The Art of War: Fighting Games, Performativity, and Social Game Play

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

the Scripps College of Communication of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Todd L. Harper

November 2010

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This dissertation titled
The Art of War: Fighting Games, Performativity, and Social Game Play

by

TODD L. HARPER

has been approved for
the School of Media Arts and Studies
and the Scripps College of Communication by

_____________________________________
Mia L. Consalvo
Associate Professor of Media Arts and Studies

_____________________________________
Gregory J. Shepherd
Dean, Scripps College of Communication
ABSTRACT

HARPER, TODD L., Ph.D., November 2010, Mass Communications

The Art of War: Fighting Games, Performativity, and Social Game Play (244 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Mia L. Consalvo

This dissertation draws on feminist theory – specifically, performance and performativity – to explore how digital game players construct the game experience and social play. Scholarship in game studies has established the formal aspects of a game as being a combination of its rules and the fiction or narrative that contextualizes those rules. The question remains, how do the ways people play games influence what makes up a game, and how those players understand themselves as players and as social actors through the gaming experience?

Taking a qualitative approach, this study explored players of fighting games: competitive games of one-on-one combat. Specifically, it combined observations at the Evolution fighting game tournament in July, 2009 and in-depth interviews with fighting game enthusiasts. In addition, three groups of college students with varying histories and experiences with games were observed playing both competitive and cooperative games together. The themes and experiences identified at these sites fell into three broad areas: the environment in which games are played, normative ideas about how those games are played, and the ways in which gamers play socially.

Beyond the actual computer code of the game, and its story, the play experiences of the gamers in this study involved socializing and exchanging play information via online forums, attendance at social events focused on play, and the creation and maintenance of a very specific way of playing. These paratextual elements
extend from social activities to specific, preferred technological interfaces for gameplay. This research argues that a game is defined as much by the ways it is played as by the formal aspects that make it up. Future research is needed to identify if these behaviors are limited to fighting game players or exhibited in other gaming communities, as well as to continue to explore the intersectional construction of identity inside those gaming communities.

Approved: ______________________________________________________________

Mia L. Consalvo

Associate Professor of Media Arts and Studies
Acknowledgments

It's impossible to count all of the people who had some sort of influence on this work. Perhaps first and foremost, I would like to thank my family for supporting what often sounded like my insane quest to finish a doctorate. Whether it was simply moral support, or even a place to live while I finished my master's degree (thank you, Lisa), without them I likely would have abandoned this road a long time ago. Thank you to my mother especially, for being the Pollyanna that, now and then, I very likely needed.

Thank you to all the faculty I had the privilege to work with at Ohio University, for helping me reach this point and to develop the necessary skills that would bring this research to this point. My great thanks go to Paula Carpenter and Janet Williams, without whose great, inexhaustible, and invaluable assistance none of this would have been possible. It's my hope that perhaps I paid you both back in laughs and smiles some small fraction of what you've given me in return. My thanks also go to Roger Cooper, who has supported me in and out of the classroom since minute one back in 2006. No other professor I know would have thought to say so much simply by putting a small toy pony in a glittery gift bag. I will treasure that for many years to come.

So many friends kept me sane over the past two years. Thank you especially to Nate Dutton and Cynara Medina, the other two members of our little trio, for being my co-conspirators, reality checks, and most importantly my friends. Thank you to Kristen Smirnov, who every day was there to keep me company and keep me sane. To Art Doler, Michael Simon, Merilan Qi, and many many others: you friendship and conversation were more valuable to me than you might ever know.
To the members of my committee, my deepest thanks. Thank you to Jenny Nelson, who did her level best to keep me honest and always remind me of how important the ways you look at something really are in this sort of research. Bernhard Debatin's vast knowledge of theory and research provided perspectives on the study that without him, I would have remained ignorant of. Christine Mattley always had a new direction or thought that helped to add depth to the end result. Beyond that, though, there were always interesting conversations to be had where the dissertation was only a starting point. Thank you all for a list of things that I can't begin to enumerate.

Finally, thanks are due to Mia Consalvo, thanks that I'm not sure I can properly express. For four years you've put up with my neuroses, answered my IMs, guided my hand, and probably most importantly, believed in me even when it was clear that I didn't believe in myself. You've been a mentor, a friend, and the best advisor I could have asked for. Any success this dissertation represents is as much yours as mine.
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Ways of playing and performativity in digital games: an introduction

Like much qualitative research, this study has its roots in my own personal experience with the subject. Thus, the story of this work begins in Waterbury, Connecticut in the summer of 1991, just outside the mall-side entrance of a drug store in the city's largest shopping mall. Sitting there was an arcade machine of Street Fighter 2, one of the oldest digital fighting games in the history of the genre, and certainly one of the most iconic. A gamer even at a young age, I found something fascinating about the SF2 machine. Dubbed The World Warrior, the characters of SF2 were colorful, brassy, and unique. Massive, muscled Zangief the Russian pro-wrestler would face off against an emaciated Indian yogi named Dhalsim inside a digital recreation of a Cold War-era Russian steel mill. Dhalsim's voice would ring out, "Yoga Fire!" as he inhaled and spit fire across the field, the fireball connecting with Zangief and briefly causing his entire body to black out, engulfed in a digital rendition of flickering scarlet flame. My favorite at that early age was the only female fighter in the whole group, a Chinese martial artist named Chun-li, whose high-kicking and acrobatic style drew me in.

At the time I lived in Plymouth, CT, a small town outside of Bristol, a good 20 miles from Waterbury. Whenever we arrived at the Waterbury mall for whatever reason, I hoarded my quarters and begged my parents for leave to run off to the drugstore to play Street Fighter. One of my most salient memories of those times was when another player – a teenage boy, Asian, much older than me – stepped up to the machine and put in a quarter. Suddenly, he was challenging me, and we were duking it out in digital form for the right to keep playing. If I lost, then my game was over and my quarter was through. This was a different thing altogether from the normal arcade games I had come to love,
shooters like Centipede or Gauntlet or Star Wars, where I could play until the game itself did me in. If I wasn't skilled enough to beat this guy, then my quarter was gone for good.

I'm not quite sure how, but I managed to beat him. I remember watching him turn to me with a frustrated expression, saying in an exasperated tone, "Oh, usin' cheesy throws!" I also recall not understanding what in creation he was talking about; to this day, I remember that my young ears heard "Chinsey" rather than "cheesy," and I assumed he was telling me the name of the secret technique I was using to defeat him. I can only imagine his exasperation when I turned to him and said, bright with pride at my perception of his approval, "Yeah! Chinsey throw, for sure!"

Flash forward to 2004 and a long history with fighting games to that point. It's an endless series of playing not in the arcades, for the most part, but buying home console ports and playing them by myself against the computer, enjoying the style of the game but not having another person to play against. In those instances where I could play with friends, I was always hopelessly outmatched and a terrible loser. Street Fighter 2 gave way to other games: Mortal Kombat, Soul Edge, a number of Street Fighter spinoffs including the Street Fighter Alpha prequel series, Nintendo's Smash Bros. series… even a truly awful American-produced game by California developer Interplay called Clayfighter. Something about the aesthetic and the play of fighting games drew me in and did so with a vengeance. I played any that I could get my hands on, but always alone, and almost never in the arcades, which were few and far between in the various places I have lived since that fateful discovery of SF2 back in Waterbury 19 years ago.

However, in the age of the internet and YouTube, I became aware that there was a side to fighting game play I never had a chance to experience. Events such as the
Evolution Series tournament were where serious, dedicated fighting gamers met to battle against each other in a competition that had much in common with competitive sports. One landmark wake-up call to the alternate possibilities of fighting game play came when a friend linked me to a YouTube video of professional Japanese player Daigo Umehara facing off against American pro player Justin Wong in the finals at EVO 2004. They were playing *Street Fighter 3: Third Strike*, one in a long series of *SF2* successors that had been released.

The video – [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtuA5we0RZU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtuA5we0RZU) – is hard to understand without knowing the intricacies of the system, but the crowd reaction that accompanies it gives even a lay viewer a taste of just how incredible that moment was for the people who experienced it. Daigo – playing Ken, the male character in white – performed a counter play of masterful skill at almost literally the last possible second, counterattacking to take the win and the tournament. In sports terms, it was the play of the century. To me, it was an example of a world of fighting game play that was beyond the scope of what I knew. Who were these professional players? What was this event they were at that had attracted such a massive crowd? Perhaps most importantly, how did they acquire their incredible skill and what seemed like, to me, superhuman reflexes? In essence: who *were* these people? At the time I was completing my master's degree at Syracuse University, however, and had little time to explore the issue, either as a player or a scholar.
Encountering hardcore play: driving me up the *Brawl*

Skip ahead once again to March of 2008, four years later. Now a student at Ohio University, I eagerly wait in a midnight line at the local Wal-Mart to acquire a copy of the latest installment of the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise: *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* for the Nintendo Wii. I have been a series fan since it debuted on the Nintendo 64 with the original *Super Smash Bros.* Since then I'd purchased the GameCube version, *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, and was now quite pleased to get my hands on the newest installment. Particularly interesting to me was the fact that with the Wii’s online capabilities, you could play *Brawl* with random strangers around the world from the comfort of your own home. Finally, I would get a chance to play against other people instead of only by myself against CPU opponents.

It's important to understand that *Brawl* has little in common with *Street Fighter 2*. In *Brawl*, there are up to four players instead of only two, and controls are highly simplified compared to the more complex motions required in *SF2*. Also, the *Smash* games include a number of random elements, such as items that drop from the sky to be used against your opponents (everything from bombs and laser guns to paper fans and baseball bats) and stage elements that can be just as much a hazard as other players.

Some stages are relatively tame; flat featureless plains. The majority, however, are rather more extreme: a boiling underground cavern where lava flows appear out of nowhere, a slippery iceberg floating in an Arctic sea, and even a Pokémon-themed stage where giant destructive laser beams and reversal of gravity are the least of the random possibilities.

What I experienced online, however, told a different story. Rather than the vast range of stages and selectable characters available, my online play with anonymous
opponents worldwide had a very homogenous tone. Match after match, I played against a very narrow range of characters and stages, time and again. The most common stage was "Final Destination," a holdover from Brawl's predecessor Melee that is a single, featureless platform. Rather than seeing the wide range of Nintendo characters that the designers added to Brawl, I often would fight matches where I was the only person not playing certain characters. After a certain period of playing against an unending tide of matches against three Solid Snakes, Ikes, or Kirbies on Final Destination again and again, I gave up on online Brawl. My frustration with the process had reached new heights. Why were these people playing this way? Wasn't the random nature of the game – all the potential wackiness and unexpected twists – the fun of the experience?

Like the YouTube video mentioned above, this experience too caused me to question just what was going on here. In considering the Brawl situation, my mind returned to an internet meme that had surrounded the previous game, Smash Bros. Melee. The joke ran that serious Smash players would adhere to a "Fox only, Final Destination, no items" rule of play. That is to say, they would turn off items entirely, only choose the Final Destination stage, and all players would choose the character Fox, who (in Melee) was considered one of the strongest characters to use. As the meme went, anyone who embraced this sort of play was taking Smash a little bit too seriously.

Naturally, as a meme, this was an exaggeration; even a cursory glance at online communities provides a page or two that identify the meme as a parody of tournament-legal play, which typically bans items and stages in order to keep the match fair ("No items. Fox only. FD", 2008; "Tournament legal (SSBM)", 2010). Of course, the idea of the meme is to criticize or tease these serious players, heavily implying that their
playstyle effectively strips all of the actual fun out of the experience; consider the related
TVTropes.com page "Stop Having Fun Guys" (n.d.), though the fans who created that
site are quick to note "while most Stop Having Fun Guys are Tournament Players, not all
the Tournament Players are Stop Having Fun Guys [emphasis original]."
Influenced heavily by Foucault (1978), Butler sought to situate the idea of gender in the realm of discourse. By separating gender from the physical body, she hoped to argue for ways in which gender could be problematized – hence the title of her first book, *Gender Trouble* – and resisted. Her argument is that rather than being essential and endemic to the body, gender is a performance: a series of behaviors and actions that over time discursively create and reify what it means to be male, female, intersex, or any other gender category.

This research seeks to explore the potential link between this idea of performativity – of identity concepts created and recreated over time through discourse – and the play of digital games, particularly in social contexts. Some scholars have argued that the primary way in which digital game texts convey ideological information is through "procedure" (Bogost, 2008): the actual process of gameplay – interacting with the rules, fiction, goals, and other aspects of experiential play – models systems, and thus conveys rhetorical information about how those systems work. The primary question here is, if gameplay interactions are discursive, then can gameplay itself be a type of performativity? Do casual or hardcore gamers, in adopting their preferred playstyles and interacting with other players socially in the context of those playstyles, create the identity concept of being "casual" or "hardcore" in the first place?

In early 2008, *New York Times* reporter Seth Schiesel (2008, February 1) wrote on how the sales figures for video games in the previous year suggested a fundamental shift in the demographics of gaming. The article suggests that the decline of sports games and single-player action games – long considered the bastion of the stereotypical hardcore gamer – and the rise of more socially-oriented and less "hardcore" systems and games,
such as Blizzard's popular *World of Warcraft* and the family-friendly Nintendo Wii, is evidence that what society conceives of as a "gamer" is shifting. As the title of his latest book suggests, game studies scholar Jesper Juul's *A Casual Revolution* (2010) and its examination of the rise of casual games and the people who play them tells a very similar story. The idea of the hardcore player – the diehard gamer, with all its attendant stereotypes of behavior and demographics – is on its way out.

Yet the vibrant and self-described hardcore *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* players congregating online, as mentioned earlier, suggest that the hardcore are not going away. Events such as the EVO tournament still draw massive numbers of players who adopt a more hardcore style of play. What's left is a question of what being a gamer even means, and perhaps most importantly, what do *gamers* think being a gamer means? How is that hardcore identity constructed and expressed, both to other gamers and to the world, and how reliant is it on styles of play for maintaining itself? Research such as this study is needed to answer those sorts of questions, and the answers can not only suggest ways in which games can be improved, but also enlighten us on the ways in which play affects self-conception, expression, and social interaction.

**Key terms, constructs, assumptions, and research questions**

Using these above broad questions as a base, and drawing on both literature on gender performativity and the play of games – particularly the impact of rules and social play – this study focuses in on three aspects of the gameplay experience. These aspects are key terms that permeate this study and guide its analysis; combined, they create a construct I have identified "ways of playing," a phrase that seeks to encompass the idea
that gameplay is part of a lived experience, and that the ways people play encompass not only basic interaction with the text, but a wide array of contextual factors. The three aspects of ways of playing are as follows:

- **Play practice**: the ways in which games are played. Play practice refers to the ways in which players interact with the rules of the game, how they control the game through technology and interfaces, and the decisions about interfacing with the game text that players make.

