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“Let’s Take a FIFA!”:

Football and the Free-Time Practices of At-Risk Youth Under Remand

Emma Witkowski and Rune K. L. Nielsen

Introduction

“And life is itself a game of football” – Sir Walter Scott, 1815¹

Walking into Highland, we encounter a typically institutional interior accented in greys and blues. As we turn the corner from the common room a familiar scene is revealed. Against the corridor wall sits a low portable table and small screen with cables looping about helter-skelter. We see well maintained black controllers, ready for future play, and four discs (three

¹FIFA Museum, “The origins of Association Football Part 2—The Carterhaugh Ba Game of 1815,” January 9, 2020. Available online: <https://www.fifamuseum.com/en/stories/blog/the-origins-of-association-football-part-2-the-carterhaugh-ba-game-of-2621854/> (accessed January 25, 2020).

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FIFA discs, one Grand Theft Auto) sprawled across a console cabinet. They are grubby though undamaged. We are struck by how regular this looks. In an institution where almost nothing looks like an ordinary home, the games are scattered in a way that is reminiscent of how books might be scattered in the house of a voracious reader—haphazardly, not because of a lack of care, but lovingly because one expects to return to them as soon as possible. This was a place where people played digital games, and we wanted to know how.

Two centuries after Sir Walter Scott kindled compelling, if not problematic, theorizations of “sports as life,”² we entered the Danish juvenile detention center of “Highland.”³ Historically, juvenile detention and non-punitive correction centers are institutions that utilize sports and videogaming for external goals deemed as positive everyday practices.⁴ Football, we found out, in all of its forms, was practiced at Highland as the “right” kind of sporting life, both structurally and socially. Beyond the grass pitch rules of play, playing *FIFA* and sharing in football cultures was an accessible and encouraged routine. To our knowledge, these settings, which often use digital games for deliberate socialization intentions, are mostly unobserved within game studies research.⁵ This made our question on entering Highland straightforward: how are digital games featured and practiced in the institutional setting of a juvenile detention center, a transitory space involving mostly young men with long periods of controlled “free-time?” What role, if any, did videogames play for young people under institutional confinement?

We quickly discovered that digital games, particularly the *FIFA* series, were deeply entangled within Highland’s spatiality, systemic goals, and human resources. Playing *FIFA* could not be understood separately from the free-time practices and organization of those enduring Highland life. As we will discuss, *FIFA* was a significant part of several broader football

²Richard Giulianotti, *Sport: A Critical Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005).

³Anonymized to protect the privacy of staff and youth under remand.

⁴Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson, “Boredom and Action—Experiences from Youth Confinement,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41, no. 5 (2012); David Wästerfors, “Disputes and Going Concerns in an Institution for ‘Troublesome’ Boys,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 40, no. 1 (2011).

⁵While these regulatory institutions of juvenile remand are mostly absent in youth sports and games research, educational and after-school club settings are far more frequently considered from gender and inclusive play (Jenson, and de Castell, 2011) to external skills development through digital games (Disalvo et al., 2009). Such studies signal the high cultural currency of digital team play and how competitive sports forms (digital and analogue) are regularly tailored to fit a range of institutional frameworks from youth clubs to prisons. Jennifer Jenson, and Suzanne De Castell, “Girls@ Play: An Ethnographic Study of Gender and Digital Gameplay,” *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 167–79; Betsy Disalvo et al., “Glitch Game Testers: African American Men Breaking Open the Console,” Paper presented at DiGRA, 2009: *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory* (Uxbridge, 2009). Available online: <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/glitch-game-testers-african-american-men-breaking-open-the-console/>.

play contexts encouraged in the space for education, well-being, and leisure purposes. In deploying football as social apparatus, Highland confirms existing research on the intrinsic and extrinsic power of team-based sports under pastoral care,⁶ as well as how digital game play extends beyond the rules of game software and conventional meta-play.⁷

Entering Highland as an ethnographer (Emma) and a psychologist (Rune), our long-form visits to the institution positioned us as “observers as participants.”⁸ Casual conversations and the everyday social minutiae of the institution contributed to our understanding of Highland life, including food preparation, game playing, and hanging-out with residents during free time when the young men returned from school and were eager to socialize, play, or be left alone.⁹ As researchers, we were outsiders, neither youth nor representatives of the institution. Our presence penetrated the bubble of monotony surrounding long stretches of contained free time. The value placed on breaks in the routine became clear when we introduced our study intentions at Highland (as research for an academic article on games and institutional free-time practices within the center). The three teenagers present all nodded at our suggestion. We expressed that they were by no means obliged to participate, to which those present offered their endorsement, “No, it’s OK [that you’re here]!” The grounds for immediate and unquestioned approval became evident over the hours, sharply punctuated when Bashir (the youngest pedagogue¹⁰) commented late in the evening, “Whew, the time has flown by” (“Tiden går hurtig i dag”). Time itself, and how it was experienced at Highland during free time seemed to have shifted with the addition of two new non-confrontational bodies, though only for those who chose and felt comfortable with playing along.

