite of spending a great deal of time and energy explicating what attributes make all games (not just video games) resonate with their participants, she does not engage with sport on any level. The findings of this study, however, suggest that one of the potential reasons that these former athletes may find such a strong connection to video games could stem from the similarities between the game principles underlying both sports and video games. In fact, sports and video games are two of the very few outlets for social interaction that derive directly from a shared foundation in games. In this regard, video games may not serve as merely an incidental incubator for the former athletes in this study who simply have more time on their hands as they transition out of elite sport; playing video games may actually represent an active, albeit subconscious, attempt by these former athletes to reconstruct the types of game-like environments within which they spent so many of their formative years. Therefore, while the positive outcomes associated with liminality may be a byproduct of video game play, it is conceivable that these outcomes derive from the verisimilitude of the game-design principles reflected in video games to the games that these athletes played for so many years on the athletic fields.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size. As a result, the findings described in this analysis are necessarily restricted to those participants who took part in the study. While the patterns in the behaviors and the theoretical contributions of the project have value in their ability to inform conceptualizations about the role of video game play for former intercollegiate athletes, there is still tremendous potential to expand the sample sizes in future extensions of this line of research to confirm the generalizability of the emerging theory. Although the relative narrowness of the domain likely contributed to the quickness with which saturation was reached in this sample, the research would undoubtedly benefit from continuing to examine the boundary conditions which may contribute to gender-, sport type-, and age-based negative cases. Understanding the differences in terms of the meanings ascribed to playing video games could potentially broaden (and deepen) the development of theory in this area. Similarly, it is essential to continue to map out the boundary conditions for the applicability of this theory with regard to the types of video games that are played and the living arrangements of the players.

In addition, further studies are needed to corroborate or refine the processual linkages described in this initial theoretical model. Of particular importance is the order in which the processes are thought to occur. While currently, playing video games for the participants in this study is asserted to be driven by a desire to compete, which is fueled by a desire to connect,

which is fueled by a desire to control aspects of the athlete's life, the order may emerge differently with a different type of sample. It is possible that with further studies and efforts to refine this theory, the notion that seeking competition ultimately precedes sociability may be reversed for particular athletes depending on individual personality differences. Also, while elicited texts through interviews are a useful tool, theory refinement should also continue to draw from analyses of extant sources of information such as video game magazines, Internet fora, and other subcultural texts.

With respect to extending this line of research beyond the realm of this particular study, it is important that the strides taken within this analysis be expounded upon to advance the discourse related to the complex social patterns underlying video game play for post-competitive intercollegiate athletes. Although this group represents a comparatively small population, video games have clearly emerged as a salient medium through which these former intercollegiate athletes negotiate and explore their identities (cf. Crawford & Gosling, 2009). Future studies may incorporate and extend these results into investigations pertaining to sport participation habits throughout the lifespan, as well as the sociocultural role of consumption in attending to one's sport identity.

Conclusion

The debate over the impact that video games have on society is one that has permeated the national media for nearly three decades (e.g., Benedetti, 2008; Quittner, 1999). Until recently, much of this debate centered around the belief that the mature themes and violence comprising the content of many commercial video games represent a threat to not only the individuals (particularly children) who play these games, but to the moral fabric of society as a whole (Johnson, 2005). While some studies have indeed found a link between violent video games and aggressive behavior (Anderson et al., 2010), for example, there are perhaps even greater numbers of studies that challenge the assumptions of causality within these findings (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). In addition to research on the impact of violent video games on children's behavior, there also exists a fairly well-developed body of work linking video game play with increased tendencies toward obesity in children and adolescents (Vandewater, Shim, & Caplovitz, 2004). Although this type of scientific substantiation certainly does lend some credence to the argument against video games, the outcry over the detrimental impact of video games emanates primarily from conjecture-based, non-empirical articles and polls that suggest that video games are addictive, harm social development, reduce attention-span, and rob children of real life experiences (e.g., Henshaw, n.d.).

The intent of this study was not to discredit or dismiss such concerns, for there are legitimate points raised on both sides of the debate. However, McGonigal (2011) warns,

As we make value judgments and hold moral debates over the addictive quality of games, and simultaneously rush to achieve massive industry expansion, a vital point is being missed. The fact that so many people of all ages, all over the world, are choosing to spend so much time in game worlds is a sign of something important, a truth that we urgently need to recognize. (McGonigal, 2011, p. 4).

This study, therefore, has emphasized understanding the more practical and holistic role that video games might play in the construction of meaning and social processes for former

intercollegiate athletes. The fact of the matter is that, detrimental or not, video games have become embedded in our contemporary media-driven culture (Jenkins, 2006). As sport managers, if we choose to ignore the impact of this undeniable sociocultural phenomenon, we only serve to distance ourselves from the society that we strive to understand. To illustrate this point, as of 2007 the Madden Football video game series had sold over 60-million copies and generated over \$2-billion dollars in revenue while spawning national tournaments and a television show on ESPN2 (Madden 08 Preview, 2008). Whether a proponent of them or not, commercial video games have a major impact on the current sport landscape, both in terms of non-athletes playing sports-based games and athletes playing a range of game genres.

With this in mind, the findings of this study suggest that, for these 13 former intercollegiate athletes, playing video games allows them to compete, which in turn enables them to socialize in a setting that is psychologically comfortable to them. In so doing, these former athletes are able to transcend time and space -- if only for an hour -- to put themselves back in a period of their childhood or adolescence when playfulness was valued, their identities were intact, and the pressures of finding their place in the post-athletic adult world did not exist. As a result, this study has not only taken a small step toward understanding video game play as an extremely complex individual and social process for former intercollegiate athletes, but has recast the discourse on the relationship between athletes and video games. Long considered to be, at best, a playful diversion and, at worst, antithetical to health and physical activity, this study asserts that video games can occupy a much more essential role in the meanings that athletes construct around their athletic and post-athletic selves.

Video games, often dismissed as a child's activity, are evolving along with their players. New generations of athletes have now experienced a childhood and adolescence in which video games represent an omnipresent form of social entertainment. As the intercollegiate athletes in this study transitioned out of their respective sports in adulthood, the memories and experiences of competing with friends and teammates in video games became nearly as poignant to them as their shared on-field journey. Only, unlike elite-level sport careers, video games do not appear to be something that these athletes must give up over time. If anything, the experiences of the participants in this study suggest that the intensity of these former athletes' gaming may have increased upon retirement from the sports arena. With fewer adult sport participation outlets (cf. Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2010) for the expression of a competitive identity that has been cultivated and reinforced over a lifetime of sport success, video games provide a relatively innocuous means of rekindling competitive fires within a salubrious social environment. As a result, former intercollegiate athletes are able to preserve and re-live patterns in their lives that more closely connect them to their past identities as competitive athletes than many of their experiences in the day-to-day adult world.

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