- **Normative play**: how players feel games should be played. Rather than play practice, which is the act of literally interacting with the text, normative play refers to social contexts, mores, norms, and other cultural, contextual factors that guide thinking about how the ideal experience ought to be.

- **Social play**: how players play together. Issues of social play focus on the ways in which interacting with other players becomes part of the gameplay experience, and incorporates aspects of both play practice and normative play. Social play encompasses not only how players *literally* play together – in other words, interact with a text together – but also how they engage in the culture of gameplay together. Online forums and communities, tournament events, and fan work are all aspects of social play.

This research takes for granted that gameplay is not static, but rather something experiential and fluid. This study works under the assumption – grounded in theory – that gameplay is not limited to the actual act of engagement with a particular game; rather, players also engage games through social contact inside gaming culture and through the consumption of secondary texts. This is what Consalvo (2007) refers to as the
paratext of gaming. Also, my own work on gameplay (Harper, 2007) has suggested that even the act of observing a game and socially engaging the player can present, in its own way, a type of play.

Accordingly, the goal of this research is to identify and explore the ways in which these three key areas of play are performed. Work in game studies rather emphatically describes the rules of a game as its most basic structure (see Juul, 2005). The literature on performativity tells us that identities and the self are created, recreated, and displayed through a constant, not always voluntary, and deeply contextual series of actions, iterated through things done and choices made. That this should be extended to the play of a game – the reason that a player must make a choice in a game at all – is natural. What I seek to find are the ways in which rules and identity performance interact.

Following from those goals, I present the following research questions that guided this research:

• How do ways of playing intersect with the performance of identity?

At the most basic level, this question seeks to examine how gamers may present and understand themselves as gamers through the act of play. What are the practices of play that are part of being a hardcore or casual player? How do those players believe the games they enjoy should be played, and how do they both disseminate and express those preferences? How do those players express and embody what it means to be a serious or hardcore gamer?

• How do ways of playing affect social interaction, particularly in the context and formation of gamer culture and gaming communities?
This question narrows the focus of inquiry to both general social interactions and specifically to gamer communities. How do social groups and organizations of players come together (or split apart into factions), and how do the ways in which those gamers play and express themselves through play influence their social participation? How do gamers interact with social groups outside their own, particularly other gamers?

- How do players negotiate their identity performance in different gaming contexts?

This final question hearkens to the important idea that performances are not static, but contextually dependent and always shifting. Is the World of Warcraft power gamer, dedicated to acquiring the best gear and the highest statistical advantage (see Taylor, 2006; Consalvo and Harper, 2009), the same type of gamer when playing a friendly round of Mario Kart Wii with strangers? Performance is shaped by the experiences of players and their environment. How do players move between those contexts?

Through the lens of these questions, this study seeks to uncover how ways of playing interact with the self-concept and performed selves of gamers. In examining why that room of fans cheered for Daigo Umehara’s miracle comeback, in examining why those hardcore Smash players eschew certain aspects of the game code to play in a certain way, we may come to a better understanding not only of the behavior of game players, but how those players construct the very experience of gameplay itself.

Chapter development

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. The first three chapters present background material on the sites of study, a review of extant research and theoretical
issues relevant to the study, and an overview of the study's methodological frameworks and procedures. The three subsequent chapters focus on the data collected during the research, organized into three major thematic areas. The final chapter draws together those themes to reflect on and answer the research questions described above.

Chapter one gives a brief explication of the "fighting game" as a genre, as well as a description of many of the games that are mentioned throughout this study. As that chapter will discuss in more detail, the idea of what makes a fighting game is somewhat in flux, as definitions can come from many different angles: players themselves, the businesses and markets that bring the games to consumers, and even scholars seeking to clarify the idea of genre in digital gaming.

In chapter two I review relevant literature from four broad areas: the rules of games, the nature of social play and gamers as social actors, gender performativity, and finally the performativity of play. Broadly speaking, these research areas seek to provide background on how the rules of a game influence the practice of play, the idea of gaming as a potentially social activity (as well as the social context of gaming), how scholars such as Butler have defined and explored the performativity of gender, and finally how some game scholars have applied the idea of performance to actual game play. It is my hope that this review of the literature will help to build a context for the reader not only in how this study came to be, but in how the phenomena studied were analyzed and considered.

Methodology is covered in the third chapter. This study is qualitative in nature, coming from a phenomenological standpoint that focuses on the lived experience of players. In chapter 3 I discuss the nature of this research, including its affordances and
potential pitfalls, as well as outline my efforts at bracketing and my attempts to let my
gaming experience inform rather than distort this research. I also provide more in-depth
description of the three sites of research – the EVO tournament, interviews with fighting
game players, and local observation of social gaming – including methods of data
collection, participant recruitment, and data analysis.

The environment of play is the focus of chapter 4. In particular, this chapter
describes the influence of the arcade ideal on fighting game play, and the ways in which
fighting games have been historically played have had a lasting influence on the way they
are played now, despite the rapid decline of the arcade as a game-playing space in the
U.S. I also discuss the influence of technology on the context of play, particularly the ups
and downs of online play and the potential effect technology can have on the creation of a
comfortable gaming space, using the "arcade stick" controller as a major example.

In chapter 5 I delve into social play. This chapter starts with a discussion of a
central conceit in serious fighting game play: that these games are meant to played
against other human beings, rather than the computer. Extending from that, I go on to
analyze what social behaviors are valorized in the community, as well as which ones are
more stigmatized. I also look at the influence and role of online gaming communities
among fighting game players: how they both (re)create the norms of play and also draw
in new members to the community socially. Lastly, chapter 5 also examines the ways in
which players I observed locally expressed identity and ways of play in social gaming.

Chapter 6 focuses on the practice of play. The major focus of this chapter is on a
very broad query: what is this game we're playing? Drawing on observations about the
influence of gameplay interactions – in reference to the aspects of ways of playing, play
practice – on how the experience and social interactions of serious fighting gamers are constructed. One such example is the conflict between the casual and hardcore, both between different gaming communities, and even – in the case of the Smash community – inside them as well. Also, this chapter discusses how players determine if a gameplay element is "broken" – unfair – or not, including a discussion of the social structures that give rise to certain norms of play practice.

Finally, in chapter 7 I draw together these various thematic examples in order to respond to the research questions which drove the research. In general, I argue that the discursive aspects of ways of playing have a major impact on where the experience of gameplay is situated. Using examples of the environment of play, social play, and play practice and drawing them together with the basic concepts of performativity, I construct the idea that rather than being limited to the textual artifact, a game is defined as much by the ways in which it is played as it is by the computer code and rules – the "material body" – that make it up. I then offer some analysis and critique of the study's potential for future research, including how the limitations and weaknesses of the study's methods can contribute to future inquiry.
Chapter 1

Explicating "fighting games"

What is a fighting game? It seems as if the range of games in the genre, depending on one's definition of the word "fighting," is potentially endless. Does any game which even involves fighting of any form in the first place – as many MMO games in the vein of *World of Warcraft* do – constitutes a "fighting game?" As the experiences of gamers discussed in later chapters suggest, it is rarely so easy, and typically much more difficult to nail down the precise qualities that define a fighting game. The companies that make and distribute games, the stores that market them, and the gamers who play them all have specific – and sometimes conflicting – ideas of what a fighting game can and should be.

In this chapter, I intend to offer some context to explore some of those contextual factors and create a working definition of a fighting game. This explanation focuses on three areas: the notion of genre (how texts are grouped together), the range of history (the development of those texts), and finally some description of actual texts that are relevant to this research, such as the games featured at the EVO tournament in 2009. The intent here is not to definitively settle once and for all the question of what a fighting game is, but rather to provide readers with a sense of how the term is used in this study and the context that definition arose from.

The fighting game genre

In its most basic form, the notion of genre is about "taxonomy" (Feuer, 1992, p. 138): a way of classifying like texts according to their observed qualities. Television
shows that are 30 minutes in length and comedic in nature tend to be labeled "sitcoms" based on what they have in common. Genre provides a way for consumers and critics to categorize texts for various purposes, though the work of scholars on the idea of genre (Altman, 1984; Neale, 1990; Mittell, 2001; see also Feuer, above) suggests that it is rarely so simple, and that genre is as much an interaction with culture as it is with judging the qualities of the text. Perhaps most interesting, given this study's grounding in performativity, is Altman's claim that genre is consistently thought of as having an independent, essential existence rather than being socially constructed. For most of the scholars mentioned previously, genre is – like gender performance – a constant and shifting discursive negotiation in the consumptive process.

Identifying how genre should be classified in digital games is tricky work, particularly given the early-life theoretical split in the community between those who sought to define games primarily as stories and narratives (e.g. Murray, 1997) and those who thought of them as systems or simulations first (e.g. Frasca, 1999). In The Medium of the Video Game, Mark Wolf (2001) comes down on the ludic side, arguing that what gets done in the game is the most critical way to group game texts. Apperley (2006) takes the same stance. Kirkland (2005) takes the opposite view, arguing that for the most part it is the thematic concerns of the game – his major example is the Silent Hill series' use of horror movie concepts – that drive it. While rules clearly have an influence on interpretation, for Kirkland that is subservient to the notion of thematic "feel." My own work on the subject (Harper, forthcoming) argues that genre is somewhere between those two extremes, and that a useful way to group texts is to examine how their combinations
of rules and fiction create certain common rhetorics or ideological frames, in line with

Returning to Wolf, his description of the fighting genre at least provides a useful
starting point for discussion on the characteristics of the games:

Games involving characters who fight usually hand-to-hand, in one-to-one
combat situations without the use of firearms or projectiles. In most of
these games, the fighters are represented as humans or anthropomorphic
characters. This term should not be used for games which involve shooting
or vehicles (see Combat and Shoot 'Em Up), or for games which include
fighting like Ice Hockey, but which have other objectives (see Sports).
Note: Many fighting games can also be cross-listed with Sports. For
related games, see also Combat.
Examples: Avengers; Body Slam; Boxing (with Sports); games in the
Mortal Kombat series; Soul Edge; games in the Tekken series; Wrestle
War. [emphases all in original] (pp. 124-125)

Certainly, this definition does have some use in narrowing down the range of potential
games. It eliminates the idea that any game with fighting in it is a "fighting game." Wolf's
related genre of Combat games is very similar, but focuses more on games where two
players attempt to shoot each other (such as competitive first-person shooters; one of his
examples is Unreal Tournament). However, some of his examples – like Wrestle War –
are more about sports realism than fighting in the Street Fighter vein; the only things they
barely have in common are the very basic things that Wolf gives us in the description.

There's also the matter of how the market considers what a fighting game is. A
glance at the online marketplace for the Xbox 360 ("Xbox Live Marketplace | Games",
2010) shows a number of games – Left 4 Dead 2 and Marvel Ultimate Alliance are just a
couple – where there is clearly "combat" involved but which nobody interviewed for this
study would even remotely consider a fighting game. Left 4 Dead 2 was played by the
local players observed as part of this study, and while it has a trace amount of hand-to-
hand combat in it, for the most part is falls quite neatly into the first-person shooter
category, having effectively no resemblance whatsoever to the sorts of games I observed
at EVO as described below.

Large game retailer EB Games presents some of their catalog online; a glance at
their selections for fighting games available for the Playstation 3
homogenous set of titles, though wrestling games in the WWE brand are also involved.
Amazon.com's construction of the fighting genre for multiple platforms mixes games like
Street Fighter and Blazblue with games that Wikipedia (2010) refers to as "Beat 'em
ups," a related genre where there is a similar focus on martial arts combat, but in a
different context than a 1-on-1 battle. How marketers and businesses define fighting
games is clearly in flux; it's more likely that a general retailer like Amazon wants to
maximize the number of titles that might catch a browser's eye, so they might construct
the genre differently than a specialty retailer like EB Games.

There is also the issue of how players themselves define fighting games as a
genre, and the conflict over what exactly a fighting game is plays a prominent role in
chapter 6's discussion of tension between the casual and the hardcore, and between fans
of games such as Street Fighter and fans of the Smash Bros. series. Though considered in
more detail later, what the conflict inside two fighting game communities points out is
that even within two games that nominally meet the same genre standards, context might
cause one group to consider a game as not part of the genre.
A brief history of fighting games

According to Ashcraft (2008), the earliest fighting games in the Japanese arcade scene were Sega's 1976 *Heavyweight Champ*, a boxing game, and a smattering of karate or kung-fu related games such as *Karate Champ* (1985) and *Yie Ar Kung Fu* (1986) that simulated realistic competitive martial arts. He explains that these games didn't reach a high level of popularity because of the dominance of shooter games in Japanese arcades at the time, and that these games have little in common with how fighting games have come to be understood today.

The title that changed it all was Capcom's *Street Fighter 2* in 1991. A sequel to a little-known combat game (the original *Street Fighter*), *SF2* featured highly stylized characters, each with a repertoire of special techniques that had very little to do with reality: breathing fire, throwing bursts of energy, and performing kicks so fast the eye can't track them are just a few examples. In *SF2*, the goal was simple: reduce your opponent's health meter to 0 within 90 seconds by using kicks, punches, grapples, and special attacks, all the while avoiding or defending against the opponent's attacks in turn. Whichever player won two rounds first was declared the winner.

It is no wild assumption to call *SF2* the progenitor of the modern fighting game. Ashcraft goes on to describe how other companies, such as developer SNK, would create their own spin on the *Street Fighter* mystique, using the same general elements and reconfiguring them in slightly different ways. One such configuration – a game by Data East called *Fighter's History* – was purportedly so close in tone and execution to the original *SF2* that Capcom brought them to court in the U.S. for infringement of copyright (Dannenberg, 2005), though Data East would claim victory in the suit. However, for
many years the *Street Fighter* series remained the grand dame of the fighting game world. The original *SF2* would go through five separate incarnations (Horwitz, n.d.) between 1991 and 1994, with each successive edition tweaking the game engine, adding new characters and special moves, and refining the game. It also spawned a major spinoff series, *Street Fighter Alpha*, and would also be followed by two direct sequels. *Street Fighter 3* (1997) continued the series legacy on new and better arcade hardware, and it too had multiple incarnations with new characters and system refinements (*SF3: Double Impact* and *SF3: Third Strike*). The most recent sequel was the release of *Street Fighter 4* in February of 2009, and the recent release of expansion title *Super Street Fighter 4* in 2010.

