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Cyberathletes' Lived Experience of Video Game Tournaments

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Samuel Joseph Whalen entitled "Cyberathletes' Lived Experience of Video Game Tournaments." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Kinesiology and Sport Studies.

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Cyberathletes' Lived Experience of Video Game Tournaments

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family for their constant support for this project and throughout my graduate career. Special dedication to my brothers Zach and Andrew Whalen, without whom there would have not been the groundwork for this project through countless hours playing Nintendo during our younger years.

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ABSTRACT

Increased interest in video games has led to the emergence of competitive video game leagues and organizations known as e-Sport (Hutchins, 2008; Wagner, 2006). Much of the research on video games has focused on negative aspects of gamers' behavior, such as aggression (Ferguson, 2007) and addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). The majority of studies have examined video game performance from a third-person perspective using video analysis (Reeves, Brown, & Laurier, 2009) or behavioral observation when examining high-level video game play (Jansz & Martens, 2005). Prior to the present study, there had been very little attention devoted to gamers' experience of playing video games in the competitive tournament setting and presence of an evaluative audience. Research in sport psychology has demonstrated the challenges associated with performance in front of spectators (Beilock & Gray, 2007; Schmidt & Wrisberg, 2008). Thus, it might be assumed that the added presence of others at video game tournaments would create a competitive experience that is similar to that of athletes in traditional sports. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the lived experience of cyberathletes (gamers) during video game tournaments. Existential phenomenological interviews were conducted with twelve co-participants who had recently competed in a video game tournament. Qualitative analysis revealed a thematic structure consisting of three distinct contexts – *video game world, tournament world, playing world* – and four figural or major themes – *real life event, comrades and competitors, respect and maturity,* and *from cutthroat to good time* – that captured the essential elements of the these cyberathletes' tournament experience. A fifth major theme – *committed investment* – was not immediate to the tournament experience, but contained elements that were related to the tournament setting. It was

concluded that for the video gamers in this study, meeting and interacting other serious gamers was the most significant aspect of the tournament experience. In addition, the results revealed a number of fundamental challenges for video game tournament competitors that are similar to those confronted by athletes in most traditional sports (e.g., pre-event anxiety, distractions, and the need for competitors to maintain focus and composure under pressure).

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CHAPTER I

Introduction and Purpose

Playing video games has become a widespread cultural phenomenon in the United States. According to data from the Entertainment Software Association (2012), sales of computer and video game software reached $24.75 billion in 2011. Additionally, 67% of American households had played computer or video games; the average gamer has been playing for 12 years. To date, some research has examined the issues of who plays video games, why those people play, and what those people learn when they play (e.g., Vorderer & Bryant, 2006). However, the study of video games as a performance domain has remained largely unexplored in the sport studies literature (see Coakley, 2007, and Murphy, 2009, for discussions). Of particular relevance to sport psychology practitioners are the fundamental characteristics of the competitive video game experience for participants in order provide sound consulting interventions. Therefore, the primary aim of the present project was to capture the first-person lived experience of individuals competing in virtual environments, more specifically within the context of tournament competition. To achieve this purpose in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with high-level gamers (i.e., individuals that had competed in video game tournaments).

The types of video games, content, and control devices can vary greatly. For example, in 2011 the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences awarded Interactive Achievement Awards for “games of the year” to video games representing 11 categories. These included action, adventure, family, fighting, racing, sports, strategy/simulation, casual, portable, role-playing/massively multiplayer, and social networking (Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, 2011). Individuals also play video games using various platforms, such as home consoles (e.g.,

Playstation 3, Xbox 360, Wii), personal computers, and portable devices (e.g., iPhone, iPad, PSP, Nintendo DS). Additionally, gamers play on devices connected to online communities such as Xbox Live, which recently claimed to have over 50 million (Xbox Live, 2011). By playing online gamers have the opportunity to compete without being present in the same room as their competitors.

Research has revealed that playing online against other human users enhances social competition and, subsequently, enhances immersion in the activity (Vorderer, Hartmann, & Klimmt, 2003). There is also evidence that playing against human-controlled opponents leads to higher feelings of presence, overall enjoyment, and more frequent experiences of flow than when playing against a computer-controlled opponent (Weibel et al., 2008). Not only are an increasing number of people playing online video games, they are also spending a considerable amount of time doing so. Data obtained from 30,000 gamers revealed that the average gamer spends 22 hours per week playing video games (Yee, 2006). In addition to other possible outcomes associated with high volumes of participation, it is plausible that the large number of hours gamers spend playing online is comparable to the number of deliberate practice hours necessary for the development of expert performance in other domains (Ericsson, 2003, 2006; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). Moreover, the increased interest in video games and desire of participants to compete against others has spawned the formation of organizations that oversee and sanction video game tournaments.

E-Sports. Two examples of professional gaming organizations that closely resemble traditional sport entities are Major League Gaming or MLG (Major League Gaming, 2012) and the World Cyber Games or WCG (World Cyber Games, 2012). MLG claims to be the largest

professional video game league in the world. While WCG claims to be the largest video game competition, boasting over one million competitors (World Cyber Games, 2012). Both of these organizations represent the convergence of video games, new media, and world of sport. The result is an abundance of large-scale video game competitions that resemble competitions in more traditional sports (e.g., baseball, basketball, football, golf) yet are unique in that the competitive field of play exists in cyberspace. The domain of competitive gaming challenges traditional conceptualizations of sport and has therefore been labeled as e-sport (Hutchins, 2008; Wagner, 2006). Some scholars have argued that discussions of video games as traditional sport are inappropriate because e-sport represents a unique arena where sport, media, communication technology, and networked technology come together to create a "different" phenomenon worthy of its own field of study (Hutchins, 2008; Wagner, 2006). Nevertheless, some aspects of e-sport are comparable to traditional sports. For example, organized video game tournaments represent the institutionalization of the video game play experience (Coakley, 2007). Moreover, the video game tournament moves the competitive experience from a recreational activity to a sanctioned event with organizational rules that exist outside the constraints of the video game. Given the presumed difference in gaming as a recreational activity and as "real" competition and the relative lack of research on the experience of competitive gamers, the focus of the present study was on the lived experience of participants competing in video game tournaments.

Assuming that e-sport represents a unique field of study, some have suggested that competitors in this arena deserve their own label (Hutchins, 2008). The term most frequently used to describe such participants is cyberathlete, which is a moniker appropriate for those who regularly compete in video game tournaments for prize money. A slight modification of this term

is cyber athlete (Griffiths, 2007), which was used in a study of football gamers. Separation of the words "cyber" and "athlete" suggests that the type of game content (i.e., sport- vs. non-sport related) is a factor to consider when labeling participants. It should be noted that sport-related video games are not the primary focus of most major video game organizations. The notion of e-sport derives from the general setup of the completion not necessarily game content (Hutchins, 2008). For example, only one sport video game (i.e., *FIFA Soccer*) has been included in WCG competition since its inception in 2000 (World Cyber Games, 2012). Further, MLG has chosen to focus on popular first-person shooter games such as *Halo* and *Call of Duty* (Major League Gaming, 2012) and *Starcraft II,* a real-time strategy game, rather than on games involving traditional sports. Given that both the WCG and MLG make minimal use of sport-related video games, the term cyberathlete would appear to be the more appropriate descriptor to use for gamers who participate in organized video game competitions.

The World of Video Gaming

There has been only a modest effort to examine the world of competitive video gaming. Some researchers have focused on the ways gamers relate to the virtual representation of sport. For example, Conway (2010) investigated the behaviors of players of *Pro Evolution Soccer 2008* (Konami, 2007), a game situated within both video game culture and the sports world. The results indicated that player behavior was organized around the sport content of the game as well as the video game itself. Sport related behavior included participants wearing the jerseys of popular sports teams, talking about game strategy in relation to soccer strategy, and even making derogatory comments toward the referee. More generic video game behavior included participants organizing their actions toward optimal performance by leaning toward the screen,

communicating with others without breaking their gaze from the game, and engaging in ongoing discussion of game tactics. In a similar study, Crawford and Gosling (2009) examined the dynamic interplay between on-screen content and the video game player. The study focused on the way sport themed video games produced player narratives that extended beyond the content of the game to real-world scenarios of the sport. For example, one participant indicated that he liked being able to experience scenarios that could have never occurred before, such as a professional boxing match between Muhammad Ali (whose career ended in 1981) and Mike Tyson (whose career began in 1985). Both of these studies illustrate how sport video game players relate to both a virtually simulated scenario and real world aspects of the sport.

Another line of research has examined performance components directly related to the playing of video games, irrespective of game content. Some researchers have focused on concepts found in the sport psychology literature (Murphy, 2009), such as achievement motivation, fitness, teamwork, competition, flow, transfer of skill, and leadership, as well as the use of a variety of psychological skills (Lieberman, 2006). Previous studies suggest that playing video games may increase participants' attention capacity (Green & Bavelier, 2003); visuospatial resolution (Green & Bavelier, 2007); ability to visually track moving objects (Green & Bavelier, 2006b); performance on dual attention tasks (Satyen & Ohtsuka, 2001); and teamwork capabilities (Hussain et al., 2008). Preliminary evidence has also indicated the possibility of mild positive transfer of video game practice to the performance of skills in real world settings. For example, Fery and Ponserre (2001) found that performance of golf putting improved following practice on a golf video game. More recently, Buns and Thomas (2011) examined the relationship between participants' performance on a Wii basketball video game and their real-

world basketball skills and knowledge. The Wii user interface is a wireless handheld controller that players use to mimic real-life sport motions (e.g., the mechanics of the basketball shot). The results revealed that individuals scoring higher on the video game (*NBA Live '08* on Nintendo's Wii) possessed higher basketball knowledge and more basketball experience than those scoring lower. In another study using the Wii system, sports bowling was found to be an effective training tool for improving participants' real-world bowling performance (Dörrfuß et al., 2008). Particularly impressive in this study was the finding that performance improved for all participants regardless of their level of prior bowling skill. In a similar investigation participants played a football video game using a handheld controller connected to an Xbox 360 that did not allow full body movement (Marraffino et al., 2011) The results indicated that those with greater knowledge of and expertise in the actual game of football performed better on the video game. Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that the interplay between knowledge and/or experience in the real sports world and performance of similar games in the virtual world may be quite significant. Recently, Bowers (2011) interviewed former collegiate athletes who currently played sport video games recreationally and found that participants' gaming experience was characterized by three distinct themes. The first was *playing to compete,* which included the enjoyment of competing against others, competing to demonstrate one's own excellence, and competing to feel like a winner. The second theme, *competing to connect,* emphasized connecting with other competitors through video game play and enjoying the time spent with others when playing. The third theme, *connecting to control,* reflected the way video game competition allowed participants to relive aspects of their younger years when playing sports with their friends or teammates. The author concluded that for these former athletes video games

may have offered a virtual field that allowed them to reflect back on times "when playfulness was valued, their identities were intact, and the pressures of finding their place in the post-athletic adult world did not exist" (Bowers, 2011, p. 305).

Limited research has been conducted to examine the experience of highly skilled gamers or how such players actually play video games. An exception is a study of expert play for a shooting video game (Reeves et al., 2009). The game, *Counter-Strike* (CS), requires the shooter to interpret and respond to a virtual world created by maps that are viewed through the eyes of their avatar. The authors played the game in order to understand how skill developed. Video analysis and follow up clarifying discussions with an expert CS player served as the primary source of data. The researchers were interested in the practical experience and game mechanics exhibited during skillful play sessions. Among other things, this study offered insights into the skills necessary for the participant to be effective, the nature of collaboration, and the ways players learn in-game tactics by observing other players, whether they are teammates or enemies. The results revealed that participants used prior knowledge of maps, prior knowledge of the round being played, and collaboration with teammates to exert quick and rapid responses to in-game stimuli. The players' movements appeared to be holistic in nature, consisting of global sequences—such as avoiding sniper fire—as opposed to individual actions such as running and then ducking.

In discussing their findings Reeves et al. (2009) emphasized the need to further examine video game expertise as "lived play" with a focus on the holistic experience of the player rather than on observable discrete actions. Adding to the playing experience of gamers is the competitive atmosphere in which the games are played. It has been proposed that playing in front

of an evaluative audience, especially for video game players who spend most of their time practicing alone and unobserved, would likely increase the participant's arousal and anxiety, elicit responses related to perfectionism, and increase the self-monitoring of mistakes (Hays, 2012). Consistent with this notion are the self-reports of participants in one study indicating that they experienced higher levels of arousal when playing in front of an audience than when playing alone (Ravaja, Saari, Turpeinen, et al., 2006), particularly when the opponent was a friend rather than a stranger. The latter finding suggests that there are nuances to the competitive gaming experience that remain to be discovered.

The Competitive Tournament Experience

Sport psychology consultants have been cautioned to "consider domain-specific examinations of the performance demands, language, and other attributes of respective subcultures" when working with non-athletic populations or artistic performers (Poczwardowski & Conroy, 2002, p. 326). Given the limited research into video game competitions, one might look to similar video game events to gain insight into large social gatherings related to video games. Therefore, insights from Local Area Network (LAN) events might be useful for practitioners interested in working with gamers. Investigations of local area network (LAN) events have provided some insight into the nuances of the event and characteristics of gamers in large social settings. LAN events are where gamers connect their PC or console to other systems in a close proximity over a local area network or LAN. Jansz and Martens (2005) conducted a study at a LAN event called Campzone 2 involving 1200 attendees. The majority of participants were single men with an average age of 19 years and who lived at home with their parents. They spent an average of 2.6 hours a day playing video games alone but ranked social interaction as

their primary motive for participating at the LAN event. The opportunity to compete was a secondary motive. In a subsequent study conducted at another large LAN event (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010), investigators obtained data using participant observation and informal interviews. During the event, they observed gamers cycling through a number of activities that ranged from actively playing, to watching others play, to trying out new games from various vendors, to interacting with others in the audience. The authors concluded that navigating through such an event as a player may involve working through a number of different elements that could impact a gamer's performance in different ways.

Murphy (2009) argued that competitive online video games—not formal organized in-person tournaments—could be used as a tool for sport psychology researchers interested in teamwork, aggression, and concentration. However, the video game tournament would appear to offer a more traditional sport-like atmosphere—beyond online play—in which gamers compete in person with other gamers and perform in front of an audience. The physical presence of opponents and teammates coupled with the influence of audience members could present unique challenges for gamers who for the most part practice their sport in isolation. While gamers may be able to experience some competitive aspects during isolated practice—by competing against others through online networks—such an experience is arguably different than that of the tournament setting, which involves in-person opponents and an evaluative audience. The way the stations are arranged (screens facing one another or screens side by side), game type, and physical proximity of opponents and the audience also produce in varying degrees of social presence (de Kort, IJsselsteijn, & Gajadhar, 2007). Some research suggests that the mere presence of others in the tournament setting does not seem to increase the evaluation

apprehension of gamers. It is only when those others are able to monitor the performance of the player that a heightened sense of awareness begins to surface (de Kort et al., 2007).

Interestingly, research has also demonstrated that playing video games with or against another person who is physically present in the same room can increase enjoyment, perceived competence, and challenge compared to gaming in separate locations (Gajadhar, Kort, & Ijsselsteijn, 2008). These results might explain the appeal of competing in organized video game competitions for many cyberathletes. While some concern has been expressed about the possibility of increased hostility and aggression in tournament settings involving strangers (Anderson & Carnagey, 2009; Przybylski, Rigby, & Ryan, 2010), the results of one study revealed that gamers exhibited more aggression—primarily in the form of verbal aggression—when playing with friends than with strangers (Gajadhar et al., 2008). The authors however suggested that the verbal aggression exhibited by participants might have represented friendly banter rather than being hostile in nature. Regardless, the limited existing research suggests that the social-psychological dimensions of gamers' tournament experience deserve further study.

Gender and Race

Although the world of video gaming is still seen by some as "a man's game" (Ivory, 2006, p. 103), a recent report indicates that almost half of gamers, 47%, are women (The Entertainment Software Association, 2012). Other research suggests that female gamers are growing in number and view games as a useful medium for interacting with family members and friends as well as for meeting new people (Yee, 2006). Additionally, one study revealed that female gamers who played Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) spent a larger number of hours per week playing and were more dedicated to the game than males (Williams, Consalvo,

Caplan, & Yee, 2009). Thus, it appears that for some types of video games women may be more dedicated to their gaming pursuits than their male counterparts (Williams et al., 2009). Despite some of this evidence, participation levels among women at public competitions—such as game tournaments or Local Area Network (LAN) events—remain relatively low (Jansz & Martens, 2005). Some have postulated that such competitions are less appealing to women. Females generally seem to prefer playing video games for social reasons (Bryce & Rutter, 2002). This trend appears to be shifting, however. In 2005 the first female-only video game tournament was held at web2zone in New York City (PRWEB, 2005). Assuming the number of women interested in competitive video game tournaments continues to increase, it would seem important to obtain information about their experiences in addition to those of men.

In addition to gender, race and ethnicity might also be considered when studying cyberathletes and the world in which they compete. Given the limited research on e-sport and organized events, little is currently known about the role of race and ethnicity in video game play. Higgin (2009) was perhaps the first to comment on the ways video game characters with black or brown skin are minimized in favor of characters with lighter skin. More recently, a study of 85 role-playing type games revealed that options to character features such as skin color almost always defaulted to White characteristics or failed to include that of a darker skin (Dietrich, 2013). In addition, characters with non-White characteristics were typically found to play only minimal roles in some games. Dietrich (2013) argued that racial segregation and limited access to online communities among ethnic minorities resembles segregated conditions found in the real world. Thus, it is plausible to assume that non-White gamers may feel excluded from acceptance in the virtual world when they are unable to create characters that resemble

them. Moreover, if normative whiteness found in video games also exists in e-sport and tournament competitions, it might be argued that non-White gamers' perceptions of acceptance could impact their tournament experience.

Sport Psychology and High-Level Video Gamers

Considerable research in the field of applied sport psychology has addressed the psychological characteristics of elite performers and the mental training techniques that maximize performance (Williams & Straub, 2006). However, the study of performance in video games and the competitive environments that they produce has largely been ignored (Murphy, 2009). Some research has been conducted on the goal orientations and mood responses of gamers. Murphy and Oswald (2008) examined the goal orientation of video game players using the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSQ: Duda, 1989) and mood states using the Profile of Mood States (POMS; McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1992). The results indicated that ego orientation was positively correlated to aggression, anger, and anxiety suggesting that players who are motivated more by winning than by achieving task proficiency are more likely to be susceptible to negative emotions.

The competitive video game tournament setting represents a performance domain that may be subject to similar psychological processes that have been shown to be critical in successful sport performance in other domains. For example, arousal shifts can occur in either a positive or negative direction and produce states ranging from excitement or anticipation to dread or anxiety. The results of one study revealed that playing against another person, either a friend or a stranger, increased video gamers' arousal to a level higher than that found when they were playing alone. Furthermore, playing with a friend was found to increase gamers'

engagement with the game and produce more positive emotions—such as fun—compared to baseline levels (Gajadhar et al., 2008). These findings suggest that social setting can have an impact not only players' arousal level but also their performance. However, no research to date has examined players' responses in competitive environments containing numerous other gamers as well as an evaluative audience. Such research might generate particularly important findings given the fact that most gamers practice alone but are required to compete— — in tournaments at least—in socially "busy" settings.

Much literature in sport psychology has been dedicated to measuring and evaluating anxiety in relation to sport performance. There are two main forms of anxiety. Trait anxiety refers to how anxious a person generally feels while state anxiety refers to the anxiety a person experiences at a particular moment (Landers & Arent, 2006). Research with video gamers has examined state and trait anxiety in relationship to gaming addiction and other personality characteristics (Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010). The results revealed that both state and trait anxiety were significant predictors of online video game addiction, with state anxiety being the stronger predictor (Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010). The authors concluded that both internal and external factors influence gamers' anxiety levels although they did not mention specific sources of anxiety or how anxiety might be related to video game performance. Some have suggested that examinations of sport anxiety and emotions related to sport performance should take into account the contextual factors leading to that emotional state (Lazarus, 2000). A potentially fruitful way of accomplishing this task would be to interview participants and ask them to fully describe their gaming experience during competition (Nesti, 2004). Presumably, the video game tournament experience prompts some form of anxiety or nervousness before or during

competition. As seen in early choking research, simply adding an audience can result in increased anxiety and diminished performance (Baumeister, 1984; Kimble & Rezabek, 1992). Choking refers to less than optimal skill execution when the performer perceives heightened levels of pressure (Beilock & Gray, 2007). Thus, it might be predicted that video gamers are susceptible to similar phenomena during tournament competition.