⁶Andrew Parker, Rosie Meek, and Gwen Lewis, “Sport in a Youth Prison: Male Young Offenders’ Experiences of a Sporting Intervention,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 17 no. 3 (2014): 381–96; Rosie Meek, and Gwen Eleanor Lewis, “Promoting Well-Being and Desistance Through Sport and Physical Activity: The Opportunities and Barriers Experienced by Women in English Prisons,” *Women & Criminal Justice* 24, no. 2 (2014).

⁷T. L. Taylor, *Play between Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2006.

⁸Tim May, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*, 4th edn. (Berkshire, UK: McGraw Hill, 2011), 173.

⁹After Rune was found out to be a veteran of multiple instalments of the FIFA franchise, he was invited to join the console play, and so it fell to Emma to observe and take notes. On departing each evening, we immediately detailed our observations and conversations on a voice recorder while sitting in the carpark.

¹⁰In Denmark, a “pedagogue” is an educator trained in the psychological and social development of youth. They are the primary professionals in the institutional upbringing of children and youth of all ages. This work is perhaps best translated into English as ‘social work’ with focused socio-psychological disciplinary training. Juvenile detention centers in Denmark also employ social workers and teachers, making for an interdisciplinary environment collectively responsible for the well-being of the children in remand.

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Five temporary residents were managed by the Highland wing when we entered the institution. They were aged between thirteen to sixteen years. Three young men identified as having multicultural backgrounds, Fazal (thirteen years), Hanif (fifteen years), and Zahid (fifteen years). They met us on our first day at the remand center and form the core group represented in this case. Mo (sixteen years) entered Highland later in the afternoon and kept mainly to himself.¹¹ Lars¹² was released from Highland just as we arrived.¹³ Beyond hanging out with the youth on return from school, formal interviews with the five staff on hand, including senior psychologists and pedagogues, were conducted informally on-site, as well as through ongoing email correspondence.¹⁴ Highland's floor staff all fulfilled social care duties, but also took on a soft specialization, routinely performing in a role such as the in-house weight trainer, team coach, cook, or guidance counselor. Though it was only Bashir, the youngest staff member, with a theoretically driven pedagogical education¹⁵ and a multicultural and dual-language upbringing (Danish and Arabic), who participated in all forms of football play. Bashir was accomplished in all forms of football, and he spearheaded organized games during free time, acting as *FIFA* and grass field tournament organizer, referee, teammate, coach, opponent, spectator, and supporter, all underpinned by his overarching pedagogical approach. In his own words, he recognized his "unique in" to engage with those admitted to the center due to his youthfulness (age, appearance, and play interests) and by way of a culturally recognizable background like many of the Highland residents.

As an institution designed toward youth confinement, Highland had mundane spatial requirements such as single occupant lodgings, a common room, offices, and a kitchen, but also spaces and resources for group-oriented free time. The wing itself encompassed an entertainment corner (TV's, extensive DVD and games cupboard, sofas, and tables used for card-play), a non-regulation sized outdoor football field, a foosball, a table tennis table, and a modest but adequate weightlifting room. A small, doorless, office cabinet housed the remaining entertainment equipment in the bedroom hallway: a 28-inch TV, rechargeable controllers, and the latest PlayStation 3 (PS3) Super Slim model. Football was the dominant form of free-time play during our time at Highland. And while the space could be

¹¹Emma took jottings on post-its during the visits, which was a cause for some wariness for Mo, who was not present for the research introduction. He asked Rune directly a little later, "why is she writing stuff down?" Mo received a full briefing by Rune, but also chose to keep to himself and not participate in any of the football games going on around him.

¹²The other youth called Lars a "potato"—slang for someone who comes from a White ethnic Danish background.

¹³All participants of this study are placed under pseudonym.

¹⁴Staff were demographically diverse across gender, age, social background, language, and ethnicity and represented various skills and education.

¹⁵See footnote number 10.



said to encourage football more than other sports forms (say basketball), football also happened across bodies—organized by the staff, engaged with by the youth, and discussed by all. It just happened that we could all talk the talk of football.¹⁶ For many at Highland, football permitted uncomplicated passage and progress within the environment, if only for a transitory period, our own lives included.