However, the *SF* series – and the many similar games it inspired across different developers and technology – are specifically what are known as "2D fighters." In a 2D fighter, there is no third dimension for on-screen action to move in; characters can move left or right, can jump, and crouch, but cannot shift into the background or foreground. To compete with 2D fighting games, Sega created their *Virtua Fighter* games in 1993. Although they maintained many of the same aspects of *Street Fighter* that were critical – life gauges, special attacks, stylized characters, and a focus on 1-on-1 martial arts competition – the designers of *Virtua Fighter* used polygon rather than sprite-based graphics, producing 3D art rather than 2D art. Inside the game, players of *Virtua Fighter* could not only move left and right, but also around the battlefield itself. It became possible to win not just by knocking out one's opponent, but also by hurling them out of the proscribed arena, a type of win that would come to be known as a "ring out" (Ashcraft, 2008).
Just as *SF2* inspired other games in that vein, so too did *Virtua Fighter* inspire a wave of development in 3D fighting games, including 3D adaptations of existing 2D series that did not fare terribly well in the market (Horwitz, n.d.). Among the most well-known 3D series to emerge from that development history are both the *Tekken* and *Soul* series by Namco (now Namco-Bandai). While the *Tekken* series (now on its sixth incarnation, *Tekken 6*) focuses on more hand-to-hand combat, the *Soul* series – starting with *Soul Blade* and then a chain of sequels, *Soul Calibur 1* through *Soul Calibur 4* – introduced weapon combat to the mix. However, both games include those same basic elements of 3D fighters: the ability to use the entire field and run in any direction, and the ability to win by knocking the other player out of the arena.

However, other contributors have added their own spin on fighting games to the mix. Game developer HAL Studios created the game *Super Smash Bros.* for Nintendo's N64 system in 1999. *Smash* – and its successors, *Smash Bros. Melee* and *Smash Bros. Brawl* – leverages Nintendo's character properties into a somewhat simplified fighting game system, and include many of the aspects of 2D fighters like *Street Fighter*, such as special moves and combat on a 2D plane. However, they also borrow from 3D fighters as well. Rather than reducing an opponent's health/vitality to 0, successive attacks "build up" damage on an opponent. The higher that player's damage level, the easier they are to send flying a long distance with attacks; when a player is knocked off the side of the stage, s/he has lost. Also, unlike the 1-on-1 mode employed by 2D and 3D fighting games, the *Smash* series allows for 4 players to fight simultaneously, either as a free-for-all or in teams. Finally, the games also involve random elements in the form of weapons and items that drop into combat at random moments, and (as discussed previously) stages
that, unlike the static decorative backgrounds of 2D fighters, can and do have an impact on the process of play.

A working definition of fighting games

Drawing on both the historical examples of fighting games, as well as the ways in which the genre is conceptualized, I offer the following working definition of a fighting game:

- **Close-quarters combat**: For the most part, fighting games involve physical combat between the on-screen characters. Elements of that combat might involve projectile attacks – for example, the "Hado uken" signature projectile of *SF* series regular Ryu – but in general, as Wolf asserts, the focus of the game is not on out-shooting the opponent; projectiles are part of a broader context of enabling close combat.

- **Standard techniques and special attacks**: Characters in fighting games typically have two sets of "moves:" standard punches, kicks, and throwing techniques, and "special" moves that are performed through specific and more complex controller maneuvers.

- **Quantifying of match parameters**: Fighting games offer visual cues on the screen (commonly called the heads-up display or HUD) that quantify various aspects of the match. Vitality meters provide a color-coded expression of remaining health; a game clock ticks down the remaining seconds left in the match; markers identify how many rounds a player has won; and various gauges and meters measure other statistics depending on the game's individual
rulesets. For example, *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo* added a "super gauge" which, when full, allowed the player access to a particularly powerful technique.

• *Competitive:* The goal of a fighting game match is to determine a winner. The common thread in all of the games considered above is that for an individual play session to end, a winner must be determined, either by knockout, ring out, or in extreme cases, the game clock running down to 0.

• *Allows for multiplayer competition:* This is the primary difference between fighting games and the previously-described beat 'em ups. In playing against the CPU, the difference is mostly conceptual; both fighters and beat 'em ups involve moving through stages, using combat to defeat the enemy and progress. However, fighting games also allow for players to fight against each other in a competitive way. While in many cases this is 1-on-1, the *Smash* series allows for a greater number of concurrent players.

It is important to note that even this definition is quite broad, and like the market genres noted above, it allows for games other than the traditional series lines (*SF, Tekken, Virtua Fighter*, etc.) to enter into the equation. However, what this definition does is outline the basic qualities that the games discussed in this study share. As later discussion will bear out, however, the context in which these games are played does much to affect how these basic qualities are interpreted and read.
Games at the Evolution 2009 tournament

Finally, I would like to offer a brief description of the games that made an appearance at the EVO 2009 event, particularly those which had "official" and semi-official tournaments. In describing these games, I both build a context for their later discussion and give examples of the types of games that the communities I explored feel exemplify "fighting games." At EVO 2009, there were a total of 6 official tournaments: Street Fighter 3: Third Strike, Guilty Gear XX Accent Core, Soul Calibur 4, Marvel vs. Capcom 2, Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo: HD Remix, and the main event, Street Fighter 4. There was also an on-site but unofficial tournament for Super Smash Bros. Brawl, and two exhibition tournaments for Tekken 6 and Blazblue, held by developers Namco-Bandai and Aksys Games, respectively.

Street Fighter 3: Third Strike (Third Strike, SF3:3 or simply SF3)

The third and last in the series of Street Fighter 3 games, Third Strike was for many years the tournament game of choice. The video described in the introduction, where Daigo Umehara stages a miraculous comeback against Justin Wong, occurred during play of SF3:3. For the most part, the gameplay mechanics echo the SF series norms of 2D action. The major series differences between the SF3 games and their predecessor are the inclusion of two mechanics: "parrying," where quick directional presses can entirely negate an incoming attack and set the defender up for effective counterattacking, and "EX moves," where fractional use of the in-game "super meter" can empower certain special moves to be stronger/faster/better than their normal counterparts.
**Guilty Gear XX Accent Core (Guilty Gear or GGXX)**

**Blazblue: Calamity Trigger (BB)**

The *GG* series is a 2D fighting game series developed by Daisuke Ishiwatari and Arc System Works. Although many of the basic elements of 2D fighting are involved here, the game's system supports a more aggressive style of play than *Street Fighter*, with a greater focus on long combination attacks ("combos"). *Accent Core* is the last in a long line of modifications to the basic *Guilty Gear XX* engine, which was itself a refinement of the second game in the series, *Guilty Gear X*. The *Guilty Gear* system is known for its large amount of systemic tricks and information to learn; Aksys Games' official site for the game includes a "System" section ("Guilty Gear XX Accent Core \ System", n.d.) which elaborates on a total of 17 separate system elements that can have an impact on the game, complete with detailed descriptions of their use.

*Blazblue: Calamity Trigger* is a spiritual successor to the *Guilty Gear* games released in 2009 and again, developed by Daisuke Ishiwatari and Arc System Works. *BB* follows much of the formula of the *Guilty Gear* games with a new set of characters. There are fewer series-unique fighting game system elements in *Blazblue*, and many of the ones that remain are echoes of similar systems in the *Guilty Gear* games.

**Soul Calibur 4 (SC4)**

**Tekken 6 (T6 or Tekken)**

The fourth game in the *Soul Calibur* series and the fifth in the *Soul* series overall, *SC4* is a 3D fighting game by Namco-Bandai with character designs that focus on weapon users. Like most 3D games, in *SC4* players can range around the various
arenas in free run, attack from any angle, and use positioning and timing to attack their opponents. The *Soul Calibur* games in general also include a mechanic similar to the *SF3* parry, where properly timed presses of the "Guard" button can not only deflect an opponent's attack, but leave them open to counterattack in the process. One interesting mechanic that made a rare few appearances at EVO is the "critical finish," where when certain match conditions are met, a player can enter a specific button sequence to perform an attack that (if it hits) ends the match then and there, regardless of how much vitality/health the opponent has left. Also, as a 3D game, the various arenas for fighting also allow for ring out victories.

Created by the same developer in a parallel franchise, *Tekken 6* follows much of *Soul Calibur 4*'s mold, offering 3D combat that focuses on martial arts rather than weapons. However, the button combinations used to perform attacks are often similar in structure between the two games. It should be noted that the version of *Tekken 6* that was on display at EVO was not final; Namco-Bandai used the opportunity to be in the presence of fighting game enthusiasts to have them test and review the game before the official release.

*Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo: HD Remix (SF2T:HDR or simply HDR)*

This game is a remake of the original *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo* by Capcom and designed for digital distribution on consoles via their online architecture (e.g. Xbox Live). It combines a massive art redesign by comic artists Studio Udon with an effort by game designer David Sirlin to tweak the game's systems and attributes, creating more "balanced" play (Killian and Sirlin, 2007). If a game is balanced, then no one character is
so strong that s/he presents a dominant option, one that guarantees victory. The gameplay is more simplistic than more modern games, with systems such as SF3’s parrying and EX moves not present, but in general it exhibits the typical basics of Street Fighter 2’s original play aesthetic.

Marvel vs. Capcom 2 (Marvel or MvC2)

MvC2 is part of a long series of games developed by Capcom known as the "Versus series." The first game of its kind, X-Men vs. Street Fighter, combined characters from Capcom's own stables with Marvel Comics characters (including those designs used in the Capcom-made X-Men and Marvel Super Heroes fighting games) and allowed players to choose teams of two. A hallmark of the Versus games is this controlling-a-team phenomenon, where the player chooses a team of 2-3 characters and controls one at a time, yet is able to switch between them during a match. To win, the opponent must knock out every character on the team. MvC2’s direct predecessor, Marvel vs. Capcom, introduced a "helper" system, where the team of two controllable characters has an additional "helper" that can be summoned a limited number of times in every match to perform a supporting attack. In this game, the helper as a sort of side character has been removed; instead, the player chooses a team of three, and can summon in his/her inactive characters to perform a helper attack at any time. Of note is MvC2’s massive playable cast of characters; well over 40, compared to SF2’s eight and Street Fighter 3’s 18.

In general, the action in MvC2 is faster and more frenetic than in the Street Fighter games, as a match can include a massive amount of on-screen visuals to pay attention to; depending on the circumstances of the match, between 4-5 characters can be
onscreen and attacking in some form in any given moment The Versus series is also known for increasing the "flash" factor of special moves. For example, Ryu's Shinkuu Hadouken projectile technique in the mainline Street Fighter games typically is shown as a medium-sized projectile that flies across the screen. Its MvC2 variant is a massive white laser that streaks across the screen like a beam.

Street Fighter 4 (SF4)

Released in February 2009, SF4 was Capcom's first new fighting game released into the market in almost 10 years, its immediate predecessor being Marvel vs. Capcom 2. Designed for next generation consoles, the game abandons the sprite-based 2D art of the series in exchange for 3D art rendered in a 2D way; that is to say, the characters and backgrounds are 3D models, but the action retains the 2D plane limitations of classic Street Fighter. A bit of a series "reboot," SF4 retains some of the systems of the SF3 games – in particular, the "EX moves" described above – but for the most part presents a small amount of unique gameplay mechanics. The most prominent is the "Focus Attack" mechanic, a technique that allows for simultaneous defense and offense when used in the right situation. An expansion for this game, Super Street Fighter 4, was recently released, adding additional characters, as well.

Super Smash Bros. Brawl (SSBB, Smash, or Brawl)

Compared to the previous fighting games, Brawl is more unconventional. As previously discussed, it's the third game in the Smash Bros. series from Nintendo, and like Street Fighter 4 is a 2D game with 3D characters and backgrounds. The game
features popular characters from Nintendo series and intellectual properties such as Mario, Link (from the *Legend of Zelda* series), and various *Pokémon* characters in a free-for-all, four player combat. Rather than the traditional fighting game model where one fighter reduces the other fighter's health to 0, *Smash* games count up damage received as a percent; the higher one's damage percent, the farther one flies when hit. When a character is hit hard enough that they go flying off the edge of the stage – each stage being "open" on at least two sides of the screen, and usually all four – that character accrues a "death." Different play modes measure wins differently; the tournament-preferred rule is "stock," where each player has a stock of "lives" that are slowly used up, while other modes simply measure who has the most knockout blows delivered against their number of deaths, with the player with the best ratio being the winner. *Smash* matches are also typically longer than the 90-second bouts of traditional fighting games, with a default timer of two minutes that can be changed to be even higher.

The game also has two major departures from the other games described above. Special moves, rather than being complex motions, are much easier to perform; one button is designed the "special move" button, and used in combination with the directional controls, it produces four unique special attacks: for example, tapping the button while playing Mario produces a projectile fireball, while holding right or left and pressing it causes him to swing a cape and hit nearby enemies, and so on.

Secondly, there is the aforementioned inclusion of random stage elements and usable items. Like the playable characters, the stages in *Brawl* are based on Nintendo properties. One stage, for example, is a replica of the first stage of *Super Mario Bros.*, complete with item-dispensing blocks and bottomless pits. Another is a reproduction of
the "Pictochat" stylus-drawing feature of Nintendo's DS handheld system, where a phantom hand will occasionally "draw" bombs, trees, platforms, and even a tank into the stage at random intervals. These random events often include dangerous elements that can damage and even knock out a player with a high amount of damage and are highly unpredictable.

Items take various forms, and randomly appear on the stage during the duration of the match unless turned off. The range is quite wide, with everything from traditional weapon-style items that can be used to attack to food and recovery items that restore health. Occasionally, a "container" item of some form – a large crate, a capsule, a box – will appear, and breaking the container produces another item. However, some of these containers are booby-trapped; rather than dispensing an item when broken, they explode, taking out any player in the vicinity.

This chapter has identified some of the issues in classifying games by genre, outlined the history of the fighting game in brief, and presented the working definition of "fighting game" that informed this study. I have also included a brief description of the various fighting games played at the EVO tournament in 2009. In the next chapter, I move into the realm of theory, exploring research on games, performativity, and social play.
Chapter 2

Rules, performance, and social play: a review of relevant literature

In this chapter, I review and consider relevant research on the subject of gameplay and gender performativity, drawing on studies from those areas but also considering studies from other areas and disciplines that have relevance. In particular, I focus on four groups of studies: the influence of rules, both game-based and otherwise; the nature of social gameplay; gender performance, and the performativity of play. These four areas give insight into the various ways that games are understood both as an experiential phenomenon and as a social practice.

Following this review of the literature, I reiterate my research questions before moving into the next chapter, which discusses both my theoretical framework and my methods for data collection and analysis.