Some previous researchers realized that video games could be a useful experimental tool for studying anxiety and performance under pressure. For example, Baumeister (1984) used Pacman and Ms. Pacman in the setting of a shopping mall arcade to examine the effects of increased pressure (i.e., being observed by another person) on gamers' performance. Participants who had demonstrated at least moderate proficiency at the game they were playing were recruited and instructed to perform at their best while the researcher pretended to time them with a stopwatch. Under such conditions participants' performance scores dropped an average of 25% compared to their baseline performance (Baumeister, 1984). The author concluded that such performance decrements were due to self-presentational concerns that emerged when participants felt their performance was being evaluated.

Similarly, Kimble and Rezabek (1992) examined participants performing both a simple video game (Pinball) and a more complex video game (Tetris) in a game room at a university. Gamers played alone as well as when being observed. The results revealed that, compared to playing alone, both high ability and low ability players performed worse on the complex game when being observed. However, low ability players performed better while high ability players performed worse when being observed on the simple game. The authors postulated that the more skilled performers perceived more pressure when being observed on the simple game because

they were expected to do better. The results of these studies provide further insights into the mechanisms by which performance can be impacted by perceived pressure, which, in extreme cases, may lead to choking. The research also illustrates the potential of video games to be used as a platform for investigating theories and processes related to sport performance in naturally occurring settings. However, since phenomena such as anxiety and choking are inextricably linked to perceived pressure in a particular situation, future research must attempt to capture the culture and happenings at video game tournaments in order to understand what elements might be contributing to perceptions of pressure. While it might be presumed that cyberathletes attempt to perform at their best regardless of the specific tournament, little is currently known regarding the potential impact of video game tournament culture or other factors on the competitive experience and performance of gamers.

Studies examining the performance of game players have proven to be foundational in improving our understanding of various aspects of human behavior, memory, and concentration. In particular, previous research with chess players has revealed how experts use memory (Simon & Chase, 1973) and develop expertise (Charness et al., 2005). The results of these studies have also informed theoretical proposals such as the deliberate practice framework (Ericsson et al., 1993), which was developed based on evidence obtained in studies of advanced chess players and highly skilled musicians and subsequently used to examine superior performance in more traditional sport settings (Janelle & Hillman, 2003).

Some have recently suggested that video game experiences mirror some of the strategic elements of games such as chess (Reeves et al., 2009). Moreover, video games and the virtual worlds they create offer substantially more complex permutations of in-game strategies and

actions within the confines of the game structure. Video games require rapid processing of large amounts of visual data created on the screen as well as high motor demands related to manual dexterity and movement speed. Beyond the perceptual-motor demands of the game itself, the tournament setting can present additional elements gamers must navigate to be successful. Charness et al. (2005) found that tournament experience was critical to the development of expertise for chess players and postulated that repeated exposure to competition enabled players to better deal with unique elements of the tournament setting, such as time pressure, anxiety and emotion, and distractions inherent in the competitive context. More recent research suggested that competing against high rated chess players is key to obtaining one's own high rating while hours studying the game and practicing alone have only minimal impact on rating (Howard, 2013). Thus, it appears that examinations of the experience of cyberathletes in the tournament setting might also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mental demands and nuances of the sport.

The Negative Impact of Video Games

Much of the existing research has investigated the potentially negative consequences of playing video games, such as increased aggression and violence. In recent years, the amount of research into video game addiction has also increased. Video game addiction is the excessive and compulsive use of computer or videogames that results in social and/or emotional problems (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009). The mechanisms that underlie video game addiction are thought to be similar to those that cause and perpetuate gambling addiction. One response to this assumption has been the development of a video game addiction scale based on elements related to pathological gambling (Lemmens et al., 2009). However, others have suggested that the

pathological gambling analogy may not capture addictive or maladaptive aspects of video game behavior. Ferguson, Coulson, and Barnett (2011) contend that research on addictive video game play should focus more on how much gaming interferes with everyday activities than on the shear amount of gaming activity. Their review of studies on internet gaming addiction revealed several risk factors associated with pathological gaming behavior, including increases in neuroticism, social isolation, and diminished self-control (Ferguson et al., 2011). Gaming addiction can also contribute to diminished academic performance, minimal to no real-life relationships, and lowered psychosocial well-being (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). However, it appears that the amount of time spent playing video games needs to be considered within the gamer's cultural context. For example, many South East Asian countries have a robust gaming circuit that regularly sells out large arenas. Within this cultural context people have a high regard for professional video gamers (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). There is no consensus among researchers as to what exactly constitutes problematic gaming behavior or how such behavior should be examined.

A recent concern associated with the playing of some video games is the potential impact it might have on aggression levels. Currently there is disagreement in the games studies literature as to the possibility of a direct causal link between playing violent video games and players' aggression (Przybylski et al., 2010). For example, Przybylski et al. (2010) found that violent video game content was not a consistent motivator of video game play. Further, while participants reporting higher levels of trait aggression were found to be more interested in playing games with violent content, such content was a not a significant predictor of play motivation or game enjoyment. For most participants, violent game content was either not

related to game appeal or even detracted from it (Przybylski et al., 2010). Other researchers have suggested two competing views of how playing video games might be related to aggression (Anderson & Carnagey, 2009). The first view follows a General Aggression Model, which suggests that various input variables—such as provocation and aggressive personality—can impact behavior by influencing players' current cognitions, affective state, and physiological arousal. According to this model violent game content would be expected to evoke more aggressive attitudes, behaviors, and thoughts than non-violent content. The second view holds that the competition situation itself is what elicits increased aggressiveness, irrespective of game content. According to this view, the competitive aspects of certain situations increase players' physiological arousal, which has been linked to increased aggression (Berkowitz, 1993). In order to test these two views Anderson and Carnagey (2009) conducted a several studies in which participants played violent or non-violent versions of video games involving the sports of baseball and football. Playing violent versions of sports video games (i.e., football) resulted in increases in aggressive cognitions, aggressive affect, and acceptability of violence compared to playing non-violent versions (i.e., baseball) irrespective of competitive context. These findings suggest that the content of video games has a greater impact on aggression levels than the does the context in which the games are played. However, it is also possible that the aggression experienced video gamers, even in competitive settings, is different than that experienced by athletes in more traditional sporting contexts (Sacks, Petscher, Stanley, & Tenenbaum, 2003). When competing in the real sports world participants engage with live, in-person opponents exhibiting various levels of instrumental and hostile aggression. Instrumental aggression is behavior directed at a target that serves as a means to an end, whereas hostile aggression is

behavior directed toward another that represents an end in and of itself and usually intended to harm the other (Husman & Silva, 1984). In the video game world, players are physically separated from their opponents, sometimes by thousands of miles when playing through an online network. Therefore, aggressive behavior is more often exhibited in the form of verbal exchanges or the style of gamers' play. However, the competitive tournament may add to the moral atmosphere of the situation from different social influences. While it might be expected that aggression levels would increase as the perceived competitiveness of a tournament increased, the ways in which cyberathletes experience aggression in the competitive arena remains relatively unknown.

Existential Phenomenology and the Video Game Experience

A criticism of many studies involving video games is the lack of ecological validity (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2009). Specifically, video game play in a lab setting is unlike everyday game play in that the researcher rather than the participant dictates game choice, length of play session, and other variables. Additionally, there is limited research on how gamers actually play video games (Reeves et al., 2009). As discussed previously, research on LAN events has centered on the overarching phenomenon itself and the results are usually "deconstructed" from an outside observer's perspective (e.g., Jansz & Martens, 2005; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010). In contrast, a first-person perspective of the video game tournament experience might provide greater insights into the world of the competitive gamer.

Recently, there have been calls for the use of existential phenomenological approaches in sport studies research (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Nesti, 2004). Dale (2000) was among the first researchers in sport psychology to utilize such an approach in a study examining elite

decathletes. The results of thematic analysis of the interviews detailed aspects of the participants' competitive experience. For example, when talking about the distractions they encountered, the athletes also identified particular characteristics that made the distraction distracting. When describing their awareness of the other competitors and the sense of camaraderie among athletes, participants pointed out how such interactions could be perceived as both positive (i.e., expressions of support) and negative (i.e., if the competitor was also a friend) during the event (Dale, 2000). A particular challenge encountered when conducting research with video gamers is to understand how the player relates to the game and the virtual world in which the player "exists". Sommerseth (2007) has argued that an existential phenomenological approach might prove useful in understanding how the player relates to the video game because it would allow the researcher to access the player's embodied perception when playing the video game.

The method of existential phenomenological interviewing would also appear to be a fruitful approach for examining video game culture (Coakley, 2007) by providing first-person accounts of the competitive experience and of the meaning participants derive from the tournament context. At the very least, such research would give cyberathletes a voice for telling their story. In many ways, video gamers are viewed with a certain stigma within North American culture where serious gamers—professional or not—are often labeled as "nerdy" or "geeky" (Jin, 2010). Such stereotyping stands in stark contrast to the celebrity status professional video game players enjoy in other cultures, particularly South Korea. In that country, e-Sports are frequently televised and widely broadcast on the Internet. Many South Koreans consider professional gamers to be celebrities, enjoying the spoils of winning (e.g., marriage to a super model) and commanding lucrative contracts (Jin & Chee, 2008). Despite the seemingly interconnected world

of online gaming, the physical play spaces encountered during a video game tournament are likely linked in some fashion to their respective cultural contexts. Thus, it is possible that existential phenomenological interviewing would allow the researcher to discover the extent to which cultural norms are embedded in the gaming experience of cyberathletes.

The results of existential phenomenological interviews with video gamers may also prove beneficial to sport psychology practitioners. In a recent paper Thorpe (2009) stressed the importance for consultants to understand the culture and nuances of a particular sport prior to developing sport psychology interventions. As a counter example, Thorpe related the story of sport scientists who had misinterpreted a particular snowboarder's actions during an X Games competition. Their third-person observations of the athlete's performance led them to conclude that an attempted jump was the result of a lapse in judgment or lack of concentration on the athlete's part. Had the researchers employed a multi-level contextual approach, which included the input of the athlete, they would have determined that the jump was consistent with the expectations of snowboarding culture. In a similar vein, Nesti (2004) has advocated the use of existential phenomenological interviewing as a fruitful method for gathering first-person insights from athletes prior to providing performance assistance. Such an approach was used by Clegg and Butryn (2012) in a recent study of traceurs' (practitioners of parkour) experience with parkour, which is a little-known free running sport. The results of in-depth interviews with the athletes provided valuable insights into what it is like to participate in that sport. The researchers contended that if they had attempted to assess the participants' experience from a third-person perspective they would have likely labeled some of the jumps and maneuvers the athletes performed as risky and reckless. However, their interview results revealed that the athletes were

well aware of the risks of their moves and approached each in a manner that was actually quite measured (Clegg & Butryn, 2012). The first-person perspective is essential to gaining a holistic account of a phenomenon, especially when perceptions of the phenomenon from third-person vantage point are quite different.

It should be noted that interview research with video game players can have its challenges. King et al. (2009) outlined a number of concerns that should be considered when doing social science research with gamers. For example, gamers are averse to completing questionnaires during competitive events because they are engrossed in the process of playing and detest distractions. They may be wary of researchers who do not demonstrate adequate knowledge of the gaming world. Thus, it is likely that in order for researchers to develop rapport with participantsmuch less understand the conversation and vocabulary of the expert gamer during an existential phenomenological interview—they must achieve an acceptable level of comprehension of video games and the gamers' language.

Statement of the Problem

Competitive video gaming remains an under-studied area within the field of sport studies. As e-Sport continues to evolve in the sportification process continued empirical investigations would benefit from insights into the first-person perspective of such events. It currently remains unclear as to the extent to which competitive experiences within video game tournaments mirror those of participants in traditional competitive sports. Much of the existing research on video games has focused on the psychological consequences of playing video games, video games as training tools, and the representation of traditional sports through video games. To date, no study has examined the first-person lived experience of cyberathletes in the competitive tournament

setting. The current game studies literature would benefit from an additional perspective of the first-person experience of gamers in their own words. Moreover, sport psychology practitioners and applied researchers would likely benefit from such information as they seek to provide the most effective performance consulting for gamers and identify the variables that impact their performance in and experience of competitive tournaments.

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to gain an in-depth understanding of the competitive video game tournament experience by asking cyberathletes to describe their experiences in as much detail as possible. To accomplish this purpose, in-depth existential phenomenological interviews were conducted with gamers who had experienced playing in competitive sport video game tournaments.

Definitions

e-Sport – An umbrella term used to describe organized, sanctioned video game competitions, most often in the context of video game tournaments.

Tournament play – The playing of video games in an organized, structured way against other in-person competitors and before a live audience.

Video games – Games that are played on a personal computer or console connected to a television (Xbox, Playstation).

Console games – Games that consist of an external computing unit that displays game content on the users' television. Examples include Xbox, Playstation, and Wii.

PC games – Video games played on a personal computer.

Cyberathletes – Video gamers who have competed in organized tournament competitions. Cyberathletes are distinguished from traditional gamers by their participation in competitive tournament situations rather than solely at home or with friends.

Progamers – Professional cyberathletes; gamers who are capable of earning a living by winning video game tournaments and obtaining sponsorships.

Grounds – The existential context of a particular experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Thomas & Pollio 2002) within which the experience becomes figural. The figural aspects of the experience and the ground cannot exist without the other.

Figural elements – Components of a particular experience that emerge from the ground and "stand out" as meaningful or important.

Major themes – Patterns that emerge from a group of people's descriptions of a particular phenomenon. Major themes represent a significant portion of the meaning people attach to the experience.

Limitations

Due to the phenomenon of immersion in the playing experience when competing, it may be difficult for competitive video game players to accurately access their perceptions of the competitive tournament experience retrospectively. In some cases it might be difficult for gamers to vividly recall their experience if considerable time had elapsed between the tournament competition being recalled and the interview. Additionally, the final group of participants consisted of individuals who agreed to participate as a result of the recruitment process. Without setting specific inclusion criteria for gender and race, the group was limited to those within the

region where solicitation for participation took place. The majority of in-person recruiting using flyers occurred on the campus of a large public university in the southeastern portion of the United States.

Delimitations

Participants in the present study were limited to gamers who had competed in a least two video game tournaments and had at least one tournament experience within the past six months. The tournaments needed to be in-person events; online tournament experience did not qualify. The platform of the game was limited to console game devices and computers. All other platforms—such as cellphone and Facebook games—were not examined.

Significance

A fuller understanding of the competitive gaming experience might provide a conceptual foundation for sport psychology researchers to use in testing theories relevant to video gaming. The results of the present study might be useful for consultants providing mental training for cyberathletes by adding competition specific information to the suggestions from Murphy (2009). Finally, the use of existential phenomenological interviewing has been recommended for examining sport phenomena that have received little previous research attention (Nesti, 2004). Arguably, the experience of video game players and the competitive gaming world could be classified as an understudied area in the field of applied sport psychology.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of cyberathletes participating in video game tournaments. In this chapter a review of the literature related to the study of video gamers is provided. Specifically, the chapter contains information dealing with the socio-cultural aspects of the video game culture, performance considerations including the development of video game expertise, and existential phenomenology as a research method.

Socio-cultural Aspects of Video Game Culture

While the growth of new media and e-sport has legitimized video game play in the field of sport studies (Coakley, 2007) relatively little research has been conducted to date on the video game culture. Some researchers have been interested in sport video games and how events and organizations in video gaming mimic aspects of those in established sports. In one sense sport video games offer sports fans a unique way of experiencing and consuming their favorite sports in the video games they replicate. Video game tournaments and gaming leagues resemble established traditional sports organizations with sponsorships, endorsement deals, and spectators watching the tournaments in arenas. Video games also represent a performance domain that can approach the real world sport experience depending on the game type, user interface, and context.

In this section, discussion is devoted to definitions of play, games, and sport in relation to video game culture. Included is a brief history of video gaming, a description of gamers, and discussion centered on the ways gamers relate to video games. An essential component of gaming culture is the concept of cyberathlete or cyber athlete. The appropriateness of the term

cyberathlete when applied to video game players is dependent on the nature and level of the player's involvement with video games and the degree to which sport-like qualities exist in that gaming experience. The present study focused on the experience of competition in the virtual environment through video game tournaments wherein the competitive space is a virtual world that exists and is experienced through a video screen.

Previous scholars have argued over the precise terminology to use when referring to games that involve a user interfacing with some digital element. The terms video game and videogame are used frequently in the game studies literature (Whalen & Taylor, 2008). Both terms imply some use of a video element for interacting with the game. The types of video games available range from playing the card game of solitaire on a cell phone to operating a video slot machine. Other terms used in the existing literature are digital game or computer game (Whalen & Taylor, 2008), which refer to any gaming device that contains some computational element. A digital game would include board games that range from having a digital timer to games played on a hand held gaming device such as a GameBoy. The present study focused on games played on a console or personal computer (PC), which would include video, computational, and digital components. Console games are systems that display content through a television produced by an encased central processing system that is housed external to the television and a hand-held controller that the user manipulates. Consoles, such as the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and Nintendo's Wii, represent the most recent and 7th generation of console systems (Taylor & Whalen, 2008). In the present study, the terms video games, videogames, computer games, and digital games would all represent accurate labels for the games the participants played. However, console gaming and PC gaming represent the most common

interface used in tournament style competition. The fact that the word “game” or “games” is readily accepted in video game culture suggests a closer look at the concept of games.

Games are connected to sport in that games are an essential element of sport. In discussing the relationship between sociology and game theory, Swedberg (2001, p. 302) defined games as “recreational activities that are often interactive and played according to specific rules.” Another (Steinkuehler, 2006) suggested that games should be analyzed on two primary levels. Little “g” games are constituted by the rules and stories that result from individualized experiences while big “G” games are those that include the emergent culture surrounding the experiences. An essential element of all games is that they are played for the sake of enjoyment and are bound by some defined system of rules. The rule system can be highly ordered, such as is the case with most well established sports or loosely defined and subject to change, such as the games played by children in the backyard or a city park.

Video games could also be considered a sport depending on the context and user interface. Coakley (2007, p. 6) defined sports are “institutionalized competitive physical activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills.” Each element of this definition of sport may or may not be present in video games. The first component of Coakley’s definition involves the concept of institutionalization.

Institutionalization occurs when activities are formalized with rules and a governing body that allow the interpretation of events in similar ways across situations (Coakley, 2007). Thus, video games become institutionalized when a governing body binds them, the participants adhere to a standard set of rules, and the games instill similar meanings on actions across contexts. An example of the institutionalization of video games is the World Cyber Games (WCG). The WCG

is the culminating tournament event held throughout the world. The WCG website boasts that over 1.6 million competitors from 78 countries competed through 14 different game titles in 2008 (World Cyber Games, 2012).

Since video games are inherently bound by the rules and structures within the games themselves, it might be argued that video gaming does not constitute the essence of play. Play is considered to be an activity done solely for the enjoyment of the participant (Coakley, 2007). Although many video games are played for the sake of enjoyment (Sellers, 2006), classifying all video game experiences as simply pleasurable would be misleading. Video games vary with respect to the degree to which they represent play or competitive sport. The breadth of possible experiences available in the virtual context is demonstrated by the large variety of games available to participants. For example, the experience of playing solitaire on a PC is quite different from that of playing *Halo 3* (Bungie, 2008) online against people from around the world. *Halo 3* is a first person shooter game that pits teams of three or four players against one another in various forms of battle. In a first person shooter game, the player views the world through the first-person perspective of an avatar. Essentially, this means that the player "sees" the world through another character's eyes. Typically the objective of these games is to "shoot to kill" the opposition.