In the following, we consider institutionalized free-time practices involving a range of football forms and formats within Highland’s physical, social, and psychological setting. Our long afternoons and evenings at the remand center materialized gaming practices from other kinds of life situations and from unconventional socio-structural conditions, otherwise unnoticed slices of institutionalized digital play. Through intense periods of play with *FIFA* and football more broadly, free time at Highland revealed other ways that team sports and digital play matter within civil society.¹⁷ Prior to discussing football and *FIFA* practices at Highland, a brief word on the institutional framework of juvenile remand in Denmark is required.

According to the staff, Highland is not meant to be a punitive center; it is a place where adolescents are joined by pedagogues and social workers in normal activities and routines, while observed and evaluated by psychologists to figure out how best to help them going forward.¹⁸ However, the materiality of the space conveys another message. High fences, locked doors, knife policies, and surveillance cameras inscribe the space. There is an inescapable penal cadence produced through an assemblage of perceptible and coded security measures marking ordinary movement, though there are no guards patrolling Highland, only pedagogues. The care remit of these pedagogues is “non-violent resistance,”¹⁹ meaning that conflict is de-escalated and violent

¹⁶There are many ways to be able to talk football, whether this ability comes from following professional teams, playing in clubs, or as was the case for Rune: countless of hours invested in the *FIFA* video game franchise. As former elite athletes both Emma and Rune, perhaps, also entered the space with bodies that suggest that they are “insiders” when it comes to sports culture. As such, this study is also a clear reminder of how we as researchers stimulate and fortify orientations in the environment through our own actions, touch points and histories.

¹⁷Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978—1979* (New York: Picador, 2008).

¹⁸According to the resident psychologist, the most effective “treatment” for these youth is exposure to “normalcy”, for example, “normal values” and “normal activities.” Of course, what is “normal” is entirely subjective. The psychologist told us that the crimes that land youth in juvenile detention (whether it is murder, robbery, assault, etc.) are almost exclusively committed without premeditation and in groups with peers. Conversely, adult offenders tend to commit crimes alone and with premeditation. This is, in part, why heavy emphasis is placed on exposing youth to “normal” positive social interactions inside the facility that reinforce positive social behavior and relationships, such as mentored team play.

¹⁹Haim Omer, *Nonviolent Resistance: A New Approach to Violent and Self-Destructive Children* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

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acts or escape attempts are not met with force.²⁰ As a framing philosophy for youth under remand, it also supports the institutional intent of maintaining youth well-being during custody.²¹ This makes for a space that is neither prison nor youth club. Rules are to be followed, not physically imposed. The social handling of rules by all involved is, as such, constantly in focus—this includes during football play.

For those under remand, the average stay lasts eight weeks, with fortnightly case reviews.²² During this time, the adolescent is often denied contact with friends and family, adding to the stress of the situation. Under these circumstances, the duration of the stay is often a tumultuous period of extreme uncertainty.²³ Contrasted to such conditions, football play affords a sense of normalcy and agency, a respite from the incertitude that come with a Highland residency, if only for a short period of time.

The following themes of *rhythms of play*, *tensions of “institutional free-time,”* and *playing with football power* are discussed later, drawn from our afternoon to evening free-time experiences at Highland. These relational themes are oriented by the “beautiful game” and how it was framed, participated within, and contributed to institutional life for youth under remand in a country where football is a part of the active and everyday formation of civic minded young men in Denmark.

²⁰While we were there one of the young men reacted angrily to Highland’s manager (approaching him about a rule-breaching incident) by kicking a small metal garbage can across the living room. Everyone in the space remained extremely calm in voice, movement, and reaction, and the incident de-escalated almost as quickly as it arose.

²¹Certainly, from the perspective of those under remand, the institution is all about confinement, control, regulation and separation from their everyday lives, where well-being may be well-meaning, it is decentered under such circumstances.

²²This study is in a near dialogue with Torbenfeldt Bengtsson’s two-month ethnography of like-institutions a year prior to our case study is relevant (2012). For example, when Torbenfeldt Bengtsson asks of the youth “why did they watch television all night” (2012, 534), we might note that playing football and digital play at Highland (rather than watching TV together) was driven by engaged staff like Bashir, and as such is a reminder of how local actors nurture the everyday culture and space through their own free-time activities that they have cultivated over time. With play notably absent from her study (such as sports or card games which were a self-activated activity for the youth during our stay), the questions surrounding how youth under remand negotiate boredom and agency becomes distinctly relational under similar structural/institutional foundations.