The rules of the game

To understand why it is important to look at how players orient themselves in regards to gameplay, one must consider first why game rules are so critical in understanding digital games themselves. Though the field of game studies has ranged in many different directions as it has grown, the sun around which most arguments orbit is the notion that games are something that is done: an active process, something experiential. One of the earliest and most formative game studies texts, Espen Aarseth's Cybertext (1997), refers to digital media texts – including digital games – as "ergodic," a term borrowed from contemporary physics that describes something requiring nontrivial effort to consume.
His argument wasn't necessarily that the consumption of more traditional media was an entirely passive process; it very clearly is not. Rather, he argues that consuming an ergodic text is more involved; there is more "work" to it. Aarseth constructs the digital text not as something static to be read, but a machine or system through which meaning is created by the actions and experiences of the consumer. One of the more evocative examples of his point is the *I Ching*, the Chinese method of fortune-telling using yarrow stalks. The actual physical text of the *I Ching* is effectively a reference book of potential interpretations; the text doesn't take on meaning until the "reader" goes through the experiential process of casting a hexagram, consulting the reference, and creating a resulting interpretation from it.

This relates to rules in the sense that a game's rules describe the boundaries of possibility for the creation of meaning. In some of the very earliest work on games and their social use, Huizinga (1950) speaks to the nature of play and its place in society. As examples of the ubiquity of the impulse for play in human cultures, he draws in examples of what he considers playful expression from many different aspects of human culture. A current that runs through all of these examples is their use of rules and the notion of a proscribed space in which play occurs. Poetry, for example, is a game about the manipulation of words and ideas, with rhyme and meter as the rules; the adversarial legal system's points of order and, indeed, the courtroom itself provide rules and structure for what Huizinga believes, at base, is a competition between players. What the rules of play do is create a space in which the play – something separate from everyday reality – can take place. As he says early in the book, "All play has its rules. They determine what
'holds' in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt" (p. 11).

Although he does not specifically nominate the term, Huizinga's discussion of the separate space for play with binding rules is generally speaking the origin of one of the more durable points of contention in game studies literature: the "magic circle."

Huizinga's reference to it is actually a relatively minor discussion of the circle drawn on the ground for a dice game referenced in the Mahabarata, part of his discussion on the role that contests have played in cultures of antiquity. Inside the circle, the game rules are paramount and "[t]he players are not allowed to leave the ring until they have discharged all their obligations" (p. 57). His discussion of the courtroom produces a similar description: "But whether square or round it is still a magic circle, a play-ground where the customary differences of rank are temporarily abolished" (p. 77). The important quality of the magic circle as Huizinga describes it in various play forms is that it is a "hard" boundary: it is a clear demarcation between everyday life (which has its own rules, interestingly enough) and the circumscribed place of play. The rules of play are part of how that boundary is drawn.

The importance of rules – and the influence of rules on various kinds of play – is a continuing influence in Roger Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games* (1958). What Caillois does in this book is to expand and refine on ideas that Huizinga lays out in *Homo Ludens*; indeed, the introduction to *Man, Play, and Games* sets up the book as a response to that work fairly clearly. For the author, the idea of play as separate from reality and taking place in a proscribed space bounded by rules continues to be salient: "[t]he confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by

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precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and which govern the correct playing of the game" (p. 7). Caillois gives us a definition of play that seems somewhat contradictory; it must be free – entered into voluntarily and able to be left voluntarily – but is still constrained by the rules and boundaries of the magic circle and separate space. Effectively, he describes play as being free within the rules of the space.

While Huizinga considers most play to be relatively common in character, Caillois distinguishes between various types of play and creates a broad typology for them. His first and most broad distinction is between paidia, freewheeling play without structure, and ludus, or structured play; these two extremes describe a line upon which all play ultimately falls. Paidia is perhaps closer to what is meant by the modern word "play," while ludus is resonant with what in common language is meant by "game." For Caillois, both are play and subject to being rule-bound and inside the proscribed space, however; he asks us to consider something as simple as playing with dolls – a game with seemingly no rules – as being effectively unstructured, but still subject to a certain broad space and rules. The person playing with the dolls is mimicking conventions and actions through the toy; thus there is a space (the toys, in effect) and rules (the appearance of verisimilitude to real life). He further breaks games down into four broad types: agon (competition), alea (chance), mimesis (imitation), and ilinx ("whimsy," though a more accurate description would be the seeking of pure sensation). The four types of play are distinguished by the level to which they are paidia or ludus, and the different role each plays.

That references to these two scholars are common in early game studies work isn't surprising. In the field's early days, the dominant discussion was formalist in
character; what scholars were interested in knowing about digital games was exactly *what they were*. It was clear to scholars that there was a division between the digital game or the interactive digital text, and what would be generally termed "traditional media" (e.g. television, film, radio, books, etc.). Some scholars, such as Janet Murray in her work *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), spoke to the potential that digital games presented for expanding and changing our ideas of narrative. From that perspective, digital games were a new form for an effectively traditional purpose: storytelling. Others, however, disagreed; the aforementioned Espen Aarseth and scholars such as Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul (among many others) argued instead that games were something different and unique.

Frasca (1999, 2003) in particular borrowed from Huizinga and Caillois, as well as Aarseth's *Cybertext*, in putting forth the idea that games are not traditional narratives, but systems for producing meaning through simulation. Rather than reading the static text and creating meaning from a fixed set of symbols, games presented a bounded space where, through rules, systems could be simulated and, through the enactment of simulation, meanings created. He termed this framework "ludology," from the same Greek terms that Caillois used in creating his typology of play. Although opinions on the role of narrative and story in digital games would shift over time and, indeed, become more reconciled to the influence of narrative on the game experience, ludology would become a powerful – perhaps dominant – paradigm for scholarly thinking about digital gaming.

In Frasca's model, rules continue to be central. Just as with his forebears, for Frasca the idea of play taking place in a bounded universe is key to the concept of
simulation. If meaning is communicated through the active representation of events and actions – in "Simulation versus narrative: introduction to ludology," he refers to flight simulators as a salient example – then the game world must have a set of rules in place that proscribe what actions can be taken, as well as the consequences of those actions. Indeed, for scholars like Frasca and Aarseth, the rules are effectively all that a game is; rather than being a set of traditional symbols, a game is a set of things that can and cannot be done, and meaning comes from how players negotiate their choices within that framework.

Originally a diehard ludologist, Jesper Juul would eventually reconcile the disconnect between game-as-narrative and game-as-rules in his book *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005). As the title of the book suggests, Juul's model for games situates them halfway in the real world and halfway in a fictional one. He accepts the base ludological concept that the core of a game is a set of rules and potential actions with outcomes that can be changed by the player, who has some investment in those outcomes. However, rather than the game being isolated from real life, the walls of the magic circle weaken in the half-real model. The purpose of the narrative elements surrounding the rules – what Juul calls the "encompassing fiction:" the story, the characters, and similar elements – is to give the rules structure and to help them, for lack of a better word, make sense. For him, the play of a game moves between the fictional world of the game and the real world of the player's context; the proscribed space drawn by the rules is certainly separate, but the boundary is not a hard one.

Thus the play of a game exists simultaneously in the game rules, the player's awareness of the game rules, and the resulting interaction. One of the more salient
examples he draws on is from the game *Grand Theft Auto III*. A rule in effect in that game is the literal boundary of the universe: the geographical places where the player's in-game avatar can and cannot go, which in this case is a bridge from an island back to the mainland. In the beginning, this bridge is inaccessible, and only the island is available to the player; this boundary condition is explained by the in-game fiction as the bridge having been damaged by an explosion that occurs early in the game's narrative. As the player progresses through the game, the bridge is repaired and the areas beyond it become accessible. Thus a ludic consideration – inaccessible content – is made sensible through a narrative element.

Ian Bogost (2007) applies these concepts to rhetorical persuasion in his book *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames*. As with the previous scholars, Bogost argues that a digital game is less of an object, locked in time, than a procedure: a player progresses through ("reads") a digital game text by navigating a series of things to do, rather than consuming static content. It is the procedurality of a game that gives it persuasive or rhetorical force, rather than just the things it represents. Rhetorical persuasion in the traditional mode shifts the relationship between signifier and signified to make an ideological argument. A *procedural* text creates a *system* of symbolization that embodies an argument. Thus rhetorically, the procedural text is experienced or "done."

This is not to say that Bogost throws out the influence of narrative or fictive dimensions; rather, they are incorporated to the extent that they are part of the modeling system. He discusses, for example, the need for the player-character to eat in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Bogost argues that this system implies certain arguments about
cultural constraints on food in inner city communities. The game requires the player-character to eat, but the choices he’s presented with are universally unhealthy; one must eat to succeed, but overeating results in obesity that hampers performance. Combined with the game’s setting – a fictional southern California city with a strong resemblance to Los Angeles – this system of eating, for Bogost, suggests the harmful impact of fast food and similar institutions in that social setting. In another example, he cites Raph Koster (2004) speaking about the falling block puzzle game, Tetris. As a thought experiment, Koster gives a description of a gruesome-sounding game about Jews in World War II concentration camps; ultimately, this is revealed as a “rewrite” of Tetris. Bogost uses this example as a way to argue that the rules alone cannot structure procedural rhetoric.

What Bogost warns against is the idea of “skinning”: molding the narrative to persuasive ends without considering the ludic dimension at all. He recounts his own experiences creating the Howard Dean for Iowa Game, which was intended to help mobilize voter support for a political candidate. Bogost deconstructs the first version of the game, which consisted of a number of simple games with a voter support “theme:” placing posters, knocking on doors, and the like. He considers that version of the game unsuccessful because rather than creating a simulated system that echoed and modeled real life dimensions of the activity, it was simply a series of games with the narrative layer of “election” poured on top.

However, research on rules as a philosophical concept has not been limited only to studying games. Wittgenstein (1953) explores rules as they relate to language and sense-making. He argues that language itself is a sort of game, where engaging in a conversation means navigating a series of rules and expectations about what words mean,
what words are appropriate, and what various contextual factors are involved that may lead a given word or sentence to be interpreted in a particular way. An extension of that is his argument that rules and games become institutions (Bloor, 2002). Sets of rules and behaviors that follow or conform to those rules become, over time, a "collective pattern of self-referring activity" (p. 33). That is to say, rules and rule-following are a particular set of behaviors, and over time those behaviors reify themselves as other actors adopt and follow them. Since Wittgenstein thinks of rule-following as a social activity – something that happens in relation to other people – then widespread rule-following becomes, over time, a social institution.

Though many of the scholars discussed here present an evolution of ideas about the rules of games, one central concept remains relatively clear: in a game – be it the social games of Huizinga and Caillois or more modern digital games – the rules present structure and boundaries. They tell us what a game is, what we can do and can’t do, and where the lines are drawn between what’s in the game and what is not. As Wittgenstein argues, those rules need not be clear cut, nor is how to follow them always easy to uncover, but whether the game is computer code we interface with, or a conversation we’re having about that code, rules guide our behavior, telling us what is possible and what is not.

Social play and gamers as social actors

Of course, rules are merely one part of the equation. A game is nothing without players, the participants who make it happen. It is no mistake that both Caillois and Juul mention, as part of the very definition of play and games, that it is something shaped by
the actions of the participants, who have an interest in the eventual outcome. In the age of
digital games – particularly an era where the massively multiplayer online (MMO) game
is so popular – the play of games must also be considered in terms of how players
function as social actors during play.

Some of the earliest work on how gamers play socially comes from Gary Alan
Fine, whose *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) examined
players of pen and paper role-playing games (RPGs) in the Minneapolis area. Fine was
interested in examining how players came to engage the role-playing experience. His
decision to use frame analysis as a base is rooted in the fact that a person involved in
playing a game such as *Dungeons & Dragons* is moving between a number of frames at
once, simultaneously.

Goffman argues that life experience and activity are understood through frames:
organizing principles that bring together different experiences, actions, and beliefs and
"govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement with them" (10-11).
Goffman describes a scenario where social interaction helps to define for us what the
world is like; he draws on a number of metaphors related to both the theatre and games
themselves to make his point, particularly the ideas that our perception of what is real has
variability depending on both context and social activity, and that certain behaviors or
cues – which he calls "keys" (p. 45) – signal social actors to shift their frame of reference.

As Fine puts it, a player managing these multiple frames is in the "real" frame of
everyday life, the frame of being a player involved in a game, and the frame of being the
character s/he is playing inside the narrative of the game world. His findings suggest that
players move freely between these frames during play, depending on the needs of the
moment. The magic circle as imagined by Huizinga is much less in evidence here. While
the players in Fine's study are clearly in a demarcated space – quite literally, as his
analysis takes place in a gaming-specific physical venue – with its own rulesets, the
players he observes do not necessarily enter into that venue and leave the everyday world
behind. Rather, at any given moment a player can adjust his/her salient frames depending
on the social context at the time:

The possibility of the rapid oscillation of frames suggests that frame
stability and change should be conceptualized as an interactional
achievement of members rather than as a function of stable situated
meaning. Since participants commonly and cooperatively shift frames in
the same situation, frames are not merely a shared individual schema that
is triggered by the objective properties of a situation; rather, they are part
of a dynamic consensus that can be bracketed, altered, or restored through
the collective action of the participants. (pp. 203-204).

One such example is the concept of metagame knowledge; he recounts an example from
play where a player wanted to act on knowledge that he had as a player (the "reality"
frame) but which his character did not. The Game Master (GM), as referee of the rules
and a sort of informal activity leader, had to shut this down for the sake of the game.

Another similar example is in another Game Master allowing a player who had rolled (on
a die) a failing result, and who had consistently been rolling poorly, to re-roll the attempt.
Although this was "cheating" – against the rules – the GM felt that part of the social
contract of gaming allowed for the breaking of the rules so that everyone could continue
to enjoy themselves.

Part of Jesper Juul's discussion of casual games (2010) focuses on social meaning
and social goals, and his analysis also presents a scenario where movement between
frames is part of the social game experience. He analyzes multiplayer games in order to
uncover how mimetic interface games, such as *Wii Sports*, came to be such a success among casual players, particularly in social play. In so doing, he argues that multiplayer games take on meaning through a shared understanding of the goal of the process. Juul suggests there are three frames of play when it comes to a particular player's actions in a multiplayer scenario: goal orientation (the desire to win), game experience (wanting playing the game to be fun, interesting, or satisfying), and social management (understanding the effect of gameplay decisions on the social experience of multiplayer play). As he puts it, "[t]he nominal description of a game will tell you to focus on the first consideration [e.g. game experience], but the other two repeatedly come into play" (p. 127). Thus management of the social situation can and does have an effect on play. A desire to fulfill a certain social imperative – for example, not wanting to beat a child and allowing him/her to win, or competing particularly hard against an annoying player in order to beat him/her – ends up influencing the interaction with the game.