Comparable to the notion of games is the concept of play, which has been around for centuries. Defining this concept, as it exists across cultures, has been a difficult task for play researchers (Ohler & Niedling, 2006). Coakley (2007) offered a definition of play as "an expressive activity done for its own sake" (p. 7). Understanding the notion of human play is important for conceptualizing the role of video games within various cultures. From an

evolutionary psychology perspective, Ohler and Niedling (2006) posited that play for humans could serve as part of a process that expands the limits of behavior and promotes the learning of new problem-solving skills. These scholars developed the behavior-diversification proto-cognition theory of play, which posits that the limits of human behavior and thinking are expanded by playful behavior. Play is assumed to be a mechanism whereby the player unknowingly explores the boundaries of human existence. Ohler and Niedling further argue that playful behavior can result in adaptive functions that serve to progress a species. In other words, through play people learn new techniques and approaches that serve an evolutionary adaptive function. Thus, the authors argue that play should be studied apart from other life experiences because of its unique characteristics.

Some scholars have also addressed the potential of video games to shaping the sociocultural development of youth. It is reasonable to assume that the appeal of video games to children and adolescents may operate in ways similar to that of sports. Salisch, Oppl, and Kristen (2006) proposed that, similar to sports, children play and experience digital games in accordance with the uses and gratifications they expect to receive from the interaction. These authors further contended that children are attracted to games that "address their developmental needs, offer possibilities for escapism and possibly mood management, and match their level of development" (Salisch et al., 2006, p. 148). The availability of video games to children was evidenced in the results of a study of German children between the ages of 6 and 13 years who were found to own on average 7.1 computer games; with many reporting that they played their games on a home computer (Feierabend & Klinger, 2001). It is reasonable to assume that

accessibility to video games, either in the home or in other settings, has some currently undetermined impact on the sociocultural development of children.

Malaby (2007) proposed that the study of video games should also recognize the fluidity of the progression of the games themselves with special consideration given to the connection between video game play and the gamer's social world. This approach presumes that with rapidly advancing technology and changes in the landscape of sport, the ways sports fans interact with and consume sports through video game experiences changes as well (Leonard, 2009). An example might be the emerging physical element associated with some video games, which addresses an element of Coakley's (2007) definition of sport: complex physical action. For example, Nintendo's Wii offers the user the ability to mimic sport motions such as swinging a bat or punching an opponent. Such an interface moves the physicality of the interaction beyond that available with hand held controllers. The majority of home console systems rely on hand held devices that are operated by pressing buttons, which might be questioned as "physical involvement". However, knowing when and in what sequence to press the buttons based on the information presented on the screen, could potentially approach the level of "complex physical action" contained in Coakley's (2007) definition.

Some researchers have investigated the physical element of Coakley's definition of sport by examining the energy expended by gamers when playing video games. Maddison et al. (2007) found that playing active video games resulted in high to moderate physical activity levels in children 10 to 14 years old analogous to brisk walking, skipping, or jogging. These video games were part of the home console system Playstation 2, and included a baseball simulation, a dance game, a boxing simulation, and a hover board game. Recently, Microsoft released a new

interface, named Xbox Kinect, which uses cameras to detect full body movements of the user. As such, the user is able to play the game by using their entire body rather than a controller.

Given the possibility that video games represent a unique form of sport, Coakley (2007) has provided an alternate definition, which includes a conditional sociocultural emphasis. Specifically, the culture of gamers in different societies is presumed to be a key factor that determines whether a video game should be considered as a sport. From this perspective video games are considered to be contested events; that is "activities for which there are no universal agreements about meaning, purpose, and organization" (Coakley, 2007, p. 11). The three criteria that must be considered to consider when defining video games as sport are (a) the meaning, purpose, and organization of the game/sport; (b) characteristics of the participants, including gender, race, and age; and (c) the mechanisms of sponsorship that influence the way games/sports are conceptualized. For example, the role that public versus private organizations plays in video game competitions might differ in different cultures. As an illustration, chess is considered a sport in Iceland because it is very popular with the general public, because Icelanders regularly compete at very high levels internationally, and because chess has been used as political leverage to assure Iceland's representation at competitions (Magnússon, 2001). Thus, a video game replicating the game of chess would likely be considered a sport in Iceland.

With increases in the realism associated with sport video games, sport sociologists such as Coakley (2007) and Leonard (2009) have emphasized the need to examine the relationship between sports fans and the e-Sports they consume. Leonard (2009) has suggested that video games be studied from a media consumption standpoint since the new media, consisting of such web entities, as YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, and Twitter, seem to transform the consumer

into an active creator of sport texts. Fans are no longer merely passive consumers of sport related content, but are now immersed in contexts where they can produce knowledge content of their own, including sport video games (Leonard, 2009). For example, a fan's knowledge of a particular team might impact that fan's interactions with the team in the virtual space of video games. In a similar vein a gamer may choose not to draft a particular player in a virtual competition because of his or her knowledge of the player's capabilities, or lack of such, in the real world.

Miah (2002) has argued that the relationship between the spectator and the athlete, or the watcher and the watched, has become blurred as a result of virtual sports. Virtual sports are those that gamers experience through virtual reality (VR) technologies. Many VR simulations have reached a level that allows the participant to experience vividly many ingredients of the real world version of a sport. In some ways the gamer becomes the athlete he or she is manipulating on the screen. Such experiences allow sport spectators to take an active role in directing their ideas about the sport and, for some, experience the sport in a way that would be impossible in the real world due to physical limitations (Miah, 2002). At the same time the role of the athlete has become marginalized in virtual sport. The athlete's body and performance is dissected into segmented performance characteristics represented in a digital format; thus making the gamer who plays as the simulated representation of the athlete become the "athlete" herself.

Jenkins (2006) proposed that the modern sports world be viewed as a "convergence culture" where new media, old media, corporate and grassroots, producers and consumers of sports media interact in unpredictable ways. Giddings (2009) suggested that one way to analyze "technoculture" is to identify themes that emerge from interactions between human and non-

human during video game play. Some scholars have focused on cybertextual analysis in an attempt to understand how the reader (player) interprets his or her interactions with texts (game experiences) (Thorpe, 2009). Giddings (2009) referred to the game experience as the event of game play, where the event is the relationship between the virtual world created by the digital agent and the consequences of participating in the virtual world through the user interface. Games themselves can function as cultural objects, reflecting discussions of issues and problems meshed within the greater societal context (Steinkuehler, 2006). For example, the virtual world created in *Grand Theft Auto* allows a concerned parent group to "talk" to the local politician about various events without dealing with the usual power dynamics (Steinkuehler, 2006). Thus, it appears that understanding the virtual worlds created by the gaming experience may be important to understanding the cultural implications of video games as well as the conversations and discussions occurring outside the gaming worlds.

Demographic information about the gaming world may also determine the inclusion criteria of its members. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) recently reported that 68% of American households play computer or video games, with the average gamer being 35 years old and having played video games for 12 years (The Entertainment Software Association, 2012). However, it is likely that the gaming culture or subculture is considerably more diverse. Certainly, the type of game, the level of involvement, and hours spent playing should help identify the subgroups that exist within the gaming community. From another perspective the term social world—rather than subgroup or subculture—may be a more appropriate label for those who partake in video gaming. Crosset and Beal (1997) describe a social world as a group of people that are linked by share perspectives, unique activities, and common methods of

communication derived from a shared interest in a social object. Coakley (2007, p. 109) considers a social world to be "a way of life and an associated mindset that revolves around a particular set of activities and encompasses all the people and relationships connected with the activities." In this context, the social world of the gamer might be considered an all-inclusive term. That is, the social world created by gamers would likely include casual gamers, serious gamers, and cyberathletes, depending on the type of game and level of involvement. Diversity in the gaming social world can also be seen in the various award categories recognized by the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences (2009). These include game of the year awards for designers of family games, strategy/simulation games, role-playing games, adventure games, action games, massively multiplayer games, sports games, racing games, fighting games, casual games, hand-held games, cellular games, computer games, and console games.

Leonard (2009) has suggested that social issues, such as race, gender, and power, remain embedded within the development of new technologies. The Entertainment Software Association (2012) reported "that forty percent of all game players are women, and that women over the age of 18 represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (34 percent vs. 18 percent) than boys age 17 or younger" (para. 1). While women may be represented within the gaming culture, there is evidence suggesting that they may approach video games differently than their male counterparts. For example, male gamers appear to prefer to experience mastery over the game and their opponents to a greater extent than females; that is, males enjoy beating both the games and other human contenders more than females do. On the other hand, female players seem to be interested in playing video games regardless of the outcome (Raney, Smith, &

Baker, 2006). These results suggest that motives for playing games may have distinct gender lines.

Taking a different approach to the issue of gender differences, Brennan and Galloway (2006) examined the ways in which females were portrayed in sport video games. The results revealed that females were grossly underrepresented or objectified in video game content. Most popular sports video games are dominated by male characters, which in many way mirrors the gender proportions found in real life sports. The results of an analysis of 225 video games covering popular titles including, but not limited to, sports video games, revealed that males were portrayed more frequently that women (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007). When females were represented they were more likely to be portrayed in a negative context (e.g., being objectified or depicted as sexy). In another study of adolescents' perceptions of video game content (Brenick, Henning, Killen, O'Connor, & Collins, 2007), males were less likely than females to view violent video games as negative or believe that such content imparted any negative influence on players. Male gamers, who played on a regular basis, were also less likely to acknowledge that stereotypical images of males and females were a problem. However, both males and females viewed male aggression and female objectification as "wrong." Interestingly, both groups also believed that playing video games, regardless of content, had little to no influence on gamers' perceptions or real world actions. Thus, there appears to be a distinct line between adolescents' perceptions of what's appropriate and inappropriate in video game content and how they view the effects of participation on gamers.

The issues of race and power in the video game culture have to date received relatively less attention by scholars than that of gender. Oates (2009) expressed the notion that video

gaming could be considered as a form of vicarious management. The key component of vicarious management is the ability of gamers to act as team owner, manager, or some other position of power in the virtual organization (Oates, 2009). Plymire (2009) suggested the possibility that such power allows white gamers to feel embodied in the blackness of the players they are controlling in some sports video games. For example, a white gamer playing as Donovan McNabb (African American professional football player) may feel like they are experiencing the player's "athleticism and showmanship—while not engaging in racial thinking" (Plymire, 2009, p. 21). Put another way, the white gamer is positioned to vicariously experience racial differences with facing any real world consequences (Plymire, 2009). An alternative view of the issue of race in the video game culture is the notion that white masculinity can assert its dominance by commodifying black players, who white gamers are able to buy and sell, or sign and release (Oates, 2009). Other genres of video games also appear to be susceptible to racial stereotypes. As an example, Higgin (2009) has pointed out that game designers of virtual fantasy worlds, such as World of War Craft, create worlds in which whiteness is the default character setting and any deviations in color or race are labeled "exotic" (i.e., different).

Some researchers have begun to examine the gaming habits of African Americans. DiSalvo, Crowley, and Norwood (2008) found that black adolescents in their study preferred to play sport video games rather than games representing other genres. The social component of offline play also appeared to be more important to black adolescents than to their white counterparts (DiSalvo et al., 2008). A possible explanation for this discrepancy suggested by the authors is that access to broadband internet connections (which allows access to online play) may be limited in many African American communities (DiSalvo et al., 2008). Since the production,

control, and distribution of information and data are a fundamental source of productivity and power (Hutchins, 2008), it is likely that access to opportunities to experience game play at its fullest may still be limited for minority populations.

The rise of local area networks (LANs) in the mid-1990s increased opportunities for gamers to play online (Lowood, 2006). Playing computer and video games online also allows a type of competition that is different from that found in conventional sports, which are limited to individuals or teams that are physically present in the same geographical location. e-Sports offer gamers the opportunity to compete in real time against people located anywhere in the world where there is an internet connection. In the virtual setting, a pick-up basketball team could consist of players separated by oceans. Therefore, understanding how virtual teammate relationships form and develop meaning within the social context has begun to attract the attention of researchers. Chen (2009) investigated the relationships developed in the virtual environment by focusing on the communication between team members. The results indicated that when the group failed, it was not seen as catastrophic loss as long as the members had time to discuss and learn from the shortcomings. It was concluded that good communication and coordination through trusting each team member is a key to team success. In an earlier study, Peña and Hancock (2006) found that in-game messages between online players contained more socioemotional information than task information. Moreover, there seemed to be socially constructed rules of respect and fair play. For example, when a player attacked an unarmed opponent, the group considered the act to be a violation of rules they had constructed based on their previous interactions (Peña & Hancock, 2006). These findings suggest that team dynamics are an important factor to consider when examining the culture of video gamers.

In summary, the sample of existing literature reviewed in this section suggests that many real world sociocultural factors, such as race, gender, age, and societal norms, manifest themselves in similar ways in the social world of video and computer gaming. Nevertheless, video games and computer simulations may also offer a unique set of perspectives when it comes to defining sport and experiencing competition. For these and other reasons, the arena of e-Sport would appear to be a fruitful area for continued investigation within the field of sport studies.

Performance Considerations Including the Development of Expertise

The study of motor performance has produced many advances in our understanding of human movement and the capacity of humans to physically interact with their environment (Schmidt & Wrisberg, 2008). As microprocessors and computers have become more essential elements of the world in which we exist researchers have become more interested in examining the interactions of humans with computers. One approach to such inquiry is to explore the perceptual-motor processes underlying video game behavior. At its most basic level video game performance requires the processing of visual inputs on a computer screen and the use of a keyboard, mouse, or other controller (including the body as controller with Kinect) to perform the desired actions (Tennyson & Jorczak, 2008). In this section, evidence from both the study of sport and the study of human-computer interaction that contribute to the understanding of performance in the virtual context of video games is discussed.

From a performance standpoint video games differ from traditional games in a number of ways. These include the level of vivid interactivity and physical constraints of the playing environment (Barresi, Gamberini, Majer, & Scarpetta, 2008). Video games portray vivid and realistic graphical representations of virtual worlds where players are able to carry out actions

not possible in the real world. Video games also bypass many of the physical constraints of traditional games by the scalability of the virtual environment. There is no need for an actual basketball court, baseball diamond, or snowboard half-pipe in a video game. These arenas can be simulated in the virtual environment with a high degree of realism (Barresi et al., 2008). Such diversity in the video game performance setting has been suggested to have the potential to increase gamers' perceptual-motor skill, problem solving skills, skill transfer capabilities, and the learning and retention of information (Lieberman, 2006).

Elite video game performers exhibit their skill in an arena that would appear fruitful for examining the components of expert performance. Skill components would likely include psychological, technical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of performance (Janelle & Hillman, 2003). A prominent approach used to study the acquisition of expert performance is the deliberate practice model (Ericsson et al., 1993). Deliberate practice consists of activities that, with effortful and disciplined practice, are designed to improve one's performance in a particular area. A critical component of the deliberate practice model is the number of hours spent practicing a skill or participating in a particular performance domain (Ericsson et al., 1993). Video game researchers may be at an advantage in studying the development of expertise because few physiological constraints with extended performance compared to real world practice sessions. For example, a cyclist would be limited to a certain amount of mileage per day based on physiological factors such as caloric intake and aerobic conditioning. In contrast, playing a cycling video game could be played for an extended time because the gamer's actions are confined to reacting to on-screen content and pressing buttons. In addition, access to in-game

records of time spent playing would allow a precise accounting of the duration and amount of extended practice.

The physiological characteristics necessary for expert performance in many sports include the performer's height, weight, flexibility, strength, anaerobic and aerobic capacity, among others (Janelle & Hillman, 2003). The physiological components required of expert performance in video gaming have not been extensively examined but on the surface it would seem that there are few if any physical constraints to performance excellence. In a traditional video game setup, players would need dynamic visual acuity to process information presented on the screen and eye-hand coordination to manipulate the controller. Klug and Schell (2006) have suggested that many people who play sports video games may have been interested in playing sports professionally, but "were not blessed with the physical talent" (p. 94). However, such individuals are able to experience simulated sport experiences by playing sport video games.

Technical skill in sport typically refers to the athlete's ability to execute task-related movements developed and refined over many years of practice (Janelle & Hillman, 2003). Studies suggest that the refinement of technical skills is also an integral component of video game expertise, which also serves to maintain the interest of video gamers. Salisch et al. (2006) noted that an important element of participants' motivation to play video games on an extended basis was their desire to improve the fine motor skills necessary for success. Earlier studies revealed that performance improvements with practice included an improved ability to mentally rotate objects in space (Okagaki & Frensch, 1994), effectively divide attention and keep track of events in multiple spatial locations (Greenfield, DeWinstanley, Kilpatrick, & Kaye, 1994), and

perform tasks requiring the processing of multiple sources of information (Satyen & Ohtsuka, 2001).

In addition to technical skills there are two related aspects of the cognitive domain that appear to contribute to expertise in sport: tactical skills and decision-making capabilities (Janelle & Hillman, 2003). Tactical skills are those that dictate the decisions of players as to how to navigate the virtual environment in the most productive manner. Decision-making requires the rapid identification of relevant task and environmental demands and selection of an appropriate strategy for successfully meeting those demands (Janelle & Hillman, 2003). When both of these elements are present, the player is more likely to produce the desired control movements for achieving performance success. It is likely that the main difference in the performance of real world sports and video game approximations is the complexity of the required movements. That is, the movements of real world sports typically involve the execution of multiple degree of freedom actions while those required in video games are confined to button pressing or the operation of a simple control device. Thus, it might be argued that the demands of video games are primarily in the areas of visual perception and response selection (based on the player's interpretation of unfolding events on the screen and tactical/strategic knowledge) than on that of movement execution (the ability to press buttons or move a controller).

Recently, Reeves et al. (2009) conducted an ethnographic study of expertise in the video game, Counter Strike that included video analysis of the behaviors of highly skilled players. Counter Strike is a first person shooter (FPS) game in which video screen images are designed to simulate the first person perspective of the shooter. Most FPS games include an image of the weapon being used to interact with the 3D virtual world created by the game. The objective of

Counter Strike is for players to work together as a team to complete various missions or goals. The results of this study revealed several factors that appeared to contribute to the performance success of experts. First, players were able to rapidly sequence highly specific choreographed moves that allowed them interact with their teammates within the virtual world. The authors referred to performance characteristic as "chaining." By automating their movements players were able to view them on a more global level (e.g., for the purpose of avoiding an unsafe area or avoiding a flashpoint). Secondly, the players developed a sophisticated understanding of the virtual environmental terrain, which often dictated what needed to be done next. For example, the terrain might indicate areas that would leave players vulnerable to specific kinds of attacks, which players would then move to avoid or traverse in ways that would protect them from the attack. Third, team members were aware of each other's performances or that of the opponent/enemy. Consistent with Ericsson's (1993) model, the Counter Strike players in this study reported that they became experts by spending many hours playing the game and reflecting on past performances. A unique feature of the game of Counter Strike is that it allows players to review their failures by quickly replaying the opponent's view of how they were able to execute a kill on the player. Finally, the expert players in this study appeared to constantly adjust their playing style based on the rapidly changing environment within the game. Such adjustments included collaborating with teammates, glancing around the current location on the map, choosing appropriate routes to navigate the map, and executing explicit strategies.

Current video games are able to create vivid, expansive, and complex virtual worlds within which players are able to learn, play, and explore. Some research (Castel, Pratt, and Drummond (2005) has examined the role of visual and attention processes required in video

games by comparing the performance of video game players (VGPs) to that of non-video game players (NVGPs). Compared to their non-gaming counterparts, VGPs appeared to demonstrate more rapid visual processing that allowed them to detect targets more quickly. Such results suggest that VGPs possess better executive control over the allocation of attention, particularly in situations that require the processing of many items in a rapid manner (Castel et al., 2005). A possible corollary to this interpretation is that experts are better able than novices to reject or ignore irrelevant visual objects while attending to those that are essential to successful game play (Green & Bavelier, 2006b). Support for this notion has been suggested by the results of a recent study, which revealed faster reaction times across a number of conditions for action video game players (AVGPs) compared to non-video game players (NVGPs) (Chisholm, Hickey, Theeuwes, & Kingstone, 2010). In addition, the visual search patterns of AVGPs appeared to be less affected by task irrelevant distractors than were those of NVGPs. The authors suggested that, compared to NVGSs, AVGPs may be better able to quickly assess the task relevance of a visual stimulus and orient their attention to relevant visual cues more effectively. Earlier research had suggested that AVGPs possessed greater attentional capacity and were able to attend to a larger number of objects compared to NVGPs (Green and Bavelier (2003). It was concluded that playing action video games may increase players capacity and spatial distribution of visual attention. In a subsequent study, Green and Bavelier (2007) found that AVGPs could tolerate smaller target-distractor distances than NVGPs. This phenomenon, which is as known as crowding, involves the spatial placement of distractors at closer and closer thresholds to that of the target object. Increased tolerance of crowding among AVGPs suggests a higher level of

visual spatial resolution capability for experienced action video game players (Green & Bavelier, 2007).