²³Lars Henning Rossen and Rune Kristian Nielsen, *Det Modstræbende Panoptikon* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Sønderbro, 2013). This situation also makes it challenging to distinguish normal and abnormal adolescent cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (Bengtsson 2012).



Textures of Institutional Free Time: Rhythms of Agency and Control

Independent activity at Highland is about being involved in managing the resource of free time.²⁴ Within the institutional context, free time remains an awkward framework, a scaffolding for other kinds of settings as the corrective-context and constraints of the remand center are inflected by hierarchical appeals for positive social action. Appeals include momentary attention shifts and play pauses (“Hanif, can you come and sign here so I can send this off to your lawyer?”) and more subtle pattern-making of time itself, in order to imbue a time phase with the right kind of “feel.” Bashir explains,

We work with context, we work with *flow*, we work with self-management. But we are also always involved in the games to make sure that those little things don’t change pace and escalate quickly into something negative. We work constantly for the “positive third.”

Here Bashir probably confuses the name of a pedagogical concept that is widely used in Denmark: “the shared third” [det fælles tredje],²⁵ a concept used to describe the unique situation where two or more individuals, through a shared project or activity like team play in *FIFA*, go from existing in a subject–object relationship to a subject–subject relationship.

Bashir nurtured shared third relationships through all forms of football with ease. He selected and seated teams close together in front of the TV for a competitive *FIFA 13* tournament (with a high value prize, a six-pack of Coca-Cola, going to the victors to share).²⁶ He organized quick paced team games, heavily adjudicated and coached, on Highland’s small grass field. His fine-tuning of the conditions of team play was well-synced with managerial demands on youth time (the result of longer matches was that residents would be called upon to leave, mid-game, to meet up with their caseworker). This scheduling produced a rhythm for competing well together, with time partitioned and game rules directed to last within half-hour intervals, the right format for “good flow” and limited institutional disruption.²⁷ Most interludes ran within this timeframe. Only the *FIFA 13*

²⁴Julie L. Rose, *Free Time* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 17.

²⁵Michael Husen, “‘Det Fælles Tredie,’” in *Kultur & Pædagogik*, ed. Benedicta Pécseli (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag, 1996), 218–32.

²⁶All *FIFA* play was local, side-by-side teamplay. No online connection is permitted.

²⁷The first early afternoon 2v2 *FIFA 13* session played for thirty-five minutes. The weightlifting session was a whirlwind of exercises done in just over a half hour. Mehmet (a pedagogue) and Hanif played a foosball match for about twenty minutes.



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tournament play session lasted for over fifty minutes. Captaining his team for this tournament, Zahid chose Paris Saint-Germain, and just as importantly, Zlatan Ibrahimović²⁸ (while exuberantly suggesting the other team “Play Balotelli!”). Alongside of the constant nurturing and guidance from Bashir, *FIFA 13*—through preferred (2v2) formats, easy to access gameplay, and fulfilled representational desires—was involved in lengthening the agreeable mood and feel of free time beyond a short game session. During this longer form of *FIFA* play, a tangible air of enthusiasm and leisure pleasure filled the space.

Football writ large participates as an organic, disciplinary material and teaching mechanism that was put to work at Highland. One example stands out for us. While playing a game of *FIFA 13*, the players showed extreme sportspersonship by correcting, and agreeing on a solution to, a (perceived) mistake made by the game’s computer-controlled referee. It is impossible to know for certain if the referee’s decision was a bug in the code or in fact the right call, but it was a remarkable gesture of good faith in contrast to the sometimes ruthless ways that the game is played in online competitive modes. Not all the boys played *FIFA* at home, and such encounters with *FIFA* teamplay were an educational experience beyond gaining new skills as players. Bending and breaking the rules at Highland are repeatedly shown as one of the most powerful (and practiced) agentic tools available to those in custody. But as the *FIFA 13* deliberations above remind us, playing well together is another high agency sensorial pleasure, personally and collectively experienced, sometimes with externalized goals of the institution meeting internal ones for players, both established and emerging.

The importance of digital games more broadly on the temporary lifestyle of youth under remand was most clearly identified in how they treated gaming materials. Bashir explains,

The boys take good care of the equipment. Of course, there are individuals who look to make something happen. We had the *FIFA 13* game disc stolen. And they can really feel that in stealing that item, that it affects all of them and the thing they like to do. Because they don’t get a replacement *FIFA 13* right away. We tell them that it will take time to get in again. So, they feel it. They generally take good care of the stuff.