Juul is not alone in thinking that shared goals and social gameplay go hand in hand. "Enjoying themselves" is the expressed primary goal of the university student players researched by Kolos (2010). In her study, she examines regular social game play in a dormitory floor lounge, exploring their motivations, actions, and the ways in which the group has become "inclusive," ranging across skill levels, backgrounds with gaming, and gender to become diverse. She argues that rather than focusing on "games" – close-ended, goal-oriented competitions – research on social play is better served by a focus on play. For the students she interviewed – and even played with – their "shared goal… to take part in a playful social activity, influenced the standards they used to accept new players. The social barriers to entry and the interpersonal stakes were almost always low"
(p. 128). In that sort of setting, players of various skill levels and backgrounds regarding games can come together harmoniously by a social agreement for a group goal: having fun together.

Her study draws on earlier work by Jakobsson (2007), who examined a gaming club in Sweden focused around the popular Nintendo GameCube title *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. His argument is that beyond the matter of the literal rules of the game code, in the club's play of *Smash* the social rules of play had a major impact on the actual game experience. He describes a conflict between two types of players – "smashers" and "anti-smashers" – whose differing ideas about certain game elements led them to play and interact with the game (and each other) in differing ways. Though the social group Kolos observed was perhaps a little more harmonious, in both cases what's evident is that social play involving multiple people brings another dimension to consider into focus. As both Kolos and Jakobsson argue, analysis of gaming in a social context must take into account the effects of that context on the experience of play.

The findings of Jansz and Martens (2005) regarding players at a LAN event also speak to scenarios where the social aspect of play and gamer culture is more critical than the ludic. While they initially expected that a desire to compete – a motive consistent with the public image of hardcore gamers – would be the highest expressed motive for attending the event, what they found was that "[t]he possibility to game in each other's presence at a LAN event was the foremost gratifying property of LAN gaming; the social motive obtained the highest score among the motives found" (p. 349). Though they note that a desire not to contribute to the stereotype of violent hypercompetitive gamers may have had an effect, their findings suggest that in the context of a massive, social gaming
event, it's the social experience and opportunity that's guiding participation and play, rather than a desire for heavy competition.

However, what about people playing alone? Cheating as an activity provides a useful bridge to thinking about the impact of rules on players as social actors between clear, social group activities such as those observed above, and a single player engaging a digital gaming text by him/herself. Consalvo (2007), in *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, explores how cheating, as an activity, intersects with a number of player factors. In general, she finds that ideas about cheating – breaking the rules of a game – vary, and more to the point that even those players who agree that a particular act is cheating can vary in when they feel that performing said act is appropriate or not. Much like the keying of frames for Fine's players, Consalvo argues that cheating is an activity that adjusts depending on the situation of the player and the game: "We need to see cheating as an important part of those practices and spaces, but not as a static 'thing' or core trait. Besides, that would be impossible, for just as games and gameplay practices change, what we consider cheating and how we respond to it have changed over time as well" (p.128). This is yet another example of how the context of play has an impact on play decisions. One of the philosophies of cheating Consalvo identifies is "you can't cheat a GameCube;" effectively, that when playing a single-player game cheating is acceptable, but once other players – social play – enter the equation, the various forms of cheating become unacceptable.

A critical concept to Consalvo's argument is the idea of "gaming capital," derived in part from Bordieu's concept of cultural capital. As Consalvo puts it,

Along those lines, I have reworked the term into gaming capital, as mentioned earlier, to capture how being a member of game culture is
about more than playing games or even playing them well. It's being knowledgeable about game releases and secrets, and passing that information on to others. It's having opinions about which game magazines are better and the best sites for walkthroughs on the Internet. Easter eggs gave rise to some of the earliest gaming capital, and one role of game magazines was to push the envelope about what about could be considered part of game capital. (p. 18).

Thus while puissant skill with games is likely to garner gaming capital for a player, in this case it is more than that. Engagement in the culture is just as much a necessity for obtaining that sort of currency in the community.

She draws in the notion of paratext as well, suggesting that acts and texts that may seem peripheral to actual gameplay – walkthroughs, cheat codes, Easter Eggs, tip websites, etc. – are really a vital part of the gameplay experience themselves. The idea of paratext was originally put forth by Genette (1997). He used the term to describe a sort of "threshold" between the most basic level of the text on the inside, and discourse in the world about the text on the outside: "[m]ore than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or – a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (pp. 1-2, emphasis original). Genette's focus was on the written work, and the ways in which things like author dedications, prefaces, and other intertexts created a context for the consumption of the "core" text to which they were linked and subservient.

According to Consalvo, Lunenfeld (1999) then took that idea and updated it for a transmedia world. He argues that as the barriers between media break down and synergy and cross-promotion become the norm, the potential range of paratexts explodes. Those paratexts can then become fascinating texts in their own right, rather than being ultimately subservient to the "original" as Genette argued. In other words, if one wants to
consider the meanings made from digital games, one cannot simply look at the isolated act of play; it must be situated in a social context and a cloud of paratexts related to it. Cheating – in many ways, a core ethical play value and certainly an orientation toward game rules – is one highly illustrative example of that principle at work.

What all of these works speak to is a relationship between the formative rules of a game and gameplay's place in a player's social actions. For Fine and Juul this means players consistently moving between the frame of the real and the frame of the game as social interaction and convention dictate. Kolos and Jakobsson both examine scenarios where a shared social understanding of the activity has a transformative aspect on social play. Finally, according to Consalvo, the MMO player who purchases in-game gold through real money trade companies may be just another player to some, and an unethical cheater to others, depending on not only their normative feelings toward the rules, but also the type of gaming capital they wish to reflect and gather.

Performing identity

The video game player is, as with any other type of person, a locus of identities. There are common categories, such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic class. Beyond that, there are the types of identities specific to gaming built on various preferences and beliefs. Is a given gamer the hardcore type, dedicated (as Consalvo notes) to being the best of the best, not requiring help, and viewing other players who lack this skill with disdain? Is s/he a casual gamer, someone who plays merely for enjoyment and has a permissive view toward the rules because of it? More to the point, how do those "common categories" come to interact with the game-specific
identities? Is it harder for a woman to be a hardcore gamer, when the culture and the gaming paratext define the hardcore gamer as an adolescent, middle class white male?

The concepts of performance and performativity – particularly as they are used in gender and queer theory – present a possible avenue for examining and explaining how gamers perform and manage their various identities through gaming. Conceptually, performativity is a counter to essentialist ideas of identity, particularly gender and sexuality. The general argument is that rather than something one is, a person's various identity markers are a result of actions taken and choices made inside that person's lived context. While performativity is often associated with the work of Judith Butler, it has its roots in earlier work on both social construction, and on the construction of gender.

One of the major roots of performativity is the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) on the social construction of reality. Much later sociological work – particularly from scholars such as Foucault and Butler, who feature prominently in the field and are discussed below – draws on their basic premise, which states that humans make sense of their day to day lives in terms of everyday knowledges. Consistent with much Marxist and neo-Marxist thought, Berger and Luckmann argue that social discourse, presented through the symbolic systems of language, produces a field of knowledge that constructs reality. New information not in the repertoire that we process must then be evaluated in terms of what is already known and then either accepted and classified, or rejected as false. This is generally speaking a similar concept to both Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation and the previously mentioned work of Wittgenstein on rules. Much as Althusser claims ideological state apparatuses ask us to define ourselves in relation to
them, and Wittgenstein's notion claims rules guide our behavior by hailing us to react to them, Berger and Luckmann claim that social discourse does much the same.

This same concept of defining concepts discursively is explored in the context of gender by West and Zimmerman (1987), who argue that rather than being something innate, gender is something that is "done." As an extension of previous work separating physical sex and socially-constructed gender, their work claims the everyday practices women engage in that include gendered activity reinforce and legitimate gendered institutions. Effectively, by enacting already-gendered activities, "gender differences, or the sociocultural shaping of 'essential female and male natures,' achieve the status of objective facts. They are rendered normal, natural features of persons and provide the tacit rationale for differing fates of women and men in the social order" (p. 142). In this model all actions have what West and Zimmerman call "gender risk:" every action we take opens ourselves up to being judged on the action being gendered appropriate.

Thus the system of being gendered and doing gender is effectively inescapable, since in this model almost every conceivable act – even language, as they speak to the gendering of verbs and nouns in various dialects – has a gendered evaluation. There is a certain degree of relation here to the work of Foucault (1978) on sexuality, particularly his argument that it is social and political power systems and institutions that turn acts and contexts into identities. He contends that in order to serve social ends, in the Victorian era same-sex sexual activity was transformed from specific acts into an identity: the homosexual. Though West and Zimmerman do not specifically reference Foucault, their arguments have some degree of relation. In both models, the social order
has already coded certain activities, styles, and even words as gendered; they are thus transformed from individual acts into aspects of a gender identity.

Judith Butler, in her books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), draws upon and builds on these concepts. Unlike West and Zimmerman, whose inescapable framework leaves little room for resistance to the hegemony and patriarchy, Butler develops concepts of performativity with an eye to how they can be used to resist and alter hegemonic structures. Like West and Zimmerman, Butler believes that the gendering structures of language affect people at a stage so early that they're nearly inescapable. She argues that when a child is born, s/he is inducted into the linguistic system of gender and thus gendered before s/he is even aware of it: "Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he,' and in that naming the girl is 'girled,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender" (1993, p. 7).

However, in Butler's view these gendered systems are not as stable as "Doing gender" argues. For her, gender is a "social temporality," constructed over time through repeat performances. Thus, it is something that can be broken apart, reconfigured, and used purposefully: "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a deformity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction" (1990, p. 179). Butler does not argue that gender is necessarily arbitrary because it is constructed, but that its constructed nature allows for shifts in representation that determinist or essentialist views do not. Such efforts to
destabilize hegemonic, binary constructions of gender are the "gender trouble" of her earlier book.

However, a number of criticisms of Gender Trouble would arise, particularly the idea that performativity is highly voluntary and always resistant. Butler's later work Bodies that Matter addresses these criticisms. In this second work on gender and performance, Butler clarifies and questions her previous arguments, coming to the conclusion that performance is indeed not always voluntary, and can serve to affirm rather than question hegemonic gender ideals. One of her more compelling examples is her discussion of drag queens, which raises questions about the "direction" of resistant performance and hearkens back to her discussion of performance and parody in Gender Trouble. Drag parodies hegemonic gender structures, but that does not make it automatically resistant:

At its best, then, drag can be read for the way in which hyperbolic norms are dissimulated as the heterosexual mundane. At the same time these same norms, taken not as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be "cited," twisted, queered, brought into relief as heterosexual imperatives, are not, for that reason, necessarily subverted in the process. (1993, p. 237)

Ultimately, she argues that performativity doesn't create a direct opposition to structures, but provides a way in which existing structures can be and are reconfigured, drawing on "resources inevitably impure" (1993, p. 241) to build anew.

However, the question remains: can we simply throw away the body and attribute gender construction entirely to discourse? Much of Butler's work – particularly Gender Trouble – makes a concerted effort to divorce issues of gender from the physical body and physical sex. Hence the idea of performance and the focus on social construction, which – unlike an elemental, immutable embodied sex – allows for
resistance. That being said, a number of feminist scholars have effectively argued that the body cannot simply be thrown away when it comes to considering issues of gender. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2005), for example, uses osteoporosis as a way to emphasize how biological issues – issues of the physical body – have an impact. She argues that many of the medical antecedents of osteoporosis, such as diet and living conditions, have cultural impacts related to gender, race, and social class. Thus the body and cultural construction come together. As cultural constructs encourage certain body-influencing behaviors related to gender, medical problems such as osteoporosis arise from those constructed populations, and the medical issue itself then becomes tied to that identity group (in this case, women over a certain age) in the public imaginary.

On a similar note, Schrock, Reid, and Boyd (2005) explore the relationship between transwomen and their bodies and bodywork. For the transsexuals they spoke with, part of the process of their transition involved "retraining the body" (p. 321). Learning how to be women from both social contract and mass media, for these particular people, involved a series of embodied practices, ranging from the right way to choose colors and wear makeup to finding the right tone of voice to speak with and be identified as a woman. Ultimately, they believe "our data indicate that theories of gender should include the material and experiencing body… while our findings support the postmodernist claim that sex is socially constructed and that the sex/gender distinction has shortcomings, gender should not be considered as disembodied" (p. 330). What these researchers are speaking about is the idea that while gender is discursive and both created and understood through social contact, the body presents a persistent and important material condition that affects that. When Schrock, Reid, and Boyd assert gender should
not be considered "disembodied," they are arguing for an acknowledgment of the potential impact of bodywork on the eventual gender performance.

Another caveat in the use of performance as a theoretical framework comes from Risman (2004), who argues for a conception of gender as a social structure, something working on a variety of levels and intersecting with other identities and categories as it is performed. One of her calls is for a greater examination of intersectionality of gender with other such structures, though she warns specifically against focusing only on intersections: "I do not agree, however, with an operational strategy for scholarship that suggests the appropriate analytic solution is to only work within an intersectionality framework" (p. 443). Rather, Risman calls on scholars to examine the unique factors of various intersecting structures, but also to realize how individual intersections affect people. To focus on either exclusively is to miss out. At base, what Risman argues for is an examination of why people make particular performative choices; this focus on the choices of social actors resonates well with the above discussion of digital games as an interactive form.

This study considers performance from all of these angles; it accepts Butler's claim that identity categories are constructed discursively through repeated practice, but also recognizes the calls of scholars who have argued that ignoring materiality eliminates a critical dimension from the equation. Thus while the focus can and should remain on the discursive, this literature makes it clear that material conditions of play and performance must be accounted for. Similarly, it is not enough to examine only the performance relevant to the study – in this case, gamer identity. As Risman argues, it is
also critical to consider how other identity categories might intersect with that performance as well.

Player types, player performances?

This begs the question: how have scholars already conceived notions of performativity as it relates to gameplay? While literature that explores games from a performance perspective is not widespread, there are some studies that examine how different aspects of play – online avatars, social context of play, playstyle – contribute to the ways in which players create and manage self concept.

Burrill (2008), for example, describes how various aspects of game play come together to create a stage on which players (specifically males, as his focus is on masculinity) perform gender. In part, he does discuss the most common locus of performance, the player-controlled avatar, but he also notes how even the physical setting – in his case, Sony's Metreon in San Francisco – shapes and molds that performance as well. From a performative standpoint, Burrill argues that games provide a space where masculinity can be performed without risk of harm or "real" consequences.