Green and Bavelier (2006a) used the flanker compatibility test to investigate possible differences in central and peripheral visual attention resources between gamers and non-gamers. The results revealed that AVGPs were able to perform better than their novice counterparts under conditions that exceeded players' normal training field of vision. These findings suggest that the visual attention skills of experienced players can be generalized to other games and playing conditions. In order to determine the effects of playing action video games on the number of objects a person can track over time, the same authors trained NVGPs on an action video game and compared their post-training and pre-training performance (Green & Bavelier, 2007). The results revealed improved performance following training, further supporting the notion of a causal relationship between playing experience and improvements in both visual attention and working memory.

To date, there has been relatively little attention given to possible gender differences in video game performance (Terlecki & Newcombe, 2005). However, it appears that any existing gender differences are practically eliminated with playing experience. For example, Feng, Spence, and Pratt (2007) found that pre-training differences in spatial attention and the performance of mental rotation tasks of males and females was eliminated with playing experience. The results of a delayed retention test administered five months after training indicated that no diminished performance for either gender over an extended period of no practice (Feng et al., 2007). These findings suggest that video game experience is resistant to memory decay over prolonged time periods.

Earlier researchers examined the possible transfer effects of video game experience to the execution of real world sport skills. For example, Fery and Ponserre (2001) explored the possible impact of playing a golf putting video game on real world putting performance. The authors postulated that experience within the video game setting, specifically that dealing with adjustments in force control, might be expected to transfer to the real world setting. Participants practiced putting with a computerized golf simulation game under different instructional conditions. One group was instructed to focus their attention on the force gauge displayed on the screen while a second group was told to focus on the swing mechanics of a virtual player displayed on the screen. A third group was simply instructed to "play for fun." The results revealed significant improvements in real world golf putting for the force control and play for fun groups but not for the group that focused on the virtual player's swing mechanics. These findings suggest that task-specific transfer is possible to real world tasks without explicit instructions regarding players' focus when playing video games with similar requirements (Fery & Ponserre, 2001).

One concept that has received attention in both the sport psychology literature (e.g., Jackson, 1996) and video game literature (e.g., Smith, 2006) is that of flow. The concept of flow, which was first proposed by (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), is a psychological state wherein individuals become so immersed in the performance of an activity that their awareness of the outside world fades away. Flow is characterized by a focused concentration on present performance, a merging of awareness and action, a loss of self-consciousness, a heightened sense of control, an ability to respond to events as they occur, a loss of awareness of time, and enjoyment of the activity for its own sake (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Some have

suggested that video game performance satisfies the criteria for promoting a flow state (Sherry, 2004). Smith (2006) examined the performance of players on the video game Quake II for a time period of 30 minutes. The results suggested that the presence of flow was associated with a number of factors contributing to player enjoyment. These included a near perfect match between player skill level and game challenge, positive outcomes, positive affect, and self-affirmation. Interestingly, video game self-efficacy and the need for cognitive challenge were not significantly related to these antecedents of the flow state.

In summary, the existing research suggests that video game performance contains a number of perceptual-motor demands that are present in real-world tasks. Most prominent are the demand for rapid visual processing of information, selective attention, and the development of anticipation of changing conditions within a dynamic visual environment. The available research suggests that improvements in the levels of these characteristics are possible with extensive and deliberate practice, in much the same way expertise has been shown to be developed in other motor performance domains (Ericsson, 2003; Ericsson et al., 1993). To date, no research has examined another category of skills that would appear to be important to video game performance—mental skills (Wrisberg, 2007). Thus, another impetus for the present study was to determine whether mental and emotional demands and skills are a salient aspect of video gamers' experience of tournament competition.

Existential Phenomenology as a Research Method

While some psychophysiological evidence supports the notion that video games elicit varying degrees of emotional response based on actions within the games (Ravaja, Saari, Salminen, Laarni, & Kallinen, 2006) the fundamental essence of the experience remains largely

unseen. In an attempt to further examine gamers' experience, one group of researchers developed the Game Experience Questionnaire (GEQ) (de Kort, IJsselstijn, & Poels, 2007). The GEQ contains questions that address seven possible psychological antecedents of the game experience: positive affect, negative affect, flow, sensory immersion, tension, challenge and competence. To date, however, limited research utilizing the GEQ has been published. Additionally, there currently exists no research that has utilized the GEQ in competitive tournament settings. Thus, the extent to which scale items capture gamers' experience remains to be determined. Further, researchers have suggested that meaning of the experience while playing in large online gaming environment is dependent on how the gamer interprets the social learning encounter in the game (Murphy, 2007). Since the player's actions are largely dependent on their interpretation of an encounter with an opponent (e.g. positive or negative, hostile or cooperative), the behavior of the gamer cannot be understood by merely evaluating the game context or in-game actions (Murphy, 2007). Only by determining what the encounter with another character or character means to them, can the gamer's actions be fully understood.

As mentioned in the previous section, relatively little qualitative research examining the experiences of high-level gamers has been conducted (Reeves et al., 2009) that employed an ethnographic approach to the study of experts' video game play. The reports obtained from participants suggested that expert video game players process their movements at a global level. For example, when describing the strategy they used when encountering fire by an enemy they stated that they preferred a global strategy of avoiding sniper fire rather than a movement specific strategy that involved running and jumping behind a barrier. While the findings offered some understanding of how advanced players explain their actions within the constraints of the

video game, the act of explaining one's behavior may have put some masked participants' first-hand experience of playing the game, not to mention putting distance between participant and researcher. Put another way, talking about possible behaviors in the video game setting may be quite different from describing actual behaviors than stand out in a previous gaming experience. In addition, behavior descriptions are unlikely to capture the totality of the first-person gaming experience in the tournament context.

Another qualitative research method that has been employed by a number of sport studies scholars in recent years is existential phenomenological interviewing. Over the past decade a number of researchers in sport psychology have employed this interview approach to examine the lived experiences of boxers (Simpson & Wrisberg, in press), gymnasts (Post & Wrisberg, 2012), MMA fighters (Jensen, Roman, Shaft, & Wrisberg, in press), Christian athletes (Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004), track and field athletes (Dale, 2000), and golfers (Nicholls, Holt, & Polman, 2005).

The method has its conceptual roots in existential-phenomenology, which is the convergence and blending of two related, yet distinct fields of study—existentialism and phenomenology (Valle, King, & Halling, 1989). The existential component of existential phenomenology provides a perspective on human existence. The phenomenological component provides a specific vehicle for investigating people's experience (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Although phenomenological interviewing is considered to be another example of qualitative research methodology, it differs from other qualitative methodologies in several ways. Perhaps most significantly, the focus of an existential phenomenological interview is on the participant's experienced meaning of a particular phenomenon (e.g., a competitive video

game tournament) rather than the person's description of her/his actions or behaviors (Polkinghorne, 1989). Mere descriptions of behavior might not necessarily capture the lived meaning of those events in the moment.

Phenomenology traces its roots to the work of the philosopher Edmund Husserl (see Valle et al., 1989, for a more detailed discussion). The goal of phenomenology for Husserl was to provide a rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear, in order to gain an understanding of human consciousness and experience (Valle et al., 1989). To accomplish that goal, Husserl advocated the careful examination of objects as they appear to a person's consciousness—or what Husserl called a return to "the things themselves" as a way of understanding the essence of those things in the mind of the observer (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Another philosopher, Martin Heidegger, subsequently combined existential philosophy and phenomenology as a cohesive unit that would allow scholars to obtain descriptions of everyday human existence in uniquely human ways (Pollio et al., 1997). In an existential phenomenological study, the researcher attempts to obtain information about people's pre-reflective lived experience of an event with no preconceived ideas regarding how the event (or phenomenon) ought to be experienced (Nesti, 2004). Accessing the precise pre-reflective experience may nearly be impossible. However, maintaining the focus on perceptions in the moment move away from rationalizations or interpretations of a person's behavior.

Valle et al. (1989) suggested two main avenues for understanding what there is to know about a person. The first is the person's outward observable physical behaviors. The other avenue is the person's unobservable thoughts and perceptions, including their emotions and sensations. In contrast to Cartesian dualism, which holds that mind and the body are two distinct

entities that must separate in order to be examined, existential phenomenology assumes that the mind and body are interrelated and interdependent on one another. That is, for a world to exist, there must be a person to experience it, and a person cannot exist apart from the world (Polkinghorne, 1989). The person comes to know and understand his or her own existence through the world, while at the same time the person's existence gives his or her world its meaning (Polkinghorne, 1989). Such interconnectedness leads to the existential-phenomenological position that being is more accurately understood as "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1962). Thus, when attempting to obtain the lived experience of cyberathletes the existential phenomenological researcher does not divide the gamer and the world in which he or she competes, but recognize the connectedness of both. In sport research, the athlete and the world in which he or she plays, practices, and competes, co-create one another and can be best understood as a unified whole, rather than as separate elements (Dale, 1996).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is generally credited with introducing the existential-phenomenological approach to the field of psychology (Pollio et al., 1997). Merleau-Ponty's central focus was on the body as the primary vehicle of a person's interactions with and knowledge of world and his notion of embodiment—that is experiencing and understanding the world by, and through the body (Thomas & Pollio, 2002)—has gained the interest of scholars in sport studies as a way of connecting athletes' bodies and their sporting experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Nesti, 2004). Merleau-Ponty also felt it was important to focus on the immediacy of a person's experience rather than fitting it to some theory (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Thus, for him, the primary purpose of phenomenology is to directly access a person's world (e.g., the cyberathlete's world of tournament competition) as it is lived by obtaining an in-

depth description of that world as it appears to the person (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Perception then is considered to the fundamental link between a person and his or her world preceding any thought, language, or theory.

An important concept related to human perception is intentionality, which assumes that human consciousness and experience are directional in nature (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). More specifically, human consciousness is always presumed to be directed at an object, whether it be a concrete object such as desk or an abstract object such as an idea or thought (Valle et al., 1989). Essentially then, whatever a person is aware of is what becomes meaningful to her/him (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). And, with respect to behavior, whatever a person does reveals who he/she is and what he/she considers important (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). It is for this reason that in existential phenomenological research the participants are viewed as the experts (Dale, 1996). Thus, in the present study the cyberathlete participating in a video game tournament was considered to be the ultimate authority on that experience.

The results of existential phenomenological studies in sport psychology have also provided useful information for practitioners. For example, Dale (2000) study of decathletes' most memorable performances revealed specific distractions participants experienced during competitions. Such information would appear to be useful for coaches and consultants working with decathletes as well as practitioners called upon to assist athletes in other sports that experience difficulty dealing with distractions. Another study examining Christian athletes use of prayer in their sport provided helpful insights for practitioners dealing with athletes that espouse that faith tradition (Czech et al., 2004). More recently, Post and Wrisberg (2012) provided helpful information for sport psychology consultants working with competitive gymnasts. Their

in-depth analysis of interviews with elite gymnasts revealed several interesting aspects of those performers use of imagery in their sport. In a number of ways the tournament experience of cyberathletes may be similar to those of athletes in more traditional sports. At a basic level, there are opponents to compete against, skills that must be mastered, and prizes to be won. A critical difference between traditional sport and video game competitions is the level and sophistication of technology involved when performing.

To date, relatively little research attention has been devoted to the interaction between technology and the sport performer. An exception is a semi-structured interview study by Butryn (2003) where track athletes were asked about their experiences using technology. Categories of technology that surfaced in the results included self-technologies (e.g., performance enhancing drugs, prosthetic limbs, sport psychology interventions); landscape technologies (e.g., jumbotrons, artificial turf, domed arenas); implement technologies (e.g., shoes, golf clubs, aluminum baseball bats); rehabilitative technologies (e.g., techniques applied by athletic trainers to assist athletes in recovering from injury or surgery); and movement technologies (e.g., video analysis software). Butryn (2003) concluded that the boundaries between sport, technology, and the athlete—even in this ancient sport—were becoming blurred due to what he termed a "cyborgification" of the athlete. As a result it is no longer the athlete accomplishing the task or event, but a combination of the athlete and the technology the athlete possesses that is doing so (Haraway, 1987). It might be persuasively argued that video game competition represents an even more complete integration of performer and technology than more traditional sports like track and field.

Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty discussed the relationship between bodies and technology. Heidegger (1962) cited the example of using a hammer. When in use the hammer is no longer a separate object but becomes an instrument that is fully incorporated into the act of hammering. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1962) offered the example of a blind man using a cane to navigate along a sidewalk. The man senses the cane touching the sidewalk so that in a sense his body becomes extended through cane and becomes part of his experience. A key element that separates video game performance from performance in other domains is the interactivity experienced by and imparted on the user, with respect to both the video displays and the control devices. Despite the life like graphics and seemingly realistic movements of the avatars within video games, there remains an inherent limit to the degree of virtuality a gamer can experience while playing. The screen world projects the framed action back to the gamer. The actions of the gamer are minimal. As Ihde (2002, p. 10) states, "it is all hand-eye coordination, enhanced in the context of hypergraphics, sound effects, and synesthetic amplification." Even with the largest screens, the screen itself remains a detectable film artifact. Nevertheless, the goal of video games, in particular sports and war games, is to create vivid and realistic representations of possible alternate worlds.

Another interest of video gaming that might be captured by existential phenomenological interviews is the extent to which the reality fades and the gamer is extended into the virtual world created by the game itself. Ihde (2002) argued that the ultimate goal of virtual embodiment is to become a perfect simulation of full body multi-sensory bodily action. The degree of realistic simulation then would seem to be dependent on the game's ability to graphically recreate seemingly real events. In light of Merleau-Ponty (1962) notion that the body is the main medium

for experiencing and defining the world, the focus of realism in video games may not as dependent on the game as on the experience of the user (Sommerseth, 2007).

Allen-Collinson (2009) recently argued that there is a lack of evidence grounded in the lived sporting body, and that phenomenology offers a "powerful framework for such description and analysis" (p. 279). Existential phenomenological interviewing would appear to be particularly appropriate for studying elements of cyberathletes' experience that traditional methods, such as questionnaires and rating scales, have been unable to capture (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The issue of reality in video games is a complex one. One view is that games are at best half-real. For example, gamers might slay a fictional dragon in one world, but manipulate the controller in another. Existential phenomenological interviews with cyberathletes might reveal nuances in the embodied perception of gamers and offer greater insights as to where their experience of reality is ultimately located (Sommerseth, 2007). If so, the results might also prove useful to sport psychology practitioners interested in providing performance consulting for video gamers preparing for tournament competition.

CHAPTER III

Methods and Procedures

The aim of this study was to examine cyberathletes' lived experience of a video game tournament. In order to accomplish this purpose an existential phenomenological interview process was used following the guidelines outlined by Thomas and Pollio (2002) and Dale (1996). Sometimes referred to as "the Tennessee Model" this process consists of a sequence of specific steps. These include exploring researcher bias, selecting the co-participants, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and developing the thematic structure, and confirming the thematic structure (Dale, 1996; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In this chapter, each of these steps is discussed in more detail.

Exploring Researcher Bias

Bracketing is an important part of the phenomenological method. Bracketing requires the primary researcher to identify his or her bias prior to commencing a study in order to avoid imparting that bias when conducting interviews, analyzing transcripts, and thematizing data (Nesti, 2004; Thomas, Neslon, & Silverman, 2005). Existential phenomenological researchers view their participants as the experts when it comes to their experiences. As a result, participants are often referred to as "co-participants," which is the label hereafter used when referring to them in the present study (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). It was important for the primary researcher to acknowledge and set aside his previous experience of playing video games when conducting and analyzing interviews with participants. Therefore, prior to commencing the study he participated in a bracketing interview conducted by a colleague with previous experience with phenomenological interviewing. During the interview the researcher revealed what he thought

cyberathletes might experience during a video game tournament. The bracketing interview was then transcribed and thematized by an interpretive research group at the University of Tennessee. Members of this group included faculty and graduate students with expertise in the existential phenomenological research process.

The themes that emerged from the bracketing interview were largely based on the primary researcher's experience with video games and video game culture. They included possible differences in online play experiences versus tournament play experiences and the beliefs that players would (a) experience strong emotional reactions to the games during the tournament; (b) be motivated to win the tournament; (c) have in-depth strategies for playing their games in the tournament; and (d) spend a great deal of time practicing and preparing for the tournament. Given that prior knowledge of video games and video game culture can be beneficial for developing rapport with gamers (King et al., 2009), the primary researcher's prior experience with video games was considered both an asset to the study as well as something that needed to be bracketed. Finally, since Pollio et al. (1997) suggested that bracketing should be an ongoing process, the primary researcher continually revisited the themes that emerged from his bracketing interview and added others as necessary throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Selecting the Co-Participants

Selecting co-participants for phenomenological research is very important since their experiences will be the primary source of data. Co-participants should have direct experience with the phenomenon of interest and be willing to discuss their experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). Therefore, in the present study video game players with tournament experience were targeted for

possible participation. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval, co-participants were recruited at the University of Tennessee - Knoxville campus through flyers posted in areas where video game tournaments were likely to be held (e.g., the campus student center, residence hall multipurpose rooms, etc.). Additional recruiting strategies included word of mouth communication among gamers, emails to campus residence halls, emails to gamers in on-campus tournaments, and postings on gamer message boards. All potential co-participants were sent the same initial email that described the project and invited them to participate (Appendix A). In order to be included in the study gamers had to have competed in at least two video game tournaments in their lifetime, with one competition in the six months prior to the interview. Co-participants were entered into a drawing for an Xbox Live gift card valued at 1600 Microsoft Points, which is around twenty dollars. The final sample included 12 co-participants with a range of tournament experience. A more detailed description of the sample is provided in Chapter 4, Table 1. All co-participants were over the age of 18 and provided their signed informed consent prior to participation (Appendix B). They also completed a demographic questionnaire that included information regarding their past gaming and tournament experiences (Appendix C).

Collecting the Data

There were several aspects to the data collection process, including equipment used, interview location, a pilot interview, and the interview protocol. Each of these aspects is discussed in this section.

Apparatus and transcription. Interviews were recorded on a Sony Digital Voice Recorder model number ICD-PX820. This device allowed for recording in MP3 format and a connection to a PC via USB port. These functions were crucial for capturing clear audio records.

The audio records were then sent to Verbalink (www.verbalink.com) for transcription. Verbalink is a transcription company that allows audio files to be uploaded via their FTP server. The company has confidentiality measures in place that ensure the content of the files will not be shared with other parties. The non-disclosure agreement used in the present study can be found in Appendix D.

Interview location. It is important for interviews to take place in a quiet and comfortable location that ensures the privacy of the conversation (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The primary researcher conducted all but one of the interviews in an office on campus. The office included a comfortable armchair and couch. Because the office was in a high traffic area of the building, a "do not disturb" sign was placed on the outside of the door. The remaining interview was conducted in Atlanta, GA in the apartment of a friend who had put the co-participant in contact with the primary researcher.

Pilot interview. A pilot interview was conducted in order to test the clarity of the opening question as well as its potential to elicit in-depth descriptions of the experience of competing in video game tournaments. Ideally a question should evoke an interview lasting anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour or more in length (Dale, 1996). The interview question read as follows: "I want you to think of a time when you were competing in a video game tournament. When you think of that experience, what stands out to you?" Follow up questions were asked only to obtain clarification or greater detailed of the described experience. Sample probing questions included, "Can you tell more about____? and "You mentioned _____, can you talk more about that?" The pilot interview was conducted with a video gamer and lasted 35 minutes and 57 seconds. Feedback obtained from the pilot participant indicated that the meaning

of the question was clear and the results suggested it was capable of eliciting a full and detailed response. Due to the rich description provided by the pilot participant, his interview was included in the final data analysis and development of the overall thematic structure.