Bashir’s comment is confirmed in several of our observations. We watch Zahid put two controllers back into the battery charger before leaving

²⁸Ibrahimović was at the prime of his career at this time, and on screen he represented something familiar and positive, an immigrant upbringing in a Scandinavian city, and someone who made magic on the field that you could play with.

the area so they will be ready for later.²⁹ Trust develops around youth management of the videogame materials. And considering the ease of theft of these small items, it suggests they carry a far greater value in the sensations produced in everyday play than for their economic benefits or risk-taking thrills. This development of trust through taking care of gaming materials is notable in an environment where destructive behavior can be one way to kill time. Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson³⁰ notes that there are “cultural revolts against unremitting boredom” in remand centers, continuing that “such acts as committing crimes or banging one’s head against a wall—can be a strategy for creating moments that involve self-made dynamics of engagement and excitement.” Highland afforded several football-oriented materials and play opportunities, and there in an opening for “self-made dynamics of engagement and excitement” as an alternative to other risk-taking or harmful behavior to starve off the monotony of life under remand. *FIFA* and playing football at Highland embody important agential aspects, M. J. Apter captures this game feel well, reflecting that “when we are in our play world we feel that we are ultimately in charge of things.”³¹

In this specialized context, self-made excitement through football involves taking responsible action of the social and material productions of existing and future play encounters, ultimately providing that sought after feeling of control. And while not all the youth were oriented as such (Fazal intentionally misused the play materials to challenge the staff, kicking the football over the fence to stop a good play session for everyone), the potential for agency through football play, caretaking, and receiving trust over the resources, was a potential part of everyday involvement for the youth under remand at Highland.

Focused Intensity Versus Boredom

Institutional free time takes place during non-structured after-school hours when residents return to their wing. In Danish, this period is called “ulvetimen”³²—the “hours of (potential) conflict”—a timespan from early afternoon after

²⁹In another institution Rune worked with, building a small local area network to play *Counter-Strike* was another version of a juvenile remand institution using digital games as a part of their education and recreation plan.

³⁰Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson. *Youth behind Bars—An Ethnographic Study of Youth Confined in Secure Care Institutions in Denmark*, PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2012, 528. Certainly, we were at Highland for a shorter timespan than Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and had not developed the position of being a regular part of the institution.

³¹M. J. Apter, “A Structural-Phenomenology of Play,” in *Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach*, eds. J. H. Kerr and Michael J. Apter (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1991), 13–29.

³²This is a contemporary Danish meaning. The new use was registered in 1983. Marianne Rathje, *Ulvetime—sproget.dk*, January 4, 2002. Available online: <https://sproget.dk/raad-og-reg>

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school/work until setting down for dinner. At Highland, *ulvetimen*'s intensity is heightened from an everyday setting: bedroom doors must be open when other residents are in the room (because bedrooms are isolated from the staff this is where violence and victimization more easily erupt),³³ all kitchen knives must be accounted for and locked away. There are clear rules, and they are palpable.³⁴ The Highland youth are aware of these behavioral boundaries which impose a distinct rhythm to the space—how one moves, but also how one can easily break the spatial flow. As Torbenfeldt Bengtsson³⁵ describes it, “Although the boys apparently have a lot of unscheduled ‘free’ time, they were physically confined to the unit, a situation creating a pervasive feeling of frustration.” In custody, *ulvetimen* has significantly different rhythms and personal-social orientations to the domestic space beyond those clear institutional (symbolic, hierarchical, and regulatory) differences participating in the buildup of frustration. Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the dominant shifts in attention during *ulvetimen* for these youth involve the absence of modern affordances surrounding social connectivity.

At Highland, personal mobile devices are not permitted, and internet access is an office-only resource for staff. As such, the absence of second screens and networked connectivity alters the processual attentions of youth and staff in the space, forcing attention toward one another, a persistent interaction form distinct from the everyday urban life of Danish youth. Steven Conway's study on domestic play and *Pro Evolution Soccer* makes the institutional alterations particularly salient: he observes that “the spectator would also engage with other media whilst watching the match, mobile phones, laptops, personal computers and so forth, normally in pursuit of or in relation to a subject of discussion they had started.”³⁶ Conway's participants stretched their attentions and padded out their sociality in digital play through other media. At Highland, *FIFA* play was collectively but locally produced under the constraints of the setting (no network connectivity, which also meant no game updates, and having to play the game software they had). They were removed from the possibilities and distractions of networked multitasking and as co-spectators and co-players, the Highland youth playing *FIFA* were “all in” on making the game in front of them, with the resources at hand.

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³³In our time at a different detention center a resident, who appeared to be low-ranking in the internal hierarchy, got a black eye while a group of boys were hanging out in one of the bedrooms.