Walkerdine (2006) does similar work, examining how young girls playing video games in a social setting perform femininity. She discusses how both the traditional video game subject, as well as the act of playing games, have masculine codes and that the context of game play – particularly social game play – presents difficulties for young girls. It is an activity the girls clearly enjoy, but because it challenges socially accepted notions of feminine performance, that play is problematic. An important question she raises, however, is why those feminine performances are “pathologized” (p. 535) but that
male aggression is not; Walkerdine asks us, in part, to examine the potential problematics of what masculine performative behaviors are rewarded or not interrogated.

This idea of the management of gender in gameplay situations has been explored in other research as well. Consalvo and Harper (2009) spoke with women players of two online role-playing games, *Age of Conan* and *World of Warcraft*, about the issue of equipment, appearance, and avatars in those games. What many of the women noted was that while they could realize the sexist aspects of some equipment and avatar features (for example, idealized female bodies or pieces of armor that are full coverage on a male avatar, but a metal bikini on a female one), for them it was just another part of the experience, one to be tolerated or endured. In particular, they noted that in many play contexts, such as advanced play like "raiding" dungeons in group play, the appearance of equipment becomes irrelevant: only the statistics matter. One participant likened them to work clothes: functional, worn for a reason, and with less of a focus on aesthetics.

On a related front, Thornham (2008) performed an ethnography of game-playing households, looking specifically to the influence of identity on their social play. She noted that perceptions and performances of identities among the people in those households during their social interactions also affected the way they played games socially as well. For example, a desire not to be considered a "geek" contributed to many members of the various households playing only in a social setting rather than alone. Thus an identity performance (or attempt to avoid embodying one) has an inevitable impact on how and when those players interact with games as a medium. In the end, Thornham notes, "my point has been to argue that gaming is also a negotiation with the
power dynamics of the home, and included into this are further issues about the position of the home and the domestic sphere within socio-cultural perceptions" (p. 140).

What many of the above studies deal with is the influence of identity – particularly gender – on social play. For Walkerdine and Burrill, this is primarily about the male coding of the activity. Women who play are subject to particular social responses – often negative ones – when they enter into social play of digital games. Because games are so strongly considered a male pursuit, playing them socially has negative consequences for women (but, as Walkerdine notes, not always for men). The online RPG players Consalvo and Harper spoke with use both the customization of their avatars and certain opinions about what aspects of the game are for – such as equipment – to manage their participation in an activity that's not only male-coded, but often outright sexist. Thornham's players did something very similar: they altered their methods and contexts of play in order to associate with one performance (the social player) rather than another (the solitary geek).

On the other hand, Consalvo (2009a) steps away from performativity and identity and instead applies it to play style. She speaks on the Nintendo DS game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, a courtroom simulation game, and in particular how the game offers two ways of proceeding: a riskier style, where the player dives into court cases with the threat of failure looming, or a more conservative style where the player can make frequent restart points. The former style is more immersive, with fewer "breaks" in the player's engagement, while the latter is a "safer" way to go about things. For Consalvo both of these styles are legitimate; what is important is that the player's choices in both scenarios reflect an orientation toward play that is performed through actual in-
game choices. Players can experiment with styles, alter and change them, and in the process the concept of who that person is as a player is produced.

However, there are other ways in which players can embody a player identity that are not necessarily tied to interface with the game but which are still focused on aspects of play. Simon (2007) describes the uses and motivation of case mods – alterations to a computer case that are decorative, functional, or most typically both – among PC gamers, particularly attendees of LAN events. In that context, case mods are a way to perform a number of different ideal identities for the modder; as he puts it, "[w]hat started as a practical solution for cooling overclocked systems has become, among gamer-modders, a means of self-expression and, importantly, a means of demonstrating machine knowledge and skill" (p. 187). The mods can show off an artistic skill through aesthetic beauty, but it can also show off expertise and knowledge through a beneficial effect on computer or by the fact that specialized knowledge and skill is required to create one in the first place. Simon is quick to point out, however, that a case mod cannot only be artistic: "a crucial component of a quality case mod is not only that it works but that it works well in terms of computer performance" (p. 190). What is interesting about this is that it highlights the importance of technical knowledge and skill as part of the performance.

One particular LAN event – a Swedish event called DreamHack – was the focus of Taylor and Witkowski's (2010) research on how such events can inform game studies research. Much like Simon's case mods, they describe personal areas on the event floor as spaces where a person's identity is on display as part of the social process. For example, they talk about the juxtaposition of a player in her space playing first-person shooter
Counterstrike, only for her to close the game and reveal a desktop picture of Twilight character Edward Cullen; the picture struck them "because it was not simply yet another pop culture picture but, by being one of a particular young and, to many, desirable male actor, it was a very clear sign of a kind of traditional girl culture being projected 'on one's own' into this massive public gaming space and done so in a highly visible and personal way" (p. 6). The idea of spectatorship is quite strong in their findings; part of the LAN event is not just being in the presence of play, but opening up one's own play activities and context – something that, like the Edward desktop image, is typically not for public consumption – to public scrutiny.

The question rises, however, of what types of gamer identities and performances are already extant, particularly those based on playstyle rather than other identity categories? One of the most famous and durable player typologies was put forth by Bartle (1996) in his examination of MUD (multi-user dungeon) players. He argued that players could be broadly categorized based on their major preferred in-game activity. Players who were most interested in contact with other players and social interaction he dubbed Socialisers, for example, while players who focused on acquiring trophies, points, goals, and statistics were Achievers. Bartle suggested a number of areas where the demographics of type on a particular MUD would even influence the game's structure (for example, a high percentage of Socialisers would bring in more new players).

Though useful in a broad sense, Bartle's typology has some issues. Yee (2007) argues that it's never been empirically tested, for example; in attempting to do so with a sample of massively multiplayer online (MMO) game players, he found that a player's play motivations – the things that make up Bartle's types – do not necessarily suppress
each other. Thus someone who has an interest in achievement (an Achiever) is not necessarily proscribed from being a socially-minded player (a Socialiser).

The question this leaves – and one which this study is designed to explore – is if and how players move between types and motivations depending on the context of play. Certainly, the power gamers described by Taylor (2006) and the instrumental cheaters described by Consalvo (2007) do this; both of these cases are not focused on expressed goals, but rather on sets of routinized practices that speak to an orientation toward play. Thus an examination of how players perform gaming identities should consider both routine and instrumental play, as well as both normative and instrumental orientations toward play. Play is both something that happens in the moment – an actual experiential act – and inside various contexts, including the player's opinion of what play should be; the "notion of what pure play looks like" that characterizes the clash Taylor describes between power gamers and casual players (2006, p. 90). What player "types" can provide us with is a starting point for examining the performance of gamer identities.

Though the above research approaches it from two directions – one about identity categories such as gender, and one about expressing a game-focused identity – what is clear in both cases is that the stances toward games and gameplay that players adopt are often embodied in sets of practice. Be it Thornham's observing players being social to avoid the stigma of being a lone gamer, or Simon's case modders, altering the technology of play to display expertise and devotion, the players in the scenarios above include attitudes toward play as an activity as part of their management of identity performance.
Research questions

Having established the research context for this study, I now wish to return to my research questions as they were expressed in the introduction, and for each, offer some of the ways in which this research context will guide and direct inquiry exploring each:

• How do ways of playing intersect with the performance of identity?

In considering this question, there are a number of critical points to consider. Performativity is about systems of repeated behavior, particularly discursive behavior, that create a way of understanding the self and one's place in society and culture. Scholars in game studies have examined how the practice of play and the social context of play both lead to certain patterns of behavior related to identity. Thus, in examining how play practice, normative play, and social play intersect with identity performance, it is critical to look at the material condition of play (the rules that make up the game and the environment in which it is played), the social condition of play (where, when, with whom, and even why games are played), and the actual acts of play itself (the choices regarding the game that players make).

• How do ways of playing affect social interaction, particularly in the context and formation of gamer culture and gaming communities?

Performances do not occur in a vacuum. Because they are discursive, they take place in the context of social interaction, and are subject to the institutions that affect that interaction. The research on social play suggests that alongside the actual elements of play, a critical issue is how the social group views the nature of play: why are we playing? What is the purpose of this activity? To examine social play, it is necessary not
only to look at literal play and its context, but also how social situations encourage or
discourage certain types of play. What are the ways in which social play constructs
institutional norms, and how do those norms then go on to influence individual and group
play decisions?

- How do players negotiate their identity performance in different gaming
  contexts?

Finally, performances are not static. If a player can be an Achiever and a
Socialiser at the same time, why might s/he move between frames, as Fine and Juul argue
they do in the context of social play? Beyond the matter of player identity, how can other
identity categories lead to shifting performances, such as the women MMO players who
recognize but suppress their feelings toward sexist game elements in order to focus on the
experience? Examining the reasons that players may change the way they play socially in
different contexts can thus also prove enlightening about their expectations about play,
and the expectations about play that are held by the social context in which play is
occurring.

In the next chapter, I outline the methodological and philosophical frameworks
used in pursuing this research. In particular, I describe the qualitative nature of the study,
and explore the three research sites used to answer the research questions discussed
above.
Chapter 3

Methodology and research frameworks

As a number of the scholars whose work is discussed above have indicated, digital game play – particularly social play – is a fundamentally experiential thing. To examine it, simply looking at the text itself isn't sufficient. Taylor (2006, also Taylor & Witkowski, 2010) used ethnography and participant observation to get at the heart of social play in both MMOs and at large social events such as LAN parties. Consalvo (2007) used interviewing to explore the role of cheating in play. Thornham (2008) and Kolos (2010) used participant observation to better understand the dynamics of play and identity inside groups participating in social play. My own previous work (Harper, 2007) used observation and focus groups to identify how players understood and contextualized the gameplay experience.

What all of these studies have in common is a focus not solely on the text, nor solely on the players; instead, the two are considered intertwined and a combination of methods tells the picture of the experience as a whole. In short, they take a primarily phenomenological approach, examining various aspects of the phenomenon of social play in order to paint a picture of what that experience is like as evidenced through the lived experience of players and fans. In this chapter, I outline the philosophical and methodological roots of this research, then describe both the three research sites from which data were collected – observations at the EVO 2009 tournament, interviews with fighting game fans, and local observation of social play – and the methods used to obtain data at each site.
Phenomenological inquiry

Broadly speaking, this research takes a phenomenological approach to studying social gameplay, both as a performance and an activity. As a framework, phenomenology is primarily concerned with the essence of phenomena: what are their structures? More importantly, how do participants in the phenomena experience the structures and expressions of those phenomena? The focus of phenomenological inquiry on lived experiences (Creswell, 1998) makes it perfectly suited for research on performativity, which (as has been previously stated) is itself a paradigm that considers how identities are constructed and reconstructed through iterations and everyday actions. In the case of this research, the phenomenon in question is digital game play, particularly social game play.

Because phenomenology is a study of lived experience, the experiences of the researcher play an active role in both originating and interpreting the research. Speaking on the researcher’s experience as a starting point, van Manen argues:

It is to the extent that my experiences could be our experiences that the phenomenologist wants to be reflectively aware of certain experiential meanings. To be aware of the structure of one's own experience of a phenomenon may provide the researcher with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all other stages of phenomenological research. (p. 57, emphasis in original)

In short, by starting with one's own understanding of how a phenomenon is experienced, the researcher can get an idea of where to begin studying it. Certainly, in the instance of this study, my own experiences as a lifetime gamer and a casual fan of fighting games were part of the process of understanding this study. As a player of Smash Bros. and Street Fighter since their earliest days, I found behavior such as that noted in the first chapter – the "Fox only, Final Destination, no items" meme, for example – confusing and
strange. Attempting to understand why players might make those gameplay decisions was a motivating factor that shaped this study.

As a researcher close to the subject and with a history with games divergent from serious fighting game play, performing this sort of research meant walking a tightrope in some respects. On the one hand, my knowledge of terms, ideas, and texts provided me with an advantage of access and understanding; on the other hand, that knowledge presented the possibility that I would accept what I already know as the truth and not ask vital questions that could provide insight into the phenomenon itself. My efforts to balance my position as a gamer with my desire not to let my experiences crowd out the lived experience of the people I was studying combined maximizing the benefit of my experience as a gamer with minimizing the effect of my past experiences coloring interpretation.

For example, there are a number of terms and concepts with which I, as a gamer and a fighting game fan, am familiar with. During interviews, I tried to convey a sense of uncertainty when I asked about those terms, to suggest that I was in the know but that I was also interested in the unique definition specific to that respondent's context. One such term is "main," which refers to the character a given player focuses on or plays most often. When asking about what a player's "main" was I would often use verbiage such as "is that the right term?". The definitions I received often questioned or expanded on what I thought I knew, and helped to enrich my understanding of the phenomenon. By making what I already knew strange, I opened doors to interpreting it in new ways. However, that knowledge also enabled me access that I might not have otherwise obtained. Henry Jenkins (2006), speaking on his position as an "aca-fan" and the tension involved in
negotiating being both a scholar and a fan of something, noted "[t]o me, the essence of being methodologically self-conscious is to be honest with how you know what you know" (p. 6). My history as a gamer gave me a vocabulary and a sense of terms, but I was also aware that my understanding of those terms came from experiences different from the people I was speaking with.

Should the observer/researcher should take a detached position, or become more active in the phenomenon (participant observation)? My own previous work with observing players took the former stance, with me as the researcher minimizing influence on the actual gameplay of the participants. However, as previously noted, Thornham, Kolos, and Taylor all took more hands-on, participant observer positions in their research. Consalvo's (2007) notion of the gaming paratext also complicates the idea of what "participant observation" means in this instance; for example, I consume many of the same texts as the players I studied, but am not part of their community. Both participant and more detached observation models presented different benefits and drawbacks in this scenario. As a participant at, for example, the EVO tournament, I would be able to experience the etiquette of matches and styles of play firsthand, but broader reactions to what was going on would be lost on me.

However, it is important to consider that the process of this research was, as previously noted, a continual tightrope walk, balancing the need not to let my preconceived notions overwhelm what I was seeing, and understanding that my subject position as a gamer and a fan presented opportunities and analytical avenues to me that it might not for other researchers. Similarly, I was both similar to and different from the fighting game players I would be interacting with. I knew much of the jargon and the
body of texts, but I am not a "serious" fighting game player. As I said in the introduction, part of the motivation for this research was the realization that there was a style of play quite different from my own. Thus I was both an insider in some ways, and an outsider in others. Being a fan gave me an in when it came to terms and concepts, but not being this specific type of fan may have contributed to my difficulty in recruiting interviewees. It's also important to note that the perception of me as an insider or an outsider could and likely did have an effect on the ways that interviewees presented their experiences to me. For example, the perception of me as an outsider, and a community perception of the press as insincere and lacking in genuine interest (see ch. 5) may have resulted in participants painting a more PR-friendly image of the fighting game community.