Interview protocol. The interviews began after obtaining informed consent from the co-participants (Appendix B). The same open-ended question used during the pilot interview commenced the interviews with all other co-participants. Similar follow-up questions were also used when necessary to obtain additional details and clarification of co-participants' comments. All co-participants were able to fully describe at least two tournament experiences, which promoted discussion of possible similarities and differences across experiences and co-participants. The interviews continued until the co-participant had nothing further to say about his/her experiences. To promote anonymity, co-participants were asked to choose a pseudonym that would be substituted for their real name on the transcripts of their interviews. Some of the co-participants permitted the primary researcher to select their pseudonym while others came up with their own. Following each interview the researcher recorded field notes that included information about the setting of the interview, unusual events, non-verbal communication, and any other reactions of the co-participant during the interview (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Immediately following each interview, the primary researcher completed field notes about the interview. The notes were helpful in reminding the primary researcher of elements that stood out from previous interviews. For example, an excerpt from Butabi's interview read as follows: "Toward the end of the interview I felt that he started to give me advice about how I should approach video game tournaments, instead of elaborating on is experience. Going forward such comments might indicate that the interview is coming to an end. Remember to focus on

experience during the event, not advice." The field note helped the primary researcher tailor interview technique in the interviews that followed to keep discussion around description of the event, not advice on how to go play in video game tournaments. Additionally, the primary researcher reviewed field notes from the bracketing interview and prior interviews to reduce the temptation to lead the co-participant to discuss particular things instead of letting the content flow from their unique experience.

Analyzing the Data

It is imperative for existential phenomenological researchers to accurately capture the meaning of co-participants' experience of a phenomenon. The goal is not to infer meaning from the interview transcript, but to gain an understanding of the essential elements of the experience as described by the participant. In order to accomplish this task, a number of specific steps were taken by the primary researcher and the interpretive research group. To begin the process, the audio record of each interview was transcribed and the transcript was sent to the co-participant. The co-participant to verify the accuracy of the transcript and invited to make any corrections or additions. All of the co-participants in this study confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts and none suggested any changes.

Next the primary researcher read and re-read each transcript to gain an understanding of the parts of the interview as they related to the whole experience of the co-participant (Dale, 1996). From the readings, the primary researcher began to identify statements that seemed to represent critical elements of the co-participant's experience. He also noted reoccurring patterns or specific statements that were repeated. These patterns and statements represented critical elements of the interview and were deemed to be important meaning units depicting the co-

participant's lived experience of competing in a video game tournament (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The researcher's analysis was an ongoing process as an attempt was made to understand the meaning by their relationship to the overall transcript (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Interpretive research group. Reading and rereading transcripts can be a time consuming process. One way to alleviate this burden is to recruit the assistance of others familiar with the methods of existential phenomenological research (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In the present study the primary researcher elicited the assistance of the previously mentioned interpretive research group in order to identify salient themes emerging from the different transcripts. All members of the group signed a confidentiality agreement before working through the transcripts (Appendix E).

The specific process used by the interpretive group involved one member reading aloud the statements/questions of the primary researcher, while another member read aloud the responses of the co-participant. The other members of the group followed along on their copies of the transcript, taking notes and highlighting words or phrases that stood out to each of them. Before reading each transcript, the primary researcher briefly explained the type of video game that the co-participant was discussing. Periodically the group would stop reading and discuss their respective observations/interpretations or request additional explanation of specific video game terminology used by the co-participants.

When necessary the group would point out any indications of leading questions or researcher bias surfacing in an interview (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Further, the research group served as a check on the primary researcher's temptation to craft a thematic structure

independently and on occasion pointed meaning units that had eluded the primary researcher's attention (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Developing the Thematic Structure

The interpretive research group was also a vital aspect of the process of identifying and confirming the thematic structure that emerged from the interviews. Deciding what constitutes a theme is a critical element of the phenomenological process. According to Thomas and Pollio (2002) themes capture the essential structure of a given experience. In the present study, the primary researcher initially brought a list of proposed themes to the research group for feedback. Then he and the group members discussed and created the final themes based on the meaning units they had identified (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The research group also assisted the primary researcher in appropriately labeling each theme (Thomas & Pollio, 2002).

Global or major themes represented the experiences of most or all of the co-participants while sub-themes—which are smaller distinct themes that support the major themes—along with the individual meaning units provided nuance to the major themes (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Once global themes were agreed upon the primary researcher and interpretive group members discussed possible thematic structures. In particular, the research group helped the primary researcher not impart biases derived from his academic training in sport and performance psychology. Eventually, consensus was achieved on a final thematic structure, which seemed to best characterize the co-participants' experience of the video game tournament experience.

Confirming the Thematic Structure

The final step in the data analysis process is to present the overall thematic structure to co-participants to determine whether they think it accurately captures the fundamental elements

of their experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). In the present study the final thematic structure was sent to all co-participants and three provided a response. All three agreed that the themes fully captured their respective video game tournament experiences. For example, William stated, "This looks great! I feel like you have hit every aspect of the tournament video-gamer, and it is really neat to look at it from this perspective. Thanks!"

Validity and reliability. Typically reliability in research refers to the consistency of the findings. However, in existential phenomenological research no two interviews are ever the same (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Therefore, Giorgi (1971) has suggested that reliability in this type of research is achieved as long as the reader is able to see what the researcher depicts in the thematic structure, regardless of whether the reader agrees with it or not. The researcher's task is to present the findings in a manner that supports the study's conclusions, and to give the reader ample description to determine whether he/she agrees with those conclusions (Dale, 1996).

Validity in social science research is determined by the extent to which the research findings capture the phenomenon under investigation. Put another way, an idea can be considered valid when it is well grounded and adequately supported (Polkinghorne, 1989). In phenomenological research, validity is judged based on rigor and suitability of the methods that were used and on the plausibility of the findings (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Plausibility is established when the researcher demonstrates the ability to link the findings and subsequent interpretations directly to the text data. Validity is achieved if the reader is able to find supporting evidence for the researcher's interpretations and conclusions based on the thematic structure (Thomas, et al., 1997). In the present study the participation of the research group in identifying meaning units, sub-themes, and themes and in developing the thematic structure, and

the verification of the accuracy of the structure provided by co-participants, provided additional support for the validity and reliability of the findings (Dale, 1996).

CHAPTER IV

Results

The purpose of this investigation was to examine cyberathletes' lived experience of video game tournaments. Existential phenomenological interviews revealed a number of major themes and sub-themes, which were subsequently combined to produce a thematic structure that captured co-participants' experience. In this chapter, demographic characteristics of the participants are provided followed by a discussion of the major themes and thematic structure that emerged from the interviews. Sub-themes and supporting quotes that became meaning units are also presented in support of the thematic structure.

Co-Participants

The final sample of co-participants included twelve cyberathletes (11 male, 1 female) ranging in age from 18 to 23 years (M=21). Their estimates of the number of hours they played per week ranged from 8 to 56 (M=24.67). Demographic information for the co-participants as along with their respective pseudonyms is presented in Table 1. The majority of the co-participants were still enrolled as undergraduates; two co-participants had graduated within two years of the date of the interview. Their tournament experience ranged from smaller local tournaments at game stores or in residence halls on college campuses with less than twenty participants to larger national tournaments hosted in arenas or convention centers with over two hundred participants. On the whole the skill level of the co-participants was very high. Many of the video and computer games they played on a regular basis have skill ranking systems built into the game structure. One co-participant had been ranked in the top five in the nation for two weeks for one game. Another co-participant reported that he had reached level 30 and achieved a

"prestige" ranking 8 times in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3. Prestige means that a player has progressed all the way through the in-game ranking system based on experience points. Experience points are earned in various amounts for different accomplishments. Many of the co-participants had won smaller tournaments played and several cyberathletes who had national tournament experience indicated they had achieved moderate success. None of the players reported consistently winning at the large tournaments. However, the final sample was a group of highly skilled players who had experienced success playing in front of others. Their interviews ranged in length from 27 min, 56 sec to 51 min, 13 sec with an average length of 36 min, 51 sec.

Table 1

Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Highest Tourney Experience	Estimated HRS/Week	Preferred Platform	Interview Time in Minutes
Bob	18	Male	African American	Campus	30	Xbox 360	27:26
Bill	21	Male	White	Local Store	15	Playstation 3	35:30
Butabi	22	Male	White	National	20	Xbox 360	43:26
Cortana	20	Female	White	National	40	P.C.	36:47
D. Man	22	Male	White	Local Store	8	Xbox 360	37:17
Dale	23	Male	White	Local Store	20	Xbox 360	29:34
Igor	23	Male	White	National	56	P.C.	39:45
Madden	23	Male	White	National	15	Xbox 360	51:13
Nick Arcade	21	Male	White	Local Store	35	Xbox 360	35:57
Refiki	18	Male	White	Campus	20	Xbox 360	32:07
Ted Mosby	19	Male	White	Local Store	15	Xbox 360	39:18
William	22	Male	White	National	22	Xbox 360	33:57
(N=12)	*(M = 21)*				*(M = 24.67)*		*(M = 36:5)*

Grounds and Figural Themes

From an existential phenomenological perspective what people are aware of in a given situation is considered to be what is meaningful to them (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Meanings that emerge as figural elements of the experience always emerge within a context or against some background, abbreviated "ground" (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) there are four major existential grounds against which things can appear figural: *Time, Body, World, and Others*. In existential phenomenological research it is important to make sense of the figural elements and to understand how those figural elements relate back to the context or ground from which they emerge. Put another way, figural elements cannot exist without a contextual ground within which the elements are perceived. Neither can the existential ground exist except as a frame for the figural elements. Commonalities identified across co-participants' interviews generate the figural themes that indicate important aspects of the experience. The resulting thematic structure should then contains the essential elements, both figural and ground, of the phenomenon of interest as derived from the first-person description of the event provided by co-participants (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The thematic structure is presented in Table 2.

In the present study the primary researcher and interpretive research group identified a total of 688 meaning units. From these meaning units, they developed five major figural themes that emerged from three distinct grounds, which represented the contexts against which co-participants experienced video game play. Four of the figural themes emerged from co-participants' descriptions of their direct tournament experiences: *real life event, comrades and competitors, respect and maturity, from cutthroat to good time.* Three distinct grounds

represented the contexts for these themes: *the gaming world* (far ground), *the tournament world* (near ground), and *the playing world* (nearer ground). An additional figural theme that emerged from the transcripts, *committed investment* did not appear to be part of the tournament experience per se. Therefore, the dotted line shown in Table 2 serves to indicate the separation of this theme from the other figural themes. In the following sections discussion of the three grounds is presented first, followed by a discussion of the figural themes with their respective supporting sample quotes. The pseudonym of the cyberathlete quoted each time is also provided. Notably absent from the final thematic structure are sub-themes. The decision not to include sub-themes was based on the observation that some components of the figural themes approached the level of sub-themes. Thus, any additional discussion of sub-themes would have been redundant, added unnecessary complexity, and detracted from the presentation of the meaning experienced by the co-participants in the tournament setting.

Table 2

Figural Themes and Grounds.

Figural Themes	Grounds
Real Life Event	Tournament World
Comrades and Competitors	Tournament World
Respect and Maturity	Tournament World
From Cutthroat to Good Time	Playing World
Committed Investment	Gaming World

Grounds

For something to appear important or meaningful, it must have a background or context that frames it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The things that people notice in everyday existence emerge from some context that makes the things noticeable. Something cannot appear figural apart from a context. In analyzing the interviews obtained from the co-participants in this study, it became clear that their descriptions of the tournament experience were framed within three separate and unique contexts: *the gaming world, the tournament world*, and *the playing world*.

The gaming world. The gaming world represented the overall (far) ground wherein video game players spend most of their time. Within this context gamers play video games alone at their home or with their friends. In the present study, many gamers also reported spending a large amount of time playing online. The cyberathletes who indicated they were part of a clan or team said they would designate times to meet online to practice and work on getting better. In the online setting, gamers were able to play and communicate with their teammates in real time via headsets or by typing messages to one another. A few participants talked about utilizing features of games to review their performance with their teammates. Practicing and playing within the context of the gaming world was a distinct domain for many of the co-participants. As one put it:

> It's really hard to play video games when you have a group of friends who don't play video games, or a family that doesn't really understand video games, because there's kind of an otherness aspect to it. But when you're in a competition with people who play the same game, feel the same way it's definitely one of those experiences where you feel whole and less as an individual in a crowd. (Cortana)

Another co-participant described how he viewed the gaming world as a separate and unique domain where the mindset is completely different than the regular world:

> I would say it's like your own little world almost. You got what you do everyday. You go to work. You're in school. You're in college or whatever, but as soon as you put that headset on to start playing, you're in competitive mode now, and really you kinda just shut everything off. (Butabi).

The way that the co-participants talked about their experience as a dedicated gamer seemed to set them apart from their friends who were not dedicated to video games as much as they were. However, the co-participants also experienced separation from their friends who played video games but did so in a less serious or frequent fashion.

The tournament world. The video game tournament provided a second context (near ground) of the co-participants' gaming experience. While an extension and subset of the gaming world, the tournament world possessed unique elements that existed only in the tournament setting. As one co-participant described it:

> You have something in common (with other competitive gamers); so you're talking about the games, you're talking about how exploits (game feature) and how much you hate (some game features). Everybody's laughing and joking, but then when the tournament starts it seems like people get really, really serious, and really intense. (William)

The co-participants also spent some time describing the setup of the tournament world. They commented on the location and number of consoles being used, the level of organization, and the amount of control the organizers placed on the tournament (e.g., the presence or absence referees). At minimum the tournament world consisted of one console with opponents competing

on the same screen. However, some tournaments had set-ups where gamers faced each other with their respective monitors in between them while others located the game stations next to each other. To some degree the various configurations of consoles, monitors, and gamers impacted co-participants' experience of competition in the tournament world.

Another element of the tournament world that many co-participants discussed was the presence of food. They were quite appreciative of the free food provided at the larger events or, at arena type events, where vendors had booths set up and offered free samples of their products. A few of the co-participants did not like the smaller tournaments where the only food available was that for sale in game stores. To them it seemed like the stores were taking advantage of gamers in attempt to make more money.

The playing world. Playing in the tournament constituted a third (very near) ground that served as the context within which co-participants experienced the competition itself. Depending on how the tournament was organized gamers could spend a greater amount of time not playing/competing than they actually spend playing/competing. When the present gamers were actually playing, they experienced pressure, had intense emotional reactions, and sometimes stressed out over the outcome. One co-participant the act of playing in the tournament world in the following way: "There is no sound. You just focus. You can't even really tell what's going on. There is no distraction at all" (Igor). The only female gamer seemed to notice other competitors more when she was playing. She said, "You meet a lot of people who come from a lot of different places. Many are extremely friendly to you face-to-face if you're not playing a game, and when you're playing a game they can be a complete and total dick" (Cortana).

Figural Themes

Figural elements are those that stand out to people in a given situation (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), figural elements and contextual grounds co-create one another and reveal the single wholeness of the experience. The figural themes represent a constellation of the most salient aspects of an experience; the themes interact with one another and with the grounds from which they emerge to create the totality of the experience. Figural themes identified in the present study existed with the conceptual grounds mentioned in the previous section and included *committed investment, real life event, comrades and competitors, respect and maturity*, and *from cutthroat to good time*.

Committed Investment. Data from the demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) revealed that the co-participants spent a considerable amount of time playing video games. Some referred to this time as "hours upon hours upon hours" (Cortana). Others described it as "going to work" (Ted Mosby). The *committed investment* label came from Cortana who talked about this excessive practice time in the following way, "So it's an investment. You really spend a lot of time working and all of your efforts to become better than anyone else." The extent of this investment varied among the players. However, some realized that there were payoffs to the time committed to practicing in the form of winning a tournament or recognition. Butabi talked about being recognized by fans at a tournament, "All the hard work we put into it practicing six hours on end every day. Seeing all these people watching you is fun. Really fun." Igor perceived the time investment in relation to other life areas, "I mean nothing's better than a game that you practice eight hours a day at trying to be good at. Finding someone else who's just like, dude,

this has totally killed my GPA, too." At times the level of investment consumed a large portion of the gamers' daily activities. As one put it,

> It's still the one thing – just knowing how much time I spent on it and just completely shutting everything else out – I mean if my life didn't involve practicing for that game for those two months – I wasn't serious. I don't know. It just amazes me how focused I was on it. (Madden)

Some co-participants expressed the challenge they faced balancing their time practicing video games and the time needed to take care of other things in their life. One said, "People shouldn't be playing video games when they're in school. They should be studying." (Nick Arcade). Clearly, the hours spent playing video games was a salient aspect of these co-participants' experience; something they deemed necessary in order to prepare for serious competition but costly in terms of meeting the other demands in their lives

A few of the co-participants even used the term "work" to describe this time, as if practicing was something they had to do instead of something they did for the sake of enjoyment. One talked about playing with friends after he lost a match, 'I thought about how I could improve and then I went to work the next like couple of weeks online with my friends" (Ted Mosby). Another co-participant compared practicing with his teammates to the toll that working a tedious job for many years can have on a person:

> I had other things going on, and it's kinda like how people say when you go to work, kinda leave everything at the door. Don't bring your emotions in, but sometimes you just can't. You can't go to work. You call out. It's kinda how video games takes a toll on you because it takes so much mental capacity even just to play one game sometimes. (Butabi).

For the co-participants in this study, practice seemed to be an activity they believed was necessary for success but sometimes seemed like working overtime on a tedious job.

For many co-participants, there was a sense of shame and regret over the extent to which they devoted time to playing video games. A feeling of shame appeared to surface in the form of some co-participants' reluctance to fully discuss their level of participation in gaming. Regret was evidenced more overtly in the gamers' remarks regarding time lost and opportunities missed because of their obsession with video games. One co-participant described his regret in the following way:

> I think if there is anything that you need to take out of this (study) it's that when someone gets sucked into this competitive world, they can overlook other things in life that need to be taken care of as well. You really do because if you don't, it gets really bad. It gets really, really bad. And in high school, it was really, really bad for me. It was – I mean like I said, I was on (playing video games) from 3 pm 'til I would probably say midnight everyday, and then I'm doing homework from 12:30 to 2 am. Then I'm up by 6. So it is – it was disgusting. It really was, and I look back at it now, and I'm like 'Why did I do that? Why did I do that? (Butabi)

Remarks like this one suggest that while the co-participants in this study readily admitted to devoting a large amount of time to playing video was not something they were always proud of.

One co-participant talked about a time when he won a local tournament on his college campus that resulted in him being able to play at a national tournament. From the time he won the campus tournament he constantly worked on strategies that would help him perform well in the national tournament. His account offered an example of how rigorous and thorough some of

these gamers can be in their preparation for competitions. He said he created an excel sheet to analyze which team he wanted to practice with and ultimately play with in the national tournament. Then he began practicing and learning the playbook for the game as well as adjusting his body to the time zone he would be experiencing at the location of the tournament. At one point he said, "I would end up going to sleep at probably 3:00 am Eastern time–to prepare for a Pacific time zone lifestyle because I didn't want to be jetlagged at the tournament" (Madden).

Overall, *committed investment* was a large part of these co-participants' lives that served to equip them with the skills necessary for competition in video game tournaments. The co-participants in this study learned tactical aspects of video games over time, from others, and from doing research on the Internet. The tactics were for the most part specific and precise. Morevoer, the need to commit a large amount of time to the development of the skills necessary for success in competition appears quite similar to the experience of athletes in other real world sports. The theme *committed investment* became figural against the ground of *the gaming world*, where the majority of people play video games for fun on a recreational basis. The remaining figural themes emerged against the grounds of *the tournament world* and *the playing world* and, therefore, were more immediate to the tournament experience.