³⁴The staff were quick to act on any transgressions, changing the movement feel of the space such as when a pedagogue made a quick sprint to stop a bedroom door from sneakily closing two youth in behind it.

³⁵Bengtsson, *Youth Behind Bars*, 538.

³⁶Conway Steven, “‘It's in the Game’ and Above the Game: An Analysis of the Users of Sports Videogames,” *Convergence* 16, no. 3 (2010): 334–54.

While institutional procedures were in effect, distractions to these short-term play intervals were low. And the youth organically moved or were nudged from one 30-minute burst of play to the next. This even included getting “match-ready,” running gleefully to their rooms, putting on their football kit, and parading onto the field.³⁷ The boys added to their free-time resource management by setting up important agenda items. When Zahid started to show signs of restlessness within an hour of returning from school to Highland, shouting “What should we get up to! What should we do! Should we train (weights) or what?” Hanif softly reminded him of their own schedule: “No, we’re training at five.”

During our Highland stay, football scaffolded time: “Tysker,”³⁸ FIFA, foosball, football, and football talk formed a suite of familiar, play-oriented, and attainable social intervals. This football medley was something cyclically produced together. Short bursts of “focused intensity” elicited full bodied joyful gestures, satisfied waves of connection³⁹ and involvement in the co-produced sensation of playing well together across different forms of football. As described by Hans Gumbrecht from the position of high-performance athletics, focused intensity encompasses “not just the ability to exclude a multiplicity of potential distractions but also a concentrated openness for something unexpected to happen ... Something which, as soon as it unexpectedly appears, will begin to disappear, irreversibly and often painfully because we want to hold onto the pleasure and possibility that it offers.”⁴⁰ While Gumbrecht alludes to “flow”⁴¹—a concept Bashir also utilizes in his pedagogical approach to creating a good feel and active participation in free-time— focused intensity under Highland football is channeled toward the youth through pedagogically structured involvements. The feel of football play and the possibility it offers (agency, a respite from boredom, developing subject–subject relationships) offers a conduit for the youth under remand to make and own their fulfillment. The youth that move

³⁷It is not uncommon for residents to arrive at a remand center with nothing more than what easily fits in a plastic shopping bag. Hanif and Zahid had however packed football jerseys with them, and used them to enjoy their free time, dressing up for their football play.

³⁸A game a where players compete, not to win, but to not lose. The loser has to stand at a distance, in a free kick scenario, turn their back to the others, and allow them to kick the ball at them in a footballified form of “brandy” or “brandings.”

³⁹With a FIFA tournament prize of a six-pack of Coca-Cola (provided by Bashir), some of the game stakes were high, but such high value prizes were shared, even with us as foreign bodies, we were a part of the football scene.

⁴⁰Hans Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 52–3.

⁴¹Coined by Csikszentmihalyi, the term “flow” denotes a state of total absorption in an activity to the point where the rest of the world almost ceases to exist and time itself comes to a halt. Flow is theorized to occur when a person’s level of skill is perfectly matched by the challenge that the person faces (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

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through Highland are not elite level athletes. Most have no experience with organized football or coaching, and some are first time *FIFA* players. Though with Bashir's guidance, they direct and improve their attention, creating a space for focused and coherent practice across a suite of football-themed events—producing an ongoing and positively met “shared” experience.

The transformation of time the young men experience is announced as a surprising artefact of something they produced together. In their separate expressions of “time flying,” Zahid and Hanif are visibly content with the ephemeral product and feel of time used well, staving off the effects of *ulvetimen*. While lingering at the table after dinner, when a creeping restlessness was settling in, Zahid jauntily announced to the room, “Let’s take a FIFA!” These observations of working toward focused intensity are the spectral reverse of how boredom is framed as a part of the walls in remand centers. Through an abstract idea of football, not pinned down by a single code or form, *ulvetimen* at Highland was injected with an atmosphere of self-driven agency while meeting the framework of the institution in (proposed as) organic circumstances as an absorbing, dynamic, and collaborative play form.