Over the process of attending EVO, interviewing fighting gamers, and watching players locally, I made a series of conscious decisions to maintain a certain degree of distance, choosing to observe and minimize my interference on events. In part, this was based on acknowledging my own habits and style of play as a gamer; I knew that if I let myself get involved in actual gameplay, there was a good chance I would stop paying attention to wider aspects of the entire experience. If an attendee at EVO asked if I was interested in playing – as one did – the question arose, would I be properly attendant to all aspects of what was going on, or too focused on winning the game? Based on self-evaluation, the latter seemed likely, and so I declined.

On the other hand, I wasn't able to experience for myself what a tournament match felt like as a player. What kind of physical and emotional responses does engaging in that playstyle produce? It became obvious after the fact, as I analyzed my data, that to understand the essence of the phenomenon in a rich and nuanced way, actual
participation is an important aspect that I was missing. While my more distanced stance still provided useful and rich data, it left out a range of aspects of the experience in the process; future research in a similar vein would do well to keep that in mind.

Data gathering: observation and interviews

Following from the phenomenological framework, one of the primary methods of data collection used was observation, which focuses on authentic experiences and natural settings to get a broad picture of the links between actors and the social and phenomenological context in which they occur (Jorgensen, 1989; Mason, 2002; Bertrand & Hughes, 2005). Past work using observation (Walkerdine, 2006; Harper, 2007) has shown it to be extremely useful for examining gameplay as it happens; it is relatively unobtrusive and thus has a diminished impact on the players, and it allows the researcher to examine both game events and the actions of players that cause them to occur. However, as noted in chapter 6, non-participant observation – particularly in a situation where the people being observed are strangers to each other – can also contribute to a feeling of artificiality for the people involved as well.

In order to round out the picture that observations provided, I conducted in-depth interviews with fighting game players. These interviews provided an opportunity for interrogating events or concepts uncovered by the observation. Interviewing in particular was useful for exploring themes in-depth that may not be practical or plausible to explore during an observation, particularly in a gameplay situation where questions from the researcher may not only be seen as intrusive, but may also significantly disrupt the natural flow of play. Combined, the two methods help to satisfy the phenomenological
methodology of inquiry by triangulating the sources of various behaviors and norms, ferreting out the narratives behind social behaviors, and generally identifying what it is like to be a "serious fighting gamer."

Below, I identify the three sites of my research, describe them in detail, and identify the procedures involved in recruiting participants and collecting and interpreting data.

The Evolution 2009 fighting game tournament

My initial research site was a large fighting game tournament held annually, the Evolution tournament. The Evolution Championship Series (or “EVO”) tournament is one of the most long-running and well-known fighting game tournaments in the world. As their website claims, “EVO events bring together the best of the best from around the world in a dazzling exhibition of skill and fun, as players and fans gather to honor the competitive spirit in an open format and determine a champion” (“About Evolution”, 2009, ¶ 1). The EVO tournament brings together players of the fighting game genre – games featuring 1-on-1 combat – in a tournament structure, with typically 4-6 different games by a number of publishers being represented. The major aim of observations at EVO was to identify and explore the ways that fighting game fans interacted, played, and behaved in such a setting. The themes and concepts that were observed then became points of discussion in the interviews with fighting game fans that followed.

According to EVO co-organizer Seth Killian (personal communication, July 17, 2009), the EVO tournament has its origins in casual arcade tournaments for Street Fighter 2 (SF2), one of the earliest titles in the genre. Killian met fellow organizers Tom
and Tony Cannon via online bulletin board (BBS) discussions (or, to use Killian's own words, "arguments;" he gave the impression that these were adversarial – but friendly – discussions, a communication style that would manifest itself at the forums they would eventually found together, Shoryuken.com) about game strategy, play, and tactics for SF2 in 1992. From there they became involved in organizing tournaments at local arcades (such as the Golfland USA in Sunnyvale, CA), then at college campuses, and finally at a single location – Las Vegas – on a yearly basis. Since that point, EVO has become one of, if not the, premiere tournament for fighting games in the United States, and it attracts players not only from across the country, but around the world; the participants in the finals alone included Americans, Japanese, and French competitors. When I spoke to Killian at the event, he indicated that the EVO tournament – including its rules, structure, and culture – is in many ways an attempt to recreate the "feel" of arcade competition.

The event itself is free to observers, but participating in the actual sanctioned tournaments involves a small entry fee for each game; the EVO tournament itself is actually 6 smaller tournaments for six individual games that are described in more detail in chapter 1. During the first two days of the tournament, players fight in elimination matches – called "pool matches" – in a double elimination style: a loss places the competitor in the loser's bracket, and a loss in the loser's bracket means elimination. The top 8 players to emerge from the semifinals then play in the finals. These last matches were played on the main screen and take up all of the third day, compared to the pool bouts which are fought on TV monitors spaced around the room. The top three placers in each final tournament win a percentage of the entry fee totals for that game as prize money, with the top player taking 70%, the second place taking 20%, and the third place
taking 10%. The EVO event stretched over three days, taking place at the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada in early July, 2009. There were also two unofficial side tournaments held on site: one for Nintendo's *Smash Bros. Brawl* and one for newly-released fighting game *Blazblue*. Additional space in the hall allowed attendees to set up their own consoles and play whatever games they wished (the "bring your own console" or "BYOC" section) during days one and two.

As is discussed in more detail in the chapters to follow, the EVO tournament featured two days where there were a number of different activities and spaces, and a third day with a decidedly greater focus on the final matches. Accordingly, my data collection strategy was different on the first and second days compared to the third. On days 1 and 2, I primarily wandered the floor, moving from place to place and following whatever things I observed that seemed to catch my attention. Accordingly, I ranged from watching tourney fighters in pool matches, to players trying the "test builds" of unreleased games at demonstration booths, to groups of attendees setting up impromptu LAN parties on the convention room floor. The goal was to get an idea of the range of interests, activities, and expressions of being a fighting gamer that were in evidence at EVO. While I did speak with some individuals – and was approached by interested or curious parties – for the most part I tried not to intrude too strongly, being content to ask simple questions about what was going on when I was near to something of interest.

Day three, with its focus on the finals, had a different atmosphere, and my strategy for data gathering shifted accordingly. Rather than flit between items of interest, I divided my attention between the actual play of the games shown on the big screen monitor, and observing the crowd and their reactions to play. As a member of the crowd
it was much easier to speak with attendees about what was going on, and on day three I often made an effort to ask people sitting nearby about things that I didn't understand.

Over the three days of the tournament event I attended and collected field notes on what I observed. Drawing on my notes and photos from the three day event, I constructed a list of themes, behaviors of interest, and events that both characterized EVO itself and provided structure for my interviews with fighting game players. In particular, I looked for aspects of the experience that were not well understood, so that I could explore those in more detail during in-depth interviews. However, I also made an effort to be aware of things I felt I understood, so that I could examine the ways in which EVO was either consonant or dissonant with my experience, which would also inform my questions in the interviews.

In-depth interviews: EVO attendees and fighting game enthusiasts

While the observations made at EVO provided an introduction to the ways in which fighting gamers play and interact socially, they did not paint a complete picture of the phenomenon. Many of the observations made at EVO suggested a number of questions and topics for inquiry that the EVO data alone didn't answer. Why were players of Hilde in *SC4* nearly booed out of the venue? Why were arcade stick controllers so ubiquitous? To answer these questions, I used the thematized data from my observations to construct a list of broad questions, and beginning in August 2009, I began recruiting respondents from various online fighting game communities to participate in in-depth interviews to explore those themes.
Initially, I used two major online fighting game forums – Shoryuken.com (SRK) and Smashboards – to recruit, asking for attendees of EVO 2009 who were interested in speaking about their experiences at the tournament. However, the response rate was exceptionally low; by November 2009, I was able to secure a mere three respondents for actual interviews. In order to broaden the response base, the recruiting call was revised to include all fighting game fans over the age of 18, rather than only those who had attended EVO, and in February 2010 I also received permission to offer an additional monetary incentive for participation in the form of a $20 gift card for online vendors such as Xbox Live Marketplace and the Playstation Network.

It is unclear why fans were so unwilling to respond, but broaching the subject with some respondents provided some interesting insights. One theory, particularly in regards to the forum community at SRK, is that an influx of forum "newbies" and journalists corresponding to the release of Street Fighter 4 in 2009 had put longtime community fans on the defensive, making them unwilling to respond to such calls. Since I had little to no contact with the community before that point, I was an outsider to that culture and likely was perceived as such. The community at SRK in particular – as discussion surrounding the "09er phenomenon" in chapter 5 identifies – can be quite insular in this regard. It may be that had I made a greater effort to present myself as an insider who was familiar with the culture, the response rate might have been higher. However, it is equally possible – especially given the nature of the 09er phenomenon – that my claim to insider status would have been challenged or dismissed. It's not immediately clear which approach would have yielded better results, or if either would
have, but future research of this nature should carefully consider the benefits and
drawbacks of presenting oneself as a sympathetic expert or a less experienced outsider.

In all, ten interviews were conducted over a six month period using a broad
interview schedule constructed from the EVO observations (see appendix A). The
interviews were conducted via voice-over-IP (VoIP) technology, specifically the program
Skype, recorded, and then transcribed. The average length of an interview was
approximately 90 minutes, with one as short as 58 minutes and one as long as two hours.
Participants were recruited through fighting game-focused, forum-based online
communities, primarily SRK, 8 Way Run.com (8WR), and Smashboards. Each of these
communities has a somewhat different focus, in terms of games played, ranging from the
highly specific (Smashboards, which are more or less entirely devoted to the Super
Smash Bros. series of games) to the relatively general (SRK, where discussion ranged on
a variety of games, though mostly those released by developer/publisher Capcom). SRK
provided the highest number of participants: 6 of the total 10. However, the games played
by those interviewed ranged considerably despite that fact, covering highly popular
current console games such as Street Fighter 4 to lesser-known Japanese import titles like
Arcana Heart that have relatively low distribution in the U.S.

I reviewed, analyzed, and thematized data (in the form of transcripts and
recordings), both in the context of unresolved questions from the EVO observations, and
also in relationship to each other. As Nelson (1989, pp. 234-235) notes about the
thematizing process, "[t]he aim is not to determine if there is consensus about experience,
nor is it to find out why persons do what they do. Rather, phenomenology is concerned
with the meaning structure of experience as a lived logic." Accordingly, the goal in
interpreting the experiences described to me in the interviews was not about finding things that were the same across every respondent, but to identify the personal aspects of the lived experience that each described.

Though recruiting difficulties made for fewer interviews than were desired, I reached the point of saturation – where patterns in the data began to repeat themselves – relatively quickly; by the time I was approaching the final interviews, the answers I was receiving to questions had a very narrow range of variability. The broad thematic areas identified in both observations at EVO and the in-depth interviews are reflected in the focus areas of chapters 4, 5, and 6: the environment and circumstance of play, social play, and the practice and norms of gameplay. Within each of those larger themes, smaller areas of consideration presented themselves, and these more specific areas make up the discussion of findings in each of those chapters.

All ten interviews were with men; even among those who expressed initial interest in being interviewed and then stopped contact, only one woman responded. This isn't particularly surprising – men are disproportionately represented among gamers in general, even more so among fighting gamers in particular. However, it is troubling that no perspectives of women are included here. Future research looking to expand on these findings would do well to expend particular effort in finding women fighting gamers. Respondents ranged in age from 20 to 36, with most respondents in their mid 20's, a range resonant with current estimates on the average age of digital gamers ("Video Games and Violence", 2010).

As previously stated, recruitment of participants proved difficult; the initial request asked for attendees of the EVO tournament to respond, which was eventually
expanded to include all fighting game fans when the response rate was close to zero. Referrals from the initial interviewees provided some additional responses, and a second wave of recruitment posts offering monetary compensation encouraged the final group of respondents.

Social play, experience, and competition: local gameplay observation

One final aspect of the study was a small observational study conducted on the Ohio University campus, to examine one aspect of social play that both the EVO observations and interviews could not: how different social groups and characteristics of players might affect the experience of social play. While EVO did offer opportunities to examine gamers playing socially, for the most part they exhibited shared social values about play, and the enormity of scale at the event meant that intimate examination of individual social gaming scenarios was difficult. While interviewees were able to provide narratives of their gameplay experience, these are fundamentally different – thanks to the subjectivity of memory – than seeing something firsthand.

To that end, I recruited three groups of 3-4 players each from the Ohio University undergraduate and graduate student bodies. An email requesting participants for a study of social game play was sent to all undergrad and graduate students over the age of 18 on the Athens campus, requesting players of all skill levels and backgrounds to be observed for a total of three hours of social gameplay, with each group playing one hour of *Mario Kart Wii*, *Left 4 Dead 2*, and *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*. The initial response rate was exceptionally high (well over 300 responses) compared to the number of needed participants; a filter questionnaire (see appendix B) and a lack of interest on the
part of some respondents cut that pool down by over half. From that reduced pool, 12 students were asked to participate, forming three groups: a beginner's group (non-players, or players who defined themselves as casual or light players), an advanced group (players who self-identified as experienced or hardcore), and a mixed group with some hardcore and some casual players. A second mixed group was planned, but was plagued by constant cancellations and problematic rescheduling, and thus was dropped. Also, after numerous attempts to reschedule and replace a long series of no-shows, the advanced group consisted of three players rather than four, for a total of 11 participants over three groups.

The participant groups consisted of 9 men and 2 women, both of whom were in the beginner group; though initial scheduling included a larger number of women and dispersed them through all three experience groups, cancellations and no-shows reduced the eventual number in the final groups. The beginner group met three separate times for one hour each; the mixed and advanced groups met one time for three hours each. In all three scenarios, I observed the groups play the three games noted previously for roughly an hour each, occasionally interjecting questions about both the observed gaming, and their past experience as social gamers. I then analyzed my field notes, specifically focusing on the ways in which each group played socially, and to what extent the competitiveness or cooperativeness of the games and the experience and investment in gaming of the players impacted how they acted toward each other and toward the games themselves.

The study was conducted in the Games Research and Immersive Design (GRID) Lab on the Ohio University campus, which offers a "gaming center" for use in projects.
such as these. Players were able to sit on provided couches and chairs and played each

game on a large-screen TV; the idea of the GRID Lab game center is that it attempts to
reproduce in some small way the "living room" feel for gameplay, rather than a more
sterile or clinical environment. While I believe this was beneficial in conducting the
study, the lab environment did still contribute to a feeling of artificiality during the study,
which I discuss in more detail in chapter 5.