Real Life Event. The first figural theme dealing with the tournament experience of the co-participants was related to the presence of others in what was called "real life" (Bill, D. Man) people as a result of "playing in person" (Nick Arcade). The presence of others made the experience "an actual event" (Butabi) by playing people who are "actually there with me, in their presence instead of online" (Bob). In a sense, it makes the virtual other become real. There was

a dynamic interaction between seeing and being seen. Many cyberathletes spend time playing video games in online networks without being able to see their opponent. Even if they play video games with friends or acquaintances in the same room, it is often not in an organized competitive format with an explicit intent of beating the opponent. The seriousness and intensity of other people at the tournament added to the competitive feel and realness of the event.

Online networks were described as, “A virtual barrier to you don’t – you’re not emotionally invested when you’re playing online as opposed to playing in person” (Nick Arcade). In the tournament setting, the virtual barrier is removed and people can put a face to a name. Being able to see your opponent—someone you do not know—is quite different from playing against people you know. As one co-participant put it:

> It’s a little different from online just ‘cause you don’t know the people you’re playing. You don’t see a face matched to a voice but when you see a face matched to a voice it sort of messes with your mind sometimes. (Ted Mosby)

These co-participants were not only able to see their opponent; their opponents were also able to see them. As a result the present gamers felt exposed to visual evaluation by their opponents. For one co-participant it was much more personal.

> There's a crowd of like 10, 15, 20 people gathered behind you watching you play. So it starts going through your head. It becomes much more personal than football does 'cause football there's like 20 people on the field. (Igor)

Which such circumstances made them nervous and anxious; it was not always a negative experience. As one co-participant stated, “Yeah, it was definitely really cool seeing them in like real life as opposed to just like playing against ‘em online and stuff” (Bill).

The co-participants were highly aware of the intensity of seriousness of the events. William described some people who took the event "very, very seriously—they get very intense." The words "intense" and "serious" were used to describe other gamers who were focused on winning or playing well. Ted Mosby described them as "just very serious, didn't want to be bothered, didn't want to really be messed with while they were watching or playing somebody, 'cause they were focused." In some cases, wanting to win did not negate the fun aspect of it. When describing a tournament experience where competitors had a chance to win a copy of a new game a week before it was released, one gamer commented on the nature of play:

> Everybody was talking. Everybody was having fun. It was social and competitive at the same time. It was social when you weren't playing, and then when you were it was like, 'All right, no holds barred. I'm gonna kill this person because I want to win.' It was fun. (Refiki)

A sense of heightened competition also seemed to vary depending on how gamers were doing in the tournament. Specifically, there was a considerable difference in the experience of a gamer playing in the winner's bracket versus the loser's bracket. One co-participant talked about the difference this way:

> When you're in the winner's bracket, the two teams playing, they are completely silent. Nobody says anything. Everybody has their headsets on. The only people talking are like you and your teammate, and the other person and his teammate. That's it. You can't even see the other people. Nobody is saying anything for fear of giving away a position or something. The loser's bracket is totally different. It's more like playing for fun. You've lost. You don't care. You're just – same thing for the guys behind you who just came to

> hang out–just messing around. I guess whether you're playing for a bit prize or not, it really changes things. (Dale)

As suggested in the previous comment, when a significant prize was on the line the sense of competition was heightened for these co-participants. Gamers' mood and behavior were different when they were no longer in the running to win the tournament. As one put it, "You see that fun come back because the stress is now off. You have fun again" (D Man). The fun element was missing from the experience of serious gamers who were still in the winners bracket and highly motivated to win.

Playing in a real life event differed in the strategy used by gamers. One adjustment that differed between playing at home and in the tournament world was the necessity of warming up. Typically, the warm up consisted of playing a few practice rounds before actually competing in the tournament. Warming up was deemed so essential to the co-participants in the study that they felt they were doomed to defeat if they did not have the time to warm up. Warming up for these co-participants had both a physical and mental component; it included warming up the muscles while also getting in the right mindset. As one explained, "You have to be warmed up or else you won't be in the mindset. You just won't be there. You won't play anywhere near your best" (Igor). Another talked about warming up as a way to get comfortable because the tournament setting is very different than wherever one normally plays, "You're definitely anxious just to get in there and start warming up and getting comfortable because you're not playing on – you're not in your living room or you're not in your computer room or wherever" (Butabi).

The strategies the co-participants described were both numerous and adaptable to different situations. One gamer said, "So generally there's different strategies that are good on

different maps. I have 15 or 20 strategies that would be really, really good with that, something like “highly aggressive and quick” (Igor). He then went on to explain about different strategies he used for a plethora of situations. They were all highly detailed, complex, and geared toward beating the opponent. Strategy adjustments were also necessary because the gamers were playing in person. It was not enough to just use game strategy anymore. Tournament competition required tournament strategy. One co-participant talked about how he changed his playing strategy to fit the tournament setting and advance to the next round:

> I wasn’t trying to shoot for first place, just trying to play a strategy, let them think they’re gonna [win easily] – I played a mind strategy also with the game. Not just being good at the game, but giving (the opponent) false perceptions of what I could and couldn’t do. (Bob)

For these co-participants strategy adjustments in game play were highly pliable and fluid. Playing in person also allowed other attendees at the tournament to view and evaluate the co-participants’ performance. As a result these gamers were aware of not only their opponent evaluating the strategies they used during game play, but also of those attendees that were watching.

Comrades and Competitors. The second figural theme to emerge from the tournament setting was *comrades and competitors.* The co-participants in the study talked about the social relationships with others at the tournament at fun and appealing. However, these same people were the source of anxiety and nerves because they were the competition. The label comrades came from the comment by Bill about what he liked about other people, “The camaraderie of it. Even though people were there for the purpose of winning and weren’t like buddy-buddy, there

was still almost the sense that being there together made us kind of like friends" (Bill). The competitor aspect became very clear once the playing actually began. Fun and laughing gave way to serious focus.

For the co-participants in this study the social aspect of the tournament setting was something they enjoyed and was important to them. It was a time to talk to other people who also had a high level of interest in video games. One talked about the general tournament atmosphere being fun. As one said, "Everyone had a great experience. People are smiling and laughing, having fun. I enjoyed it. I love being around that type of happy environment, especially when it includes the hobby that I enjoy most" (Bob). The co-participants also remarked how tournament attendees shared their love of video games with each other. Such shared appreciation acted like a bonding element between people who did not know each other prior to the tournament. One gamer observed, "We just got along like we knew each other our whole life. Just because we had something in common I guess" (Dale). Another explained his feeling of camaraderie in the following way: "At the end of everything, people are just so cool with each other. It's a good time" (Igor). One co-participant described it this way: We realize that everyone has something in common; we're here because we like to play these games (William). However, the same co-participant made it clear that there was a difference between hanging out with other gamers and playing against them:

> I really like talking to the guys when you just want to talk about a video game, and laugh about it or talk about your experiences in a game or anything like that. It's a lot of fun. But when we turn around and start playing each other in the actual tournament we get really super intense. (William)

One co-participant talked about feeling like he belonged: “Like when I was a little kid playing, I was considered weird for loving video games. But then you finally go to this tournament. You walk in and there’s 10,000 people around you who love those games as much as you do” (Igor). Building the connections and social bonds extended beyond the tournament itself for these gamers. For the gamers in this study, tournament experience included numerous social interactions with other gamers—both comrades and opponents—some of whom they deepened their relationship with after the tournament was over.

The majority of the participants at these video game tournaments were young men. While most co-participants mentioned the gender discrepancy, the majority comments from males indicated that they were not surprised to see young men dominating the sport. Playing with “a bunch of dudes” was a common thing. Cortana, the only female co-participant, described it as a “world of guys” (Cortana). The males in this study said they were quite shocked whenever they saw a female in the tournament setting. While not explicitly derogatory to women, their comments reinforced the notion that video gaming—particularly at tournaments—is a male dominated culture. One noted his amazement when he saw a female at a Call of Duty tournament, “Actually saw a girl that came there and played this time. That was amazing because you never see girls play games like that too much” (Bob). Other male gamers had similar reactions when talking about a tournament experience that included more than a few female gamers. One said, “Not necessarily all men at that one either. There were quite a few females playing in it too. Really surprised me” (Dale). Notable differences existed in these male co-participants’ perceptions of and interactions with male and female gamers.

The gamers also distinguished various types of players who attended these events. Many commented about the various types of players they encountered at tournaments. When asked to talk further about possible differences in participants at tournaments, one gamer replied, "I find myself wondering what kind of people are going to be there–what kind of players. Are they super competitive or are they casual players?" (Nick Arcade). Another co-participant used labels for video game participants like "die hard killjoy gamers" and "more casual, fun loving guys" (D. Man). According to the gamers in this study, the presence of more intense players changed the overall mood of a tournament. Such competitors could be difficult to interact with. Another outlined the differences he saw in people at tournaments:

> Now that's compared to like the [Gaming Center], where you meet like a couple are friendly and then other people were just very serious, didn't want to be bothered, didn't want to really be messed with while they were watching or playing somebody, 'cause they were focused. My clan, we were just friendly, we were just glad to be there. Just talking with people – trying to talk with people, but no one really talked to us. We just kept to ourselves and just sort of joked around a little bit. (Ted Mosby)

By way of contrast, one co-participant described a different feeling he had at a tournament where intense players were the exception, "It was one of those good time tournaments where everybody was yelling and screaming when you did something really funny, really cool" (Dale).

A critical element of the tournament experience for the co-participants in this study was the evaluation of their own skills relative to those of others. Moreover, such comparisons seemed to be an ongoing aspect of tournament play. One said "Then I watched some of the people play and I just got super nervous and was unsure how I was going to perform. I was like 'oh man

these guys are legit. I don't know what I'm gonna do'" (Bill). Two others said they found themselves evaluating the overall talent level of the field of competitors, but each came up with a different assessment. "It became apparent real quick that there were about three good players and two excellent ones" (D. Man). "I still didn't feel like – I knew that the talent level wasn't going to be that high" (Madden). These co-participants' ongoing assessment of skill level was always self-referenced. In some cases, however, the labels they used when evaluating their opponents' skill levels revealed a respect (or lack of such) for the opponent. For example, they would use the term "kids" as a putdown when describing opponents who they perceived to be less skilled or less mature than they were.

Respect and Maturity. The third figural theme *respect and maturity* was derived from co-participants perceptions of how people should behave at tournaments. Respect and maturity were mentioned as defining elements of sportsmanlike behavior. There seemed to be a basic understanding among tournament participants that their behavior should be respectful. One co-participant directly stated, "you're expected to act mature" (Nick Arcade). Immature actions were related to a player's inability to control his or her emotions. Where outbursts might be acceptable in online play, playing in person in an actual event changed the way co-participants thought others ought to behave in that setting. In general, the co-participants experienced the atmosphere of tournaments to be civil if not friendly. They said the majority of people they encountered friendly. One stated, "I guess the one thing I could say is people were really friendly at tournaments, even if they did have a mean side" (Nick Arcade). Another co-participant said, "I always try to be respectful whether we win or whether we lose – definitely cannot be a poor sport. I mean that's just very immature" (Butabi). Respect was often mentioned when these

gamers talked about acceptable behavior. One put it the following way, “When you start getting beat, you have to still remain classy because you don’t want to be one of those guys that they don’t want to ever invite back” (D. Man). Another talked about how being unpleasant at a tournament was simply uncalled for and frowned upon by people who attend such events:

> Yeah, like I said (some people) just kind of – were really arrogant. Before they played, while they were playing, and after they played. They took what we would call cheap tactics–so you know what I’m talking about–in the games. You know, it’s just something one might do when trying to win but that wasn’t the time for it. (Dale)

In both the online arena and the tournament setting there are opportunities for gamers to talk with their teammates and opponents. Online gamers do this via a headset with a microphone. At tournaments, however, they are sitting in close proximity to others, both teammates and competitors. Trash talking is taking verbal jabs at an opponent to ridicule or make fun of him or her. Trash talking was an essential element of their competitive experience regardless of the setting. As one put it, “I mean trash talking is fun when you are not the one being trash talked to” (Bill). Another co-participant expressed the feeling that trash talking was sometimes unavoidable, “I do my fair share, but it drives me nuts. I’m kind of hypocritical. When you get real competitive, you can’t help it. It happens. When someone else trash talks and makes you mad, you retaliate” (Dale). Some co-participants said they used trash talking as a strategy against their opponents such as to “get into the opponent’s head” (Butabi). The co-participants also indicated that trash talking and player exchanges can offer insights into the emotions of the opponent, One recalled a time when he thought, “This kid’s really mad. So he’s sitting there calling me names and stuff like that. But at the end of the game, like the end of the tournament

we were still friends" (Igor). Based on these comments it appeared that trash talking as well as the anger and angst it produced were part of the tournament experience but the interpersonal effects did not persist beyond the competitive setting.

A common occurrence at tournaments was one or two people who were very serious in their approach to playing and acted in a way that was not inline with the rest of the group. One co-participant talked about a player he observed at a tournament who did not quite seem to fit with the rest of the group:

> One guy in particular stood out to me. He was a really awkward fellow, really got into what he was doing. He was one of those really über competitive people that you just want to strangle at an event. You know, it's not a big tournament. There's no prize. There's not a point to it, you know (Dale).

Sometimes "that one guy" disregarded the social norm for behaving at the tournament. One co-participant described such a player he had encountered at one tournament, "There was – just one guy that was just going nuts. He was just acting crazy. He was like screaming. He had actually won his first game, to my surprise" (Ted Mosby). One talked about a guy in a tournament who "got mad and ran out – he like just stormed out, like rage quit, or something. Got mad and left the room. I don't know what the deal was with that" (Bob). The extreme emotional outbursts and general "super serious" approach was seen as unwarranted by some, "I feel like people get too intense over something that should just be fun and recreational" (William).

From Cutthroat to Good Time. The remaining figural theme, *from cutthroat to good time,* is comprised of a range of emotional intensity levels connected to the co-participants desire to win the tournament and experienced during competition. The label *from cutthroat to good*

time was derived by the primary researcher from descriptions of playing when winning was important versus when winning was not the end goal. The co-participants distinguished between "good time tournaments" (D. Man) where people were not very concerned with winning and larger tournaments with a significant prize that produced "cutthroat competitiveness" (Refiki). D. Man went on to describe focusing on the win, "You're putting money to it and you see that kind of fun leave their eyes. Then you look at the losers playing and you see them over there playing for nothing, but they're having a great time doing it." When there was less on the line, the intensity of emotion seemed to wane in favor of more relaxed and fun competition.

In smaller tournaments where the entry fee was minimal to none, the competitive feel was more calm and fun. When talking about the relaxed nature of one tournament, Dale described the approach by some as, "They didn't care. Who cares, right? I mean you didn't lose anything to play. There was nothing to win. Nothing to lose" (Dale). Even with no entry fee, the competitive nature came out from some people, "They were there to have fun, but at the same time trying to win" (Bill).

For the more competitive tournaments, the anticipation and anxiety while ever present came to a pinnacle in the moments leading up actual competition. One talked about the anxiety he felt just waiting to play: "I was just so amped up and on edge cause you never know when your name's about to be called" (Igor). For some co-participants the anticipation and nerves were manifested in physical symptoms. One said, "I was to the point that I'm getting little shakes, I'm nervous, I'm like – I don't know if I've got adrenaline going or if I'm scared. It was bad. I'm shaking and stuff" (Madden). Nerves had a significant impact on other gamers as well. One said, "People are watching. I'm nervous. My fingers might slip. And then I'm just like, 'aw crap. Now

I'm done. I'm done.' So it's a complete and utter mind game with yourself" (Igor). Some co-participants said they were able to calm down after a point while others remembered experiencing intense emotions throughout the match. As one put it, "I was pretty much like, 'Oh shit, oh shit' the entire time. There was never a moment I was calm, not even when I knew what I was supposed to be doing"(Cortana). The desire to win was to the point of perfection, "I notice when my hands start sweating. Because I'm driven, I want it to be perfect" (Dale).

The fast pace at which decisions had to be made also seemed to be a factor that contributed to the co-participants' emotions in tournament play. The number of decisions a player made per second varied based on the type of game he or she was playing. One co-participant described the speed of decisions in the game StarCraft II: "It can all be decided by one small decision in a game where I'm making 450 decisions a minute. One small decision can make or break me. Like the mind games and the speed of it are just crazy" (Igor).

Another aspect of in-game reactions was when players made mistakes because they changed their approach and became more aggressive. Aggressive game strategies did not always work. As one put it, "Yeah, you slip up. You get aggressive" (Dale). But then he remembered a time when "had I not been aggressive–riding the adrenaline the whole time–we couldn't have won by that margin. There's no way" (Dale).

In more competitive settings, perceptions of winning and losing were seen as "all or none" (Madden) with no middle ground. The time effort was completely worth it and validated with a win, or all the preparation was a waste of time. They had devoted so much preparation to getting ready for the event that if they did not win, they tended to see all the time they had spent training as a total loss. For these gamers, winning produced complete joy and validation, while

losing evoked a feeling of worthlessness. The following quote from the lone female co-participant in this study seemed to capture the intense and lasting impact of losing:

> So a huge thing that stands out to me is just the emotion and the passion that people put into (competing in a tournament), especially when it comes to winning and losing. There's definitely an air of, 'This is it, you either make it or you break it.' You either feel like you spent 40 hours for something special or you spent 40 hours for just being really dumb. (Cortana)

The agony of losing was so great to these gamers because of the exorbitant time and effort they spend working on getting better at playing their video games. One talked about not even wanting to play again if he get beat by a substantial amount, "I go to play somebody else and he absolutely dumps on me. I'm feeling very discouraged and very disappointed in myself. I sometimes think I don't even wanna play that game anymore" (Butabi).

One spoke of not even being able to take a moment to recognize where he was (at an important tournament) and the opportunity it had availed him because he was so caught up with the prospect of winning:

> I wasn't even appreciating the fact that I was in California for free for two days. All I was thinking about was winning $10,000.00. If I could not make that happen it was gonna be a letdown. It was a waste of the past two months. (Madden)

Lastly, the fun aspect seemed to return to the tournament experience once the cyberathletes were no longer in contention for the prize. Dale noted the difference between gamers who were still playing in the tournament and those who were no longer in contention:

> The loser's bracket, totally different. That was kind of like the play for fun kind of thing. They'd lost. They didn't care. They were just – same thing with the guys behind them, just messing around. I guess when you throw a big prize into it, it really changes things.

D. Man made an observation about the fun returning after the pressure to win was no longer there. "But the funny thing there is when the losers play in the loser's bracket, you see that fun come back because it looks like the stress is now off and they can just earnestly have fun again." Clearly, the emotions of these video gamers tied to wanting to win were an intense aspect of their experience of tournament competition and something they all struggled with on a regular basis.

Additional Perspectives

As shown in Table 1 all but one of the co-participants in this study were males. Similarly, all but one was White. While the comments of the entire group were quite similar, the female and African-American gamers provided an additional perspective that is worth noting.

A Female Perspective. The female co-participant (Cortana) talked about her experience as a woman at tournaments and the general perception she had that the male attendees either ignored her or failed to respect her as a legitimate gamer. For example she stated that, "they assume you're there with your boyfriend, that you're there to support him, which is pretty–that's a low blow." She also thought that male gamers did not see her as a threat competitively. "Because when you play in a tournament against a guy and they say, 'Oh this one's going to be my gimme game,' it's like playing in a losing bracket." She also shared some of the sexist comments that had been directed at her at tournaments. The most common phrase was, "You belong in the kitchen, why don't you go back home?" However, she also noted that some male

gamers changed their attitude toward her once they played against her. “I have met a lot of guys that changed their opinion when they compete against a female gamer like me that’s actually played the games and can talk the games with them.”

The overall themes of this female gamer’s tournament experience clearly indicate that she faced pressures and adversity not felt by the males in this study.

An African American Perspective. The lone African-American co-participant (Bob) also shared one aspect of his tournament experience as a person of color that distinguished it from those of the White gamers. His general observation was that tournaments were not:

> Very diverse with respect to race, but I was expecting it. Since the whole ratio of Black to White students on the campus is still rather low, it wasn’t a big shocker to see a similar ratio at the tournament. However, I did bring a few of my friends with me to play in the tournament. There were about three of us [African Americans] including my best friend but yeah, everybody else was White. I wondered though how they [White gamers] would feel, you know, if they let this Black guy beat them or something.