Football Power Plays: Rules and the Practice of Benevolent Competition

While short-format, organized play showed to have a positive effect on the youth,⁴² one of the core orientations driving each game session was an effort to “avoid humiliation.” As Bashir remarked, “humiliation isn’t productive to a good learning experience.” Humiliation avoidance required each analogue and digital ruleset to be restructured. Rules were locally crafted depending on the current player roster and contests were consistently pressed toward good cross-team play through sharing ball-time (making sure all were involved), and collegial support (heavily encouraged by Bashir). While “house rules” are a regular feature of gaming sessions writ large, for teenage boys playing football and *FIFA* together, house rules—encouraging cross-team collaboration, encouragement, and low-score differentiation—are not the norm but the aberration. This managerial and “good sport” work was initiated and encouraged by the staff, with some of the more egalitarian

⁴²Though, as we unpack how football was practiced and managed, we must remind ourselves that the personal resources spent on organizing football as a free-time activity was achieved with an on-hand “manager” (Bashir) for the first hours of play after school, which meant low self initiation and game management (and as such low conflict) by these youth in much of their free time.

orientations readdressed by the youth in custody. The following vignette describes a sequence of *FIFA* play:

Play begins. Everyone sits extremely close in the tight corridor space. Barcelona (Hanif’s favorite team) against Juventus (Zahid’s squad). Zahid is chattering away constantly, probing at the opponents and his teammate, just being cheeky. The other two boys say next to nothing. Bashir (the pedagogue) counters the constant flow of Zahid’s jibes with his own positive energy, telling Hanif that he is playing well, complimenting the other boys play, asking about what tactics to do, and generally being involved and showing good sportspersonship throughout. High-fives are demanded by him when they score—orienting bodies towards one another, making eye contact, and taking delight in playing well without shaming others. Then they realign and sit huddled together in the narrow hallway game space again, faces forward, ready for the next pass.

In this scene, Bashir performs as the recognized coach. When the boys scored a goal in *FIFA*, Bashir asked them to “call him” (an in-game avatar animation). In response, the boys push the necessary sequence of controller buttons, some demonstrating their newly acquired technical mastery, making their avatars imitate picking up a phone and putting it to the ear.

All join in on laughing and celebrating the spectacle. Bashir shoulder hugs the boys while validating their efforts. This use of the celebration cut-scene in the game stood out as a contrast to what we perceive to be the norm in online competitive *FIFA*, where players could take offence when the opposition decides to engage in excessive celebrations.⁴³

Bashir maneuvered his sporting capital smoothly across fields of play. On the grass field, he could modify play to balance out the skill levels of the players, ensuring that no one loses or wins all of the time, demonstrating the embodied value of sporting capital within the institution. When the youth turned their attentions to non-play, hanging out (making dinner, lounging), and the surrounding aura of football talk, the interchanges were less hinged to “one-up-manship” chatter. And while trash-talk existed at Highland, it was expressed in a disciplined shame-free form. Zahid’s constant jibes during *FIFA* play (delivered in a deadpan voice—“Fazal, you are not playing very well/ Fazal, du spiller ikke særligt godt”) were recognized by all as sociable banter, as wide grins emerged on the faces of those on the receiving end of a well-delivered taunt that avoided player embarrassment.

⁴³In online *FIFA* games (in 2013), the player who scores a goal decides if and when to skip the replay for both players, choosing whether or not to rub in their goal. In more recent updates, the replay feature (though not the celebrations) can be shut off by the player who was scored against, addressing potential poor sportsmanship that arises around overly celebrating a goal.

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The orientation toward managerial support and player involvement resembles what Jenson and de Castell recognize as “benevolent competition,” “never too direct, always somewhat supportive and rarely ... meant to undermine the player who was ahead.”⁴⁴ While their study saw benevolence developed between participants in a young women’s gaming club, the form and feel of participation reflects the behavior encouraged in Highland youth in every instance of free-time play.⁴⁵ Research on how young women play in social videogaming clubs, and the social codes found there-in⁴⁶ are reflective of the positive social forms encouraged for young men under remand. This connection and desired process of play is notable, as distinctive player groups equally uninterested in experiencing embarrassment during their free-time play and working or being encouraged to work toward social participation over domination, and toward a flourishing game for all.⁴⁷ Public embarrassment and exhibiting dominance over others in digital games like *FIFA* (among others) are ongoing trends. But what Highland youth and the young women’s game club reveal are other needs from our everyday play spaces, our materials and social support, which enable and encourage a way to play games well together. In both studies, *FIFA*, digital team games, and football are shown to be flexible enough in their local rules management and codes to accommodate the construction of benevolent competition.⁴⁸ At Highland, this collaborative form of participation through football and team games offers a distinct alternative to findings on masculinities in North American juvenile detention centers,⁴⁹ where the staff were found to reify winning during play, and as such the value of dominance, as they engaged with the residents.⁵⁰ During our visits at Highland, football and *FIFA* were overtly practiced and scaffolded in such a way as to tone down and reduce player power differences and humiliation that can arise from competitive play. Highland’s institutional actors, from who is hired to managerial orientations to competition, significantly affect the cultivation of benevolent

⁴⁴Jenson, and De Castell, “Girls@ Play,” 172.