The goal of this mixed methods approach was to provide multiple ways to
examine the phenomenon, in terms of social expressions of ways of play that are both
large (EVO) and small (observations at the GRID Lab), as well as through the personal
narratives of serious fighting game players. In the next three chapters I examine the three
thematic areas that arose from the analysis of data collected with these methods: the
environment of play, social play, and the practice of play.
Chapter 4

The environment of play

One of the most basic – yet in many ways the most critical – aspects of both the EVO tournament and the fighting game culture as a whole is the environment and circumstances of play. This has many manifestations, from the expressions of gamer culture seen at EVO to the predilection of fighting gamers for using specialized equipment and controllers to engage with the games. Examining the environment of play gives insight into not only into the way these games are played, but also how the people who play them feel they *should* be played; a preferred environment becomes a normative construct, particularly when aspects of the culture not only disperse it across geographical and temporal space, but also when adherence to that environment of play is a badge of membership to the fighting game culture in general.

In this chapter I will establish the observed norms of the ideal play environment among the participants at EVO and the fighting game players that I interviewed. Understanding the base circumstance of play – its technical, material, and normative dimensions – sets the foundation for analysis in the following chapters of both the mores and practices of social play, and how play practice defines the gameplay experience. In many ways this is an echo of critiques to Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and related feminist work that put heavy emphasis on gender as being defined discursively. As many feminist scholars have since argued – Ebert (1992), Butler herself in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Fausto-Sterling (2005), and Schrock, Reid, and Boyd (2005) are only a few examples – even discursively-defined identity can be and is affected by material conditions. Just as many of the issues the above scholars discuss impact the discursive
production of gender, the material conditions of fighting game play influence the ways in which gamer identities are performed among those who play them.

Specifically, the themes discussed in this chapter focus on the notion of the "arcade ideal." Historically, fighting games were played in arcades, or in other venues where arcade games might be found, such as local convenience or corner stores. As home console technology improved and "arcade-faithful" home versions of the games became available – and as the arcade scene in the United States took a downward turn – much play shifted away from the arcade and into the home. However, as both observations at EVO and discussions with fighting gamers bore out, the ideal of the arcade persists as a norm in the culture. This chapter will elaborate on the various ways in which fighting game players attempt to re-create the arcade experience through various material conditions of play. Through their use of (and opinions on) various technologies, and the role those technologies take on in the community, fighting gamers seek to create and recreate a space where the spirit of the arcade as a play environment remains, even if the literal physical space has long since been abandoned in the West.

Basics of the arcade setting

The earliest days of video games were powered by arcade machines: tall, person-height cabinets where players inserted money or tokens to play a digital game. An image common in popular culture is of a large number of boys surrounding an arcade machine, cheering on the current players and being generally rowdy. However, while arcade games still exist in the United States, the number of game arcades has dwindling over time; according to Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter (2003) this decline began
as early the start of the 1980s, spurred by the increasing availability of home gaming consoles. Fighting games, particularly the Street Fighter series, became highly popular in the 1990s despite the decline of arcades (Horwitz, n.d.). Comparatively, in Japan, arcades and gaming centers are still quite popular, and fighting games in particular have a thriving arcade culture there (Ashcraft, 2008). Yet for fans of fighting games, this experience – standing at an arcade machine, surrounded by other players cheering and yelling, fighting an opponent one-on-one in public – remains very salient, even for those players who did not have the chance to experience this firsthand. Echoes of the arcade experience press into the future in the form of the way fighting games are played now, and many of the ways in which current fighting gamers play are designed to recreate the feel of this experience.

As many respondents are in their early to mid twenties, only a few were either about to enter, or had already entered, adolescence when Street Fighter 2: The World Warrior (SF2), the game's first iteration, hit arcades in 1991. Yet many of them describe playing SF2 in the arcade as one of their earliest – if not the earliest – experience they had with fighting games in general. Even players such as Ibrahim (29), who would later in life move on to focus on 3D fighting games such as the Soul Calibur series rather than 2D games like the Street Fighter series, was clear that for him it all started with arcade play of SF2:

Interviewer: Interesting. Back in the Street Fighter 2 days did you mostly play in arcades, or did you play at home, or a combination of both…?

Respondent: Well yeah. At first, for a long time, arcade was the only option, so it wasn’t until it came out on SNES that people were able to play it at home, so for the first three, four years it was exclusively in the arcades.
Interviewer: So you said you played exclusively 2D games for a while, so you started with Street Fighter 2 and the 18 versions of that, I'm guessing.

Respondent: Yeah, yeah.

Gene had a similar experience; he played the Mortal Kombat games in the arcade, only playing SF2 once it came to a home console, but those early arcade experiences with Mortal Kombat helped to spark an interest in fighting games that would eventually lead to his current engagement through the community even as he left Mortal Kombat behind.

Isaac, the oldest respondent at 36, had a strong friendship in his youth with another player, and one of the foundations of their friendship was that they would play SF2 against each other in the arcades while he was in college. Though they have since fallen out of contact, Isaac expressed a desire to get in touch with him again, because of his fond memories of those early days. Evan, too, had a fighting friend and rival in his earliest years playing SF2, which he describes in relative detail:

Started, waited forever to get on and then started playing and then I… probably played there for about… I dunno. A couple years? Through all the different versions, there’s upgrades, Championship Edition and on through, like, Hyper Fighting stuff, and one of my best friends… I really remember meeting him playing Street Fighter there, so we would go there and play and we got pretty good for local players.

In both of these cases, it is the combination of the arcade and a close personal relationship that is the salient memory; the two are strongly linked together. In fact, for Evan, the arcade experience was so formative that he would go on to eventually work in the arcade he played in as a teenager, running fighting game tournaments and encouraging the owner to support fighting games in purchasing decisions. Gene describes going to the arcade after school every day, and even describes "defending" its honor against players from another arcade who came to challenge players there.
However, the decline of the arcade means that not all respondents – particularly the younger ones – had access to arcades; Nicholas, for example, was too young to have played heavily in the arcades in the early days of fighting games, being only 7 when his game of choice – *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo* – was released. Yet even without the actual arcade setting, arcade cabinet play was still a very common "first experience" with fighting games. Jordan notes that his first experiences with fighting games were playing both *Street Fighter 2* and *Mortal Kombat* at a local bowling alley. That being said, Jordan's first identified *meaningful* investment in play came on a home console; specifically, the release of *Street Fighter Zero 3 (Alpha 3 in the U.S.)* in the late 1990s. Then there are players like Garret and Aaron who, while having a small amount of scattered arcade experience, have for the most part been home console players of their chosen games.

As previously discussed, the EVO tournament has strong roots in the arcade tradition. In its earliest days, EVO was primarily an arcade tournament that began in southern California arcades before expansion moved it outwards to increasingly larger venues, and advancing console technology made it possible to play arcade-perfect versions of those arcade games on home consoles such as the Playstation or Xbox. Seth Killian (personal communication, July 17, 2009) stated outright that the EVO tournament itself attempts to capture the feel of the arcade, even now that it's moved to console-based play.

A number of observations made at EVO showed aspects of the arcade environment recreated and reproduced at the event itself. Some of the more interesting examples were those few stations in the bring-your-own-console, free play sections of the
floor, where players brought not just games and televisions or monitors, but entire wooden arcade frames they had constructed themselves to house hardware and give the impression one was playing on an authentic arcade cabinet. Over the course of the event, there were two such places. One involved an attendee set up near the north entrance doors to play the original Street Fighter 2. Another was at the far southern corner of the room and was a collection of 2-3 red-painted cabinets containing a wide variety of games, from old Neo-Geo arcade selections to a version of the X-Men arcade game made by Konami in 1992… notable because it is not a typical fighting game per EVO’s focus, but rather in the related side-scrolling "beat 'em up" genre instead.

As well, the setting itself had strong echoes of the arcade space, with a monitor as a focal point and a cluster of people around it spreading outward from the two (or more) players at the epicenter. Particularly on days 1 and 2, when the elimination pools were still filled with competitors playing through their matches, the relatively intimate setting of the pool booths – a table no more than a person height across with a TV and enough room for two side-by-side chairs – gave rise to batches of small groups together in this mold. Similarly, the bring-your-own-console spaces and even the booths for both Capcom and Namco-Bandai to feature their upcoming and current games were roughly the same: a TV and enough space for a few people to stand close together around it, connected in sequence. These close gathering points, with a small cloud of onlookers centered around the two peoples playing the game, had considerable resonance with the crowds one might find at a game arcade. In the BYOC and test booth areas, even the “I’ve got next” practice, where the next player in line indicates that they will play the winner of the current match, was common.
Yet among all of the players I interviewed, there are aspects of the arcade experience – playing alongside another person in a physical space being watched by a crowd, for example – that are resonant among all of the respondents regardless of their history. Those respondents who had attended tournaments or events like EVO in the past – particularly those who have attended an actual EVO tournament – spoke to their great affection for such situations, where players are gathered together in a physical space to play matches against one another while other enthusiasts are there to watch and take part. Interestingly enough, in describing the Japanese arcade experience, Ashcraft (2008) notes that in Japanese arcades, standing next to the other player side-by-side was a detriment to machine use/coin drop in fighting game cabinets. As he tells it, once arcade managers in Japan developed two linked cabinets that were back to back, so challengers couldn’t look at each other while playing, business took off.

One might wonder why this mode of play, with its emphasis on cohabiting space and playing in person, would be so dominant, particularly in a world where online-capable consoles with arcade-perfect home versions ("ports") of most fighting games are commonplace. Wouldn’t online play offer a better opportunity to fight against many different types of opponents, without the cost and effort involved in finding a physical space to do it in? The answer, almost universally, was that it does not. Although some of the reasons why are related to the technology of online play, many of the reasons that the respondents I spoke to avoid online play – either altogether, or only using it in highly specific circumstances – dealt with its impersonal nature, and the behaviors enabled by anonymity. The arcade ideal of two people face to face in the proverbial ring stands as a contrast to online play; in a world where fighting games can and often are played online,
the players I spoke to not only rejected that mode of play, but have embraced a different one with a far greater resource cost by comparison.

This isn't to say that all the players interviewed eschew online play. Ibrahim noted he still plays online in games that he does not take "seriously," which can easily be read as another way of saying "competitively." Garret actually finds that online matches can be rewarding "if you find good players," but that in the end, "I'd say that playing online is good for learning but not competing. It's much better to be face to face." The general thrust of these statements seems to be that the limitations of online play hold it back, but it's better than nothing. Why might this be?

Lag, nerdrage, and you: the ups and downs of online play

The "easy" reason involves technology. Respondents identified that competitive fighting game play moves at a very quick pace, and that the speed of various in-game moves and techniques is measured in "frames," as in the number of animation frames the motion takes up on-screen. Online play involves a certain degree of inherent lag time, as the information about what each player is doing travels between players. This lag can cause controller inputs to be lost, delayed, or otherwise mistimed, resulting in a less satisfying experience. Ibrahim described it thusly:

   Interviewer: Do you play online, too? At least in terms of like, matches on Xbox Live or Playstation Network, stuff like that?

   Respondent: Uh, I don’t play Calibur online. I do play other games that I don’t take quite as seriously online.

   Interviewer: That’s an interesting phrase. Is it… well, no, I mean, I wanna ask about that. Is there something about the online experience that makes playing a game you take seriously like Soul Calibur 4 distasteful, compared to…
Respondent: Not distasteful, but like I was saying, the frames make a difference, and fighting games online inherently will lose a couple of frames just sending information back and forth. So, the timing required to play online is different from the timing required to play offline, so if I get acclimated to that online laggy type of play, when I try to transition back to offline to play at tournaments, I will get destroyed.

Aaron described the online play experience in his favored game, *Tatsunoko vs. Capcom* (**TvC**) as if he were "playing against the system, not the other player." The general feeling in these scenarios isn't necessarily that playing online itself is terribly onerous, but that the way the technology works has an adverse effect on the experience. This idea – particularly the potential for dropped frames/inputs and the effect it might have on a match – is explored more fully later in the discussion of how play practice defines the game experience. In short, however, the concern is that in a situation where precise timing is required, any negative impact on that is a risk.

However, concerns about online play stretch beyond simple technology issues. Some respondents noted that there is a substantial difference in behavior between many of the players they meet in online games compared to the opponents they find in "real life" venues. These negative experiences online involved players who were poor losers, poor sports, and generally those who used the semi-anonymity of internet play in order to break a code of good sportsmanship that the respondents typically embrace.

Certainly, this isn't a new thing in online competition or social gaming; Ian Shanahan (2004) describes a situation where not only was another player patently racist and offensive in the context of online anonymous play, but also did it to gain a tactical advantage in a *Star Wars*-themed lightsaber duel game. Tracy Kennedy (2009), writing about the effect of social play and harassment on women Xbox Live gamers, cites a
number of unnerving stories where the online environment led to poor sportsmanship based on gender perception. One of her participants describes a game of Halo 2 where, having been identified as a woman through speaking in voice chat, was then systematically "camped" – singled out and repeatedly killed – by a male player she had previously had a more equitable playing relationship with.

Jeff in particular had a number of stories about his experiences playing Marvel vs. Capcom 2 (MvC2 or simply Marvel) over Microsoft's Xbox Live service. He described scenarios where his opponents were openly hostile over voice chat; Xbox Live includes a feature where if both players have compatible headsets (included with the console) they can talk while playing. The other player, who was losing, became openly hostile and attacked Jeff verbally:

Interviewer: And, uh, you had said he was kind of being… was he being a jerk? Like, you’d said that he was sounding really mad because he was losing, but.

Respondent: He… he was getting very upset; the term – I’ll borrow it from World of Warcraft – they call it “nerdrage.” Just where someone is just getting extremely upset over a video game, and <coughing> excuse me, sorry. To his credit, he kept coming back two or three times before he quit, which is good. I mean, that’s showing that he’s… maybe not even, I don’t know what his reason was, but I hope it’s ‘cause he was trying to get better, but he was just screaming at me the whole time, and, you know… “You’re garbage!”, “You’re trash, man, you’re terrible!”", “Like, that was terrible!” and I’m like “Dude… I’m terrible but I’m winning. What does that mean you are? I don’t understand. Like, are you trying to hurt my feelings, or…?” The amount of stuff that he was saying was really amusing.

Isaac described similar experiences while playing online, mentioning encountering his share of sore losers and hate mail as well, though he brushed off the idea that this presents a serious issue: “Now I’m polite, when I play against people, and you know, when I lose, I