One White male participant reflected on past experiences he had playing with different types of gamers.

> I’ve teamed with a pretty diverse group of people. I’ve teamed with African American. I’ve teamed with Spanish, Caucasian primarily, but I have teamed with a bunch of people, and it’s kind of funny because each race kinda adapts differently to a loss or a win. (Butabi)

Summary

The results of the present study revealed four major themes that were figural against the grounds of the tournament world and the playing world. These included *real life event, comrades and competitors, respect and maturity,* and *from cutthroat to good time*, and represented fundamental characteristics of the co-participants' experience of competing in video game tournaments. A fifth figural theme, *committed investment,* emerged against the overall ground of the gaming world, and dealt with the co-participants' experience of preparing for the challenges of tournament competition. Therefore, this theme seemed to be a vital part of the co-participants' lives and contributed to the behaviors, emotions, and reactions they experienced in the tournament setting. Overall, the results suggest that these co-participants spent a great deal of time playing video games and that such experiences were a significant component of their lives. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), for something to emerge as important and meaningful, it must exist within some background to stand out against. Thus, the five figural themes that emerged in this study were not separate and unique elements but were interwoven with each other and emerged from three distinct worlds. Taken together, the *gestalt* that characterized these co-participants' experience in video game tournaments consisted of the opportunity to compete, connect, and have fun with fellow gamers through the medium of the video game and within varying contexts.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Investigations in sport psychology have demonstrated the unique challenges of performing in front of others (Beilock & Gray, 2007; Dale, 2000; Schmidt & Wrisberg, 2008; Wrisberg, 2007) and what it takes to perform at a high level on a consistent basis (Ericsson, 2006). Prior to the present study the majority of research examining video games had been conducted from a third-person perspective using surveys developed by the researcher (Y. A. W. de Kort et al., 2007; Ravaja, Saari, Turpeinen, et al., 2006), video analysis (Reeves et al., 2009), or behavioral observation (Jansz & Martens, 2005; Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009). Missing was the perspective of the video game players themselves, particularly in the competitive tournament setting. Thus, the primary aim of the present investigation was to obtain video game players' first-person descriptions of the lived experience of video game tournaments using existential phenomenological procedures (Dale, 1996; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a thematic structure that captured these gamers' tournament experiences. In particular, the co-participants talked about what it was like to be part of the larger gaming community and to compete at a high level. Their descriptions included a dynamic interplay between the always-existing real world and the virtual arena of video game competition. Finally, the act of competing in front of others—both spectators and other gamers—seemed to be a salient component of the co-participants' tournament experiences.

Presented in the remainder of this chapter is a discussion of the major findings; connections to previous research; recommendations for further research; practical implications for sport scientists, cyberathletes, performance consultants, and tournament organizers; limitations; a brief summary; and conclusions.

Major Findings

The most surprising—and arguably important—finding of the present study was the extent to which co-participants talked about the other people and elements of the tournament environment compared to their own (or their team's) performance. While there is a tendency among the general public to view video games and virtual world technology as absent of people and human qualities, human beings were an important figural element of video game competition for these co-participants. In some cases other competitors made them worry whether their video game competence and skill level were sufficient for success. At other times the co-participants felt an unusual connection to their competitors.

Possible explanations for why the impact of other people was so prominent for these gamers center on the nature of the gamers' world and the "disconnect" between the practice and competition environments. Unlike the participants in previous video game research whose primary practice venue was public arcades (Baumeister, 1984; Lin & Sun, 2011), the co-participants in this study primarily practiced and played in the relative solitude of their home environment. If others were present they tended to be friends or acquaintances. Many of the co-participants' friends were recreational players and relatively unskilled. The tournament setting was drastically different from the home practice environment in several ways, including the vast number of players, highly skilled gamers, and people the co-participants had never met before. Playing video games in front of others has been shown to increase players' arousal level and negatively impact their performance (Baumeister, 1984; Kimble & Rezabek, 1992). Without the ability to simulate performing in front of a skilled evaluative audience prior to competing, it is likely the present co-participants found the tournament environment distracting and anxiety

inducing. Thus, it should come as little surprise that they talked more about their reactions to the tournament environment than they did about their own performance during the competition.

A second major finding that emerged from the interviews dealt with the nature of co-participants' interactions with others, as reflected in the major theme *comrades and competitors.* The social aspect of the tournament setting was very meaningful to the cyberathletes in this study. For one thing they encountered others who were as passionate about video games as they were. In their home environment they were often isolated socially due to their level of commitment to gaming compared to their friends. At the tournament they found other people who were just like them. It was a place where they did not feel like outsiders—a place they felt like they belonged. The finding of co-participants' perceived affiliation with others of a similar persuasion is consistent with previous research at a LAN event where players indicated that their primary motivation for attending was the social interaction (Jansz & Martens, 2005). The present results extend this finding by revealing more nuanced aspects of the interactions between gamers in the tournament setting. These cyberathletes did not have to rely on online communities to find others that matched them in interest and skill level. They met such people at the tournament—one-on-one, face-to-face—and were able to exchange experiences and information in a more personal and informal fashion than they were used to.

A third major finding concerned co-participants' views of winning and losing. Put simply, these two performance outcomes were extremely personalized but in different ways. The gamers interpreted winning as the crowning achievement of all their hard work; validating their skill level and competence in front of others. Conversely, the co-participants talked about losing as a devastating blow. In only a couple of instances did a co-participant indicate that losing a

match or tournament was a positive learning experience. From a performance psychology standpoint, these co-participants appeared to be more outcome oriented than process oriented in their approach to tournament competition (Wrisberg, 2007). Thus, it might be argued that their relatively high levels of perceived pressure and anxiety was due to an inordinate focus on things they could not control (e.g., the final score) rather than on those things under their control (e.g., a task-relevant focus on the act of skillful playing) (Beilock & Gray, 2007). In one case, the prize for being successful in the tournament was a significant amount of money, $10,000.00. Even in tournaments where the prize money was less significant, the desire to win and be successful produced nervousness and trembling hands on the part of gamers. Co-participants' attachment to and focus on the outcome became most evident in their descriptions of the contrast between the winners' and losers' sections of the tournament area. Those still in the competition were not speaking to each other very much and, as one gamer put it, the "fun left their eyes" (D.Man). In stark contrast, gamers who had lost were laughing and having fun. While all the other elements of the tournament experience continued to exist, the overall demeanor and interactions with others was no longer mediated by anxiety and nervousness produced by perceived pressure. These findings offer a fuller picture of the influence of social setting beyond the act of video game participation in isolation (Gajadhar et al., 2008). They also suggest that the intense desire to win impacts the tournament experience over the fun, social aspects, as noted in LAN events (Jansz & Martens, 2005; L. Taylor & Witkowski, 2010). Finally, it might be contended that several key concepts from the sport psychology and motor behavior literature may have been operating simultaneously during these co-participants' video game tournament experience. In addition to their apparent focus on winning rather than on the process of effectively performing

mentioned previously (Wrisberg, 2007), it is possible that the present gamers exhibited an achievement goal perspective that was ego- rather than task-oriented (Duda & Treasure, 2010). That is, they were motivated more by a desire to defeat their opponents (i.e., ego orientation) than by the challenge to perform at their best (i.e., task orientation) regardless of the outcome. If so, it is possible that the co-participants' attention was not fully focused on key aspects of the performance environment (i.e., salient characteristics of the video, effective strategies that might be employed, etc.) or their own movements (i.e., rapid and accurate decisions and actions), which would have likely impaired their performance.

A fourth major finding that emerged from the interviews was the way co-participants described and accounted for the logistics and behavior they observed at tournaments. At the larger events, tournament organizers clearly specified the ground rules of participant behavior, particularly with respect to the proper ways for gamers to interact with each other. However, at the smaller tournaments a more "fuzzy" social norm seemed to dictate players' notions of what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Behavior that did not conform to the norm was frowned upon but at the same time tolerated or sometimes even admired. For example, trash talking was considered to be acceptable and viewed by the co-participants as a clever maneuver that players could use to divert their opponents from a performance focus or game strategy. Previous research revealed that verbal aggression and arousal levels increase among gamers when they are playing with their friends (Ravaja, Saari, Turpeinen, et al., 2006). The present results suggest that such behavior may also be more prevalent in smaller tournament environments where oversight is less formal or non-existent and players are permitted to use less noble strategies for enhancing their prospects of success.

Connections to Previous Research

The nature of the present co-participants' experience in video game tournaments suggests that such competitions are more than just play (Ohler & Niedling, 2006). Thus, it might be argued that the institutionalization of video games has resulted in participation that resembles "sporting" rather than "gaming" (Coakley, 2007). The cyberathletes in this study played video games beyond a recreational level and to the point that it was not just for fun anymore. As mentioned earlier in this paper, relatively little prior research had examined video gamers' approach to competition or experiences in competitive tournaments. However, several aspects of the present findings appear to have connections to several previous studies.

The experience of the lone female gamer in this study seems consistent with that of a female competitive gamer highlighted in one recent investigation (Taylor et al., 2009). The woman in that study said she had to repeatedly justify her attendance at competitive gaming events—convincing people she was there as a legitimate competitor rather than serving in some support role or with the intention of "flirting" with male gamers. The female co-participant in the present study recounted similar experiences—noting that she did not feel readily accepted as a viable competitor or that male gamers assumed she was there to support her boyfriend. However, after defeating several male opponents she noticed that people's perception of her began to change. For this female cyberathlete, gaining acceptance into the culture of video game tournaments was contingent on displaying a level of playing proficiency comparable to that of her male counterparts. It is likely that her experience is similar to that of women in other sports who have faced or continue to face traditional gender stereotypes (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). More studies like the present one, offering women and members of other marginalized groups an

opportunity to tell their story (Sparkes, 2002; Taylor et al., 2009; Thorpe, 2009), might contribute to the eradication of cultural barriers and stereotypes that discourage minority participation. Much of the early research in game studies reinforced the notion that gamers were for the most part the domain of adolescent males (Crawford, 2005). Even a recent study revealed only three females in a representative sample of over 750 professional gamers (Jin, 2010). Fortunately, issues of gender inequality and the participation of females in organized tournaments are beginning to attract more research attention (Taylor et al., 2009). As e-sport goes through the process of "sportification" (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010), researchers might give more consideration to the ways female participation is being supported and encouraged. Indeed, future studies of video game culture might be a potentially fruitful platform for examining gender issues in e-sport.

The concept of normative Whiteness as demonstrated in the characters in the video games themselves (Higgin, 2009) and the characteristic choices available to gamers in many video games (Dietrich, 2013) was somewhat evident in the present data. The one African-American co-participant was sensitive to the way he might be perceived by the predominantly White participants at video game tournaments he attended. However, the White co-participants only mentioned noticing a female gamer and were silent regarding gamers of color. Possible explanations for such silence might include the relative dearth of gamers of color at tournaments and the White dominance of game content. While it would not be appropriate to conclude that White gamers are "color blind," the present findings suggest that diversity is not a prominent characteristic of video game tournaments. However, it is also possible that the limited diversity

in the present sample of co-participants may have contributed to a less than balanced portrayal of racial and ethnic presence at video game tournaments.

The some ways co-participants' descriptions of gaming experiences suggested elements of video game addiction, as evidenced by the shame and regret experience for lost time. Concerns about addiction are more appropriate when video game players choose to take part in the activity to escape the reality of their everyday existence. Previous research has shown that addiction to video games functions in similar ways to that of gambling addiction (Wood, Gupta, Derevensky, & Griffiths, 2004). One component of addiction is the inability to accurately determine how much time has elapsed during the course of a life event. The current co-participants' reflections concerning their past gaming activity prompted in some feelings of regret over the enormous amount of time they had lost (i.e., passed without them realizing) or wasted. These results are consistent with previous research showing that the mere act of playing video games can prompt a sense of lost time in players, with the severity of impact being a function of the amount of time spent playing (Wood & Griffiths, 2007). The most problematic outcome of video game use is when gamers are unable to control their excessive and compulsive playing tendencies (Lemmens et al., 2009). It should be noted, however, that some of the co-participants in the present study explicitly mentioned efforts to balance their video game playing with other commitments, such as school and work. Thus, some seemed to be better at balancing time commitments than others.

The results of this study also suggest that the number of hours co-participants spent playing contributed to how they interpreted losing in the tournament setting. Those who had devoted considerable time practicing considered that time to be a complete waste if they

subsequently lost at the tournament. Such a perception is not consistent with the results of a recent study with chess players, which revealed that the amount of time playing tournament rated games was a stronger predictor of players' peak ranking than the amount of time studying the game or practicing (Howard, 2013). Thus, it appears that the present co-participants' prospects of success in future tournaments would be enhanced by practicing in competition-like ways than by practicing "safe" games in the relatively non-competitive atmosphere of a home or apartment. Literature in sport psychology advocating a games approach to practice in order to enhance competition performance is consistent with this notion (Wrisberg, 2007). Research has also indicated that elite level performers engage in practice activities that are substantially different from those of non-elite performers—who tend to reach a level of performance they deem acceptable and refuse to challenge themselves any further (Ericsson, Roring, & Nandagopal, 2007). While the co-participants in the present study mentioned practice habits they felt were more advanced than those of their peers (i.e., beyond recreational participation) – as reflected in the references to "work"– it is possible that their conception of effortful, productive practice is different from that of the more successful gamers they encountered in the tournament setting.

The results of the current study also indicated that verbal aggression – primarily in the form of "trash talking"– is part of the video game tournament culture, particularly at the smaller events. A significant amount of research has been dedicated to the link between violence in video games and aggressive tendencies of players (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). There is evidence suggesting that competition may be a greater source of aggression and state hostility than is violent game content (Adachi & Willoughby, 2011). According to the co-participants in this study overtly aggressive and unpleasant outbursts appeared to be rare among gamers at the

tournament. While such events were competitive, overall the attendees were cordial with one another especially when they were no longer in the running to win the tournament. It should also be noted that the present co-participants only observed such outbursts from an outsider perspective—or at least none ever mentioned acting in extreme, unacceptable ways during the course of their interviews.

The only physiological reaction co-participants mentioned experiencing during the tournament appeared to be somatic anxiety. The theme *from cutthroat to good time* was comprised of meaning units that included "shaking hands" and "feelings of total nervousness." The notion of being amped up referred to the feeling gamers had during the moments leading up to the competition. When they were actually playing in the tournament they seemed to be focused more on the prospect of winning or losing rather than on bodily sensations. The existing literature indicates that perceptions of pressure can be detrimental to peak performance (Beilock & Gray, 2007). By placing a high value on winning, the current co-participants may have felt greater pressure as the "time to win" approached. If so, it might be expected that their performance, at least at the outset of their competitive event, would be adversely affected. Comments regarding their extreme disappointment when they lost also suggest an inordinate emphasis on competition outcomes, which would be expected to adversely impact performance. Interestingly, co-participants seem to be more relaxed and free to enjoy the company of other serious gamers after they had lost and the perceived pressure of winning had been dissipated.

The results of the current study regarding cyberathletes' relationship with other competitors are similar to the findings of previous qualitative research with decathletes, who stated that their opponents at big competitions were often their friends (Dale, 2000). In a more

recent study with parkour athletes, the sense of connectedness to and community with other competitors also seemed to be an important component of the tournament experience (Clegg & Butryn, 2012). Thus, it appears that a pervasive challenge for athletes in some sports, including video gamers, may be an ability to acknowledge friendships with other competitors without letting those relationships to become a distraction that compromises the athlete's chances of performance success. A prominent theme associated with performance success in sport and other domains is proper management of attention or focus (Schmidt & Wrisberg, 2008; Wrisberg, 2007). Performers who are able to deal with those aspects of competition that are irrelevant to performance success (e.g., friends, adversaries, officials, spectators, media, etc.) and focus only on the strategies, information, and environmental cues that contribute to effective performance are more often the ones who achieve the outcomes they desire, particularly under pressure.

As mentioned previously, athletes with a task orientation tend to perform better than those with an ego orientation because they are motivated more by the desire to perform well than by beating an opponent (Duda & Treasure, 2010). The cyberathletes in the current study who expressed extreme disappointment in their performance when they lost appeared to exhibit an ego orientation. Thus, it appears that the e-sports arena may be a fruitful venue for examining the impact of applied sport psychology interventions that promote a task-orientation.

It is acknowledged that the results from the bracketing interview were quite similar to the themes that emerged from the present interviews. However, it could be argued that such similarity was not a threat to the validity of the findings. As mentioned previously, King et al. (2009) has contended that prior knowledge of playing video games is an important prerequisite for understanding the video game culture. The primary researcher's understanding of nuance and

jargon likely facilitated his ability to interact with co-participants. However, while the researcher possessed prior video game experience his tournament experience was quite limited, which minimized any expectations of the dynamics of tournament competition. Finally, the use of an outside interpretive research group served to validate the themes that emerged from the interview texts. This group also acted as a check to curb any biases of the researcher that might threaten the data collection and analysis process.

Community was important for the co-participants in the present study. This was evidenced by the enjoyment they expressed when describing conversations they had with other serious gamers at tournaments. Several commented on the satisfaction they obtained from talking to other people who were just as interested and dedicated to video games as they were. Possible explanations for the high level of camaraderie with other gamers and the importance of community expressed by the co-participants may be the relative newness of competitive tournaments and limited opportunities for competitive gaming. However, previous research with athletes from a sport rich in history and tradition (i.e., track and field) revealed similar expressions of camaraderie between elite competitors in the decathlon (Dale, 2000).

Similarities and differences in the experiences of athletes in traditional sports and virtual sports is an issue requiring further inquiry. Recent research suggests that former collegiate athletes in traditional sports sometimes turn to video games to continue their experience of competitive situations (Bowers, 2011). Similar to the present findings, participants in that study indicated that their desire to connect with others and come together through video game competition was an important attraction to their playing video games. For some the games represented a way to connect to parts of their childhood they might have missed due to playing

traditional sports. A similar theme of missed opportunities was echoed by some of the cyberathletes in the present study. A final similarity between the present co-participants and athletes in traditional sports was the formation of competitive identity in their respective arenas. The present cyberathletes formed their competitive identity in the e-sports arena and in online tournaments while the collegiate athletes in previous research formed their competitive identity in the "real" (i.e., traditional) sports arena (Bowers, 2011). In both cases, social bonds forged in their respective competitive environments appeared to be an important part of the cyberathletes'/athletes' video game experience.

Recommendations for Further Research

As e-sport continues to evolve, the role of women as both consumers and competitors should be examined. Currently, game content is designed to appeal to young men and seems to exclude participation of minority groups. Preliminary evidence has shown racial stereotypes in game content (Dietrich, 2013). Future research should examine how existing racial stereotypes in game content and online environments impact the participation levels of minority groups in e-sports competitions.

There are significantly fewer female video game characters than male characters and where females are presented they are portrayed as scantily clad provocative objects designed to appeal to adolescent male gamers (Ivory, 2006). Thus, future researchers might examine video game culture more critically in order to determine the factors contributing to the apparent perpetuation of masculine superiority. In another vein, recent research suggests that female gamers prefer to compete in a "bedroom culture," meaning they play video games primarily at home and for social and domestic reasons (Zaremba, 2012). Some scholars contend that the non-

gendering of sports is more likely when gender differences in the performance of males and females are minimized or eliminated (Jönsson, 2010). If so, it might be argued that e-sport could assume a place at the forefront of such change because current gender differences in performance seem to be culturally situated, rather than being due to innate physical or anatomical differences between men and women. Support for the notion that males are no more adept at video gaming than females has come from one study, which revealed no gender difference in mood state and the elimination of pre-experimental gender differences in spatial attention following extended practice on action video games (Feng et al., 2007).