⁴⁵One notable difference in behavior (amid very distinct contexts and actors) was the girls banter involved self-effacing commentary. This was fully absent from the youth banter at Highland.

⁴⁶In Jenson and de Castell’s work this included, benevolence, peer-assistance, and good sports banter (2011).

⁴⁷Though, in the young women’s club case this was cultivated by the participating youth, in the case of Highland play, this was dependent on the pedagogue leading by example.

⁴⁸At Highland, they worked with a “mercy rule” we had not previously encountered: As soon as one side was down 0–3, the game would end immediately. In this way, games are kept relatively close, and no one is ever allowed to fall so much behind that the game ends in total humiliation.

⁴⁹Laura S. Abrams, Ben Anderson-Nathe, and Jemel Aguilar, “Constructing Masculinities in Juvenile Corrections,” *Men and Masculinities* 11, no. 22 (2008), originally published online Mar 9, 2007.

⁵⁰Denmark’s history around sports participation and associationalism makes for a counter-distinctive case to that of American youth sports systems.



competition, the limited experience of youthful pleasures under remand and extrinsic effects of institutional play.

From research in juvenile centers,⁵¹ we are pointedly reminded of the values filtered through, and power centered on, individual institutional actors. While at another juvenile detention, Rune experienced how digital play was used as an opportunity by staff to assert a small measure of dominance over youth that were seen as uncomplying with the institutional rules. In this other detention center setting, *FIFA* matches became a part of the struggle for control between staff and youth. These situations of team sports and digital play in the institutional setting highlight how fruitless it is to talk about videogame effects in a deterministic sense; as if a given videogame (or sport) will always have the same effect on its players irrespective of how the activity is framed, what function it is intended to have, and how the context is produced by bodies under conditions where power, dominance, and control are salient.

Concluding Remarks

At Highland, we observed how the “beautiful game,” grass-pitch football and *FIFA*, was involved in making time more leisurely, offering a space for normalcy to those under this form of institutional management. Where sports and digital games were part of a broader entertainment base shaping the socio-material institutional space and enactments there in, it was football that was actively deployed—at this time, for these youths—as a mechanism to control and shape behavior under familiar everyday circumstances. Highland used football as a corrective to behavior, but also as a tool of well-being in the institution, where the penetrating experience of boredom can be so intense it is felt as “a part of the walls” for youth in confinement.⁵²

How free-time practices manifested themselves in this exceptional situation revealed football as a social lubricant. As a low-confrontational play form for these young men within Danish society, Highland football proved to be malleable enough to accommodate minimal effort rule structuration and enforcement by all participants (with optional wiggle room for free play), and material resources to raise social capital befitting institutional goals of positive socialization and personal satisfaction. Though, the Highland football experience is not necessarily the case elsewhere, under different contexts, social hierarchies, institutional power, and player intentionality. However, Highland football presents an exemplary case on the cultivation

⁵¹Bengtsson, “Youth Behind Bars”; Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar, “Constructing Masculinities in Juvenile Corrections.”

⁵²Bengtsson, “Youth behind Bars.”

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and values associated within football-oriented free time, laden with individual pleasures and institutional goals, under the unique circumstances of youth under remand.

The play culture at Highland developed not from a singular football source, but rather flowed over a full suite of football practices that afforded a sense of normality and agency to those under remand during a time where tensions are high and future freedoms are unknown. As each afternoon drifted into evening, football arose as a productive activity, a break from the “closed club” situation as one of the young men put it, and a pedagogical framework for “good” participation. Football’s modularity across its digital and analogue forms was tinkered with by all, it was additive and subtractive as situationally required, and worked on collaboratively as a low confrontation framework to play well together.

As Zahid sat down to our last meal together, he placed a shawarma loaded with Hanif’s freshly made chili-oil in front of him and popped the cap of a can of soda, one of his few personal resources. Leaning back into the stiff, cobalt blue meeting chair, he exhaled with a light smile “It feels like a Sunday.” He was conveying a familiar and pleasant sensation from another leisure time and place. It was the clearest expression of how football was a material actor in play at Highland: arranged by the staff, yielded to by many of those under custody, structured through different rules (Tysker, field-play, *FIFA* play), and followed up through popular sports talk. For Zahid and those few transitory others under remand during our time at Highland, football loosened up their time under remand,⁵³ extending them the possibility to be ordinary and to feel ordinary in an unordinary space.

⁵³Ibid., 540.