It was clear from the interview transcripts and demographic information obtained from the co-participants that they spent a great deal of time playing video games. Based on their descriptions of video game practice, the nature of these co-participants' gaming activities appears to conform to the definition of deliberate practice found in the motor learning literature (Ericsson, 2006; Ericsson et al., 1993). More specifically, their practice appeared to be for the sake of improving their video game skill and was not inherently enjoyable. Thus, future research might systematically examine video game skill development from a deliberate practice framework. For example, a retrospective recall procedure might be used to reveal past practice habits of gamers and the process by which they accumulated deliberate practice hours (Ericsson, 2003). Previous studies have employed deliberate practice approach in examining the development of expertise in chess and scrabble players (Charness et al., 2005; Tuffiash, Roring, & Ericsson, 2007). Earlier research has also examined the development of chess playing expertise by means of directly observable behavior and quantifiable performance measures (Charness et al., 2005). A similar approach might be advantageous for studying expertise in

video games since many games have built-in components for tracking the number of hours played, past scores, and other performance related data. It might also be argued that compared to chess, video game performance contains relatively more of the elements of traditional sports, such as the need for rapid and accurate perception, decision making, and movement execution. If so, it is possible that the study of video games and advanced video game players from an expert performance approach might have considerable predictive potential or transfer to the performance of a number of real world sports (e.g., volleyball, tennis, basketball, etc.) and non-sporting skills (e.g., combat military operations involving hand-to-hand encounters or rapid-fire weapon exchanges).

Finally, future research in applied performance psychology might examine the effectiveness of mental skills training programs in improving the performance of video gamers. Mental skills such as imagery, self-talk, and emotional control would appear to be useful complements to conventional video game practice. Recently, Murphy (2009) suggested the use of large online games for the purpose of testing and evaluating players' use of psychological skills during actual performance. The fact that video games can be played in a controlled lab setting would likely enhance the internal validity of such experimental assessments. Based on the results of the current study it would be particularly useful to study cyberathletes' behavior and performance in high-pressure competitive settings (e.g., the tournament environment) and the presence of an evaluative audience. It is possible that such research could be conducted in the video game tournament setting given the machine component technology for obtaining performance measures and the presence of spectators and other competitors.

Practical Implications

Sport scientists. Scholars doing research on video games are advised to possess or develop the necessary awareness of cyberathlete terminology and life experience before commencing an investigation with serious gamers. The learning of key phrases and the general characteristics of popular video games would be essential for conducting qualitative research in this area. Qualitative researchers should consider also consider how local cultural acceptance of video games and gamers might influence recruitment strategies. Lastly, researchers should consider the possibility of identifying or encountering gamers with addictive characteristics and the ethical responsibilities of dealing with people who demonstrate such characteristics.

Cyberathletes. In order to maximize performance in tournament competition, the present results suggest that cyberathletes should practice in ways and situations that are as similar as possible to the tournament environment (e.g., in rigorous competition with other gamers and in the presence of an evaluative audience) (Wrisberg, 2007). Additionally, cyberathletes might benefit from viewing tournaments as learning experiences and focus on self-referenced mastery goals—where the purpose is to improve skill level—rather than solely on outcome goals (i.e., winning) (Roberts & Kristiansen, 2010). Since civility and sportsmanship were components of the major theme *code of behavior,* cyberathletes might consider the ways their behavior can impact others or the ways others perceive them. For example, while trash talking might be considered acceptable behavior in certain settings, gamers might consider the impact of such behavior on themselves and others before exhibiting it. The present results suggest that the ability to manage emotions during competition is a key component of tournament success. Thus, gamers' performance might be maximized by developing and using breathing techniques or self-

talk to increase or decrease arousal levels as necessary, particularly when competing under pressure (Weinberg, 2010). Lastly, cyberathletes might consider how to balance their video game play with other areas of and people in their lives. Co-participants in the present study talked about the importance of maintaining control over virtual world, video game participation levels in order to stay connected to real world friends and responsibilities (e.g., schoolwork).

Performance consultants. The present results suggest that performance consultants could assist video gamers in a number of ways. First, consultants might encourage gamers to consider their mental preparation for the tournament experience by introducing concepts such as pre-competition planning, goal setting, cognitive appraisal, emotional control, and a process-focused approach to performance (Weinberg, 2010; Wrisberg, 2007). Other mental skills such as imagery, self-talk, and breath control might be employed to assist gamers in preparing for and reinforcing the look and feel they want to have during the tournament. Consultants might also encourage cyberathletes to conduct self-referenced evaluations of their performance in order to maintain confidence throughout the tournament. Such evaluations would emphasize the relative accuracy of perception and decision-making, effectiveness of control movements, or commitment to staying with a process focus under pressure. By evaluating the things they did well or the areas of their game they improved or they need to improve, cyberathletes would be able to see some benefit in every tournament experience—regardless of whether they won or lose. Lastly, consultants might consider educating gamers on the signs and symptoms of video game addiction. Ultimately, the overall health of gamers—not the winning of tournaments—should be the consultants' highest priority when assisting video gamers.

Tournament organizers. Based on the comments of the current co-participants, organizers of video game tournaments should consider how they might structure such events in order to create an inclusive, respectful, and fun environment. In particular, efforts might be made to increase participation opportunities for women. Additionally, tournament organizers and professional gaming organizations might use their position of authority to educate gamers about the pitfalls of video game addiction, the importance of achieving balance in one's life, and the potential role video game culture might play in addressing socio-cultural challenges associated with gender and race (Coakley, 2007).

Limitations

There were several possible limitations to the present study. First, the procedure for recruiting co-participants may have biased the sample to some extent. Prospective gamers were recruited by on-campus advertising, word of mouth, and flyers posted at game shops. Obviously, those persons not seeing the posted announcements would not have been aware of the opportunity to participate in the study. It is also possible that co-participants were not fully willing or able to describe their tournament experience to the fullest extent (Polkinghorne, 1989). Some appeared hesitant to describe their precise level of involvement in playing video games and others expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time they spent playing video games. In some cases there appeared to be an underlying stigma associated with playing video games for long periods of time over many years. Unlike traditional sport—where participation at high levels is viewed as worthwhile—video gamers and e-sport participants often feel the stigma of doing something many people, including themselves, consider a waste of time and of no value to society (Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010). Therefore, it also possible that some potential participants

may have decided not to respond to posted announcements about the study because they were reluctant to admit that they met the minimum requirements. The existing literature on video games indicates that cultural context is important in determining the respect people have for gamers. In South Korea competitive video gamers are seen as cultural icons (Jin, 2010) and the professional gaming circuit resembles many of the professional sport leagues in North America—including sold out arenas, sponsorships, and endorsement deals. Competitive video gaming is not as widely accepted within North American culture. Even the scholarly literature appears to emphasize the negative aspects of gaming behavior (Ferguson, 2007; King et al., 2009), including problematic gaming (Ferguson et al., 2011), aggression (Anderson & Carnagey, 2009), and addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012). Thus, it is difficult to estimate the extent to which a general cultural stigma associated with the activity of serious video gaming influenced the recruiting of co-participants and/or depth of information provided by co-participants in the present study. Finally, the sample of co-participants was primarily limited to undergraduate students at a large university in the southeastern United States. Thus, it is possible that the cultural stigma of gaming within that geographic region and/or the subset of college life in general may have impacted individuals' decisions to participate in the study.

Summary

The results of this study suggest that being a serious tournament competitor requires a significant amount of time and personal commitment. For some co-participants the requirements were regrettable in hindsight. The results also indicate that the tournament gaming community consists of people who are not only passionate about the specific games they play, but who identify with other gamers that share their simple love of gaming. In the end, this study may be

more about people having their voices heard than about the depth and breadth of their tournament experiences. The co-participants appeared eager and excited to describe their experience of a world they feel is misunderstood and deemed unworthy by many people. The current dearth of e-Sport articles and scholarly research in the games studies literature would appear to offer silent confirmation of this perception (Adamus, 2012). Yet regardless of how e-sport is presently conceptualized in North American culture, the tournament experience of the cyberathletes in this study appeared to be exciting, nerve-racking, surprising, and sometimes fun.

Conclusions

Based on the results of the current study the following conclusions are offered regarding these cyberathletes and their experience during video game tournaments:

1. The e-Sport tournament environment was radically different from the everyday gaming experience
2. Connections with and presence of others were dominant aspects of the tournament experience
3. The tournament experience was similar in some respects to that of athletes in “real world” sports (e.g., need to maintain focus and composure under pressure).

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email Example

Dear Video Game Tournament Participant,

My name is Sam Whalen and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a study on the experience of gamers during a video game tournament. The criteria for participation in the study are as follows:

- You must have competed in one video game tournament within the past 6 months
- You must have competed in at least two video game tournaments
- The tournaments must have been organized by an outside third party (e.g., a local rec center, video game store, etc.)
- You must be willing and able to openly discuss the experiences you have had during video game tournaments.

If you meet the above criteria you will be invited to participate in a one-on-one interview that will last approximately 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews will be conducted at a time and location convenient for you. There will be no monetary compensation for participating in the study but if you choose to do so you will be entered in a random drawing for 1600 Xbox Live points. Please contact me as soon as possible if you wish to participate in the study. We will then decide on a time and location for the interview. During the interview I will begin by asking you the following question: "I want you to think of a time when you were competing in a video game tournament. When you think about that experience, what stands out to you?" After that I will only ask you follow up questions to gain a more complete understanding of your responses. You need to know that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions. My only interest is to gain an understanding of ***your experience*** during these tournaments. Please feel free to contact me anytime if you have questions about this project.

Thank you for your time and consideration in assisting me with my research project.

Sincerely,
Sam Whalen

swhalen@utk.edu
865-974-2271

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

Cyberathletes' Lived Experience of Video Game Tournaments

You are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experience of competing in a video game tournament. To accomplish this purpose I would like to conduct a one-on-one interview with you. The interview might last between 30 minutes and 90 minutes, depending on how much information you are able to share. You will receive no monetary compensation for participating but have the option to be entered in a random drawing for a gift card worth 1600 Xbox Live points.

During the interview I will ask you to describe in as much detail as you are able your experience competing in a video game tournament. I will then ask you follow up questions to gain a full and complete understanding of your experience. There are no right or wrong answers. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed. After I transcribe your interview I'll give you the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the transcript and make any changes if necessary. After that I will attempt to identify themes that emerge from your interview and may contact you if I have any additional questions. After I thematize your interview I will give you an opportunity to review the themes and let me know if they describe your experience accurately.

Your data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons helping with the study unless you specifically give permission in writing for me to do otherwise. All persons will treat your interview as strictly confidential. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study

My faculty advisor and the research team assisting me in thematizing your interview are the only ones other than myself who will have access to your audiotape or transcript. The audiotape will be kept in a locked file cabinet in Room 133 in Morrill Hall until after the transcript has been analyzed, at which time the audiotape will be destroyed. The interview transcript will be kept in a locked file cabinet for three years and then destroyed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before the interview is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed. By signing this form you acknowledge that the procedures of this study have been fully explained to you and that all of your questions have been answered. However, you may ask me any additional questions at any time.

If you have any questions about the institutional review process at the University of Tennessee you may contact the UT Office of Research (865-974-3466).

STATEMENT OF CONSENT: I understand what I am being asked to do in this study and my rights as a participant and I agree to participate.

_____	_____	_____
(Printed Name of Participant)	(Signature of Participant)	(Date)

Samuel J. Whalen, M.S.
(865) 974-2271
swhalen@utk.edu

Craig A. Wrisberg, Ph.D.
(865) 974-1283
caw@utk.edu

APPENDIX C

Demographic Questionnaire

Email Address: Name: Pseudonym:

1. Age _____
2. Gender _____
3. Ethnicity _____
4. Video Game Experience:
    a. Preferred platform _____
    b. Average number of hours playing each week _____
5. Games Played – List your top three most frequently played games, hours played per week, and any ranks or accomplishments associated with those games.

Example: Call of Duty: Black Ops. 15 hours per week. Level 23, 2nd Prestige.

    a. _____
    b. _____
    c. _____

6. Video Game Tournament Experience – List all video game tournaments you have competed in recently. Include game played, location of the tournament, your performance in the tournament (e.g., 1st place, 2nd place, etc.), and any winnings associated with your participation in the tournament.

    a. _____
    b. _____
    c. _____

7. Is there any other information you would like to share with us about your video game and video game tournament experience?

APPENDIX D

Non-disclosure Agreement from Transcription Agency

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Date: March 19th, 2012
"Verbal Ink": Outskirts, Inc. dba Verbal Ink
"Client": Sam Whalen

This Confidentiality Agreement ("**Agreement**") is entered into by and between Client and Verbal Ink as of the above date in connection with discussions between the parties with respect to Verbal Ink performing transcription services for Client ("**Services**"). Whereas Client intends to provide Verbal Ink with certain confidential and proprietary information regarding Client and/or its business for transcription purposes and Verbal Ink intends to maintain the confidentiality of such information, now, therefore, in consideration of the disclosure of such information, and other good and valuable consideration, the parties agree as follows:

1. The parties acknowledge that related to any Services provided by Verbal Ink to Client, Client may make available to Verbal Ink certain information and materials: (i) in writing, by email, by audio tape or other tangible electronic storage medium clearly marked and identified by Client as "Confidential" or "Proprietary" or (ii) that, by the nature of the information and circumstances surrounding their disclosure ought to, in good faith, be treated as proprietary and/or confidential (hereafter referred to as "**Confidential Information**"). Excluded from Confidential Information are: (i) information which is known to Verbal Ink prior to entering into this Agreement, (ii) information which becomes known to Verbal Ink from a third party who is not subject to a confidentiality agreement with Client, (iii) information which is required to be disclosed as a matter of law, and (iv) information which is generally known to the public.

2. Verbal Ink acknowledges that all Confidential Information furnished to it is considered proprietary and is a matter of strict confidentiality. Verbal Ink further acknowledges that the unauthorized use or disclosure of any Confidential Information may cause irreparable harm to Client. Accordingly, Verbal Ink agrees that Client will be entitled to seek equitable relief including injunctive relief and specific performance, in addition to all other remedies available at law or in equity for any breach of this Agreement. In the event of any dispute under this Agreement, each party and its managers', officers', directors', executives', owners', members', shareholders', employees', affiliates', agents', advisors', representatives', and, in the case of Verbal Ink, its transcriptionists, ("**Representatives**") monetary liability to the other party and its Representatives for all claims related to this Agreement will be limited to direct and proven damages. Neither party (nor its Representatives) will be liable for or entitled to any indirect, incidental, reliance, special, punitive, exemplary or consequential damages arising out of its performance or non-performance under this Agreement, whether or not they had been advised of the possibility of such damages. In the event of any dispute related to this Agreement, each party (and its Representatives) shall pay its own attorneys' fees and other litigation costs.

3. Verbal Ink agrees that, except to its Representatives to the extent necessary to permit them to assist in the performance of the Services, it will not distribute, disclose or convey to third parties any of Client's Confidential Information without Client's prior written consent. All transcriptionists working with Verbal Ink are subject to and must pass criminal background checks before starting work with Verbal Ink. Confidential Information shall not be distributed, disclosed or conveyed to any Representative unless such Representative is advised of this Agreement and agrees to be subject to the terms hereof or a similar agreement.

4. Verbal Ink agrees that all Confidential Information received from Client shall at all times remain the sole property of Client and upon completion of the Services shall be either: (i) returned to Client, if Client has made such prior written request, or (ii) deleted from Verbal Ink's files such destruction certified to the client. Notwithstanding the immediately proceeding sentence, Verbal Ink may (but shall not be obligated to) retain one copy of Confidential Information in its files for legal or regulatory requirements only (subject to the confidentiality requirements hereof). No rights or licenses, express or implied, are granted by Client to Verbal Ink under any patents, copyrights, trademarks, service marks, or trade secrets owned by Client as a result of, or related to, this Agreement.

5. This Agreement is effective upon the date first written above. This Agreement shall remain in full force and effect for three (3) years from the above date.

6. This Agreement is binding on the parties and their successors and assigns, and its provisions may only be waived by written agreement of the parties.

7. This is a binding agreement that contains all of the agreements and understandings of the parties and any amendments to this Agreement must be in writing. This Agreement and any claim related directly or indirectly to this Agreement shall be governed and construed in accordance with the laws of the State of California (without giving regard to the conflicts of law provisions thereof). No such claim shall be commenced, prosecuted or continued in any forum other than the courts of the State of California located in the City and County of Los Angeles or in the United States District Court for the Central District of California, and each of the parties hereby submits to the jurisdiction of such courts. Each of the parties hereby waives on behalf of itself and its Representatives, successors and assigns any and all right to argue that the choice of forum provision is or has become unreasonable in any legal proceeding. This Agreement may be executed in counterparts by facsimile.

READ, AGREED AND ACCEPTED:

By: _____

Its: _____

Outskirts, Inc. dba Verbal Ink

By: _____

Its: _____Account Executive_____

APPENDIX E

Confidentiality Statement: Research Group

Project: Cyberathletes' Lived Experience of Video Game Tournaments

As a member of the UT College of Nursing Phenomenology Group, I understand that I will be reading transcriptions of confidential interviews. The information in these transcripts has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentially agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information in these transcriptions with anyone except the primary researcher of this project, his/her doctoral chair, or other members of this research team. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

Name Date

Appendix F

Thematic Structure for Co-Participants

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research project titled "Cyberathletes' Lived Experience of Video Game Tournaments."

Below you will find a description of the thematic structure that was developed from our conversations about your experience while competing in video game tournaments. The purpose of the Thematic Structure is to capture the essential elements of what it is like for you competing in video game tournaments. I am interested in **your feedback** regarding the resulting thematic structure. Specifically, I would like to know if the thematic structure accurately and completely describes **your** experience in video game tournaments. I have included both a text description as well as a picture representation of the thematic structure. Please let me know if you see anything that needs adjusting or if I need to add anything.

- I chose to go with the TV screen as the main component for the diagram because it represents the technological aspect of the video game culture. Additionally, it puts the viewer in an outsider perspective that indicates the video game world as a distinct area that is separated from the larger world around us. The segments within the TV represent the themes that emerged from your experience with gaming and competing at video game tournaments.

- **Playing in person** was a major theme that came out because it was different than competing at home or with friends. Part of that was the element of seeing other competitors and you being seen yourself. There was also a heightened sense of competition when playing with others. You also talked about interacting with teammates or partners as a significant part of your experience. You also talked about various strategies that were in-game strategies as well as strategies you used to advance in the tournament. Warming up was an important part of playing in tournaments.

- **Practicing and Preparing.** It was clear that you spend a great deal of time playing and practicing to get better at your video game of choice. Within that experience were tactical and technical components. You all gained a lot of experience playing online with others. You also talked about learning from others, whether you talked with someone at a tournament or you learned from a friend who plays the same game as you.

- **Comrades and Competitors.** Part of the tournament experience was the fun part of interacting with people who are just as dedicated to video games as you are. A large majority of the players at tournaments are males. There also was an evaluation of other players that would indicate whether they were recreational players or competitive players. Additionally,

many of you were concerned with evaluating the skill of other players in relation to your own skill, mostly by watching them play or determining their skill while you were playing against them.

- **Code of Behavior.** Many of you talked about how you are supposed to conduct yourself at tournaments. It appeared that there are unspoken rules about how you are supposed to act at tournaments. There was an emphasis on sportsmanship. However, many of you talked about the role of trash talking and how that impacts the tournament environment. More than one of you talked about "that one guy" who was overly competitive and sometimes angry.

- **Emotions.** The last theme that emerged from you interview deals with the emotions you experienced before, during, and after competing in these events. There was much talk about nervousness and anxiety before matches. During the matches it appeared that frustration with your own play and/or a teammate impacted your playing style. Many of you talked about the importance of being calm and focusing on playing your game. It also appeared that the impact of losing was devastating. Your descriptions seemed to point to an all or none phenomenon. Winning was the best thing ever but losing was terrible and indicated a waste of practice hours and preparation.

Please let me know what feedback you have if any about the previous thematic structure. Thank you again for your participation. The drawing for the Xbox gift card will be coming up soon.

Cheers,

Sam

VITA

Samuel Joseph Whalen was born and raised in Knoxville, TN. He attended the University of Tennessee as an undergraduate where he earned a Bachelor's of Arts in Psychology in May of 2005. He then attended Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, GA where he earned a Masters degree in Kinesiology with a Sport Psychology concentration in May of 2007. For his doctoral work, Sam returned to the University of Tennessee where he earned a PhD in Kinesiology and Sport Studies with a Sport Psychology and Motor Behavior specialization in May of 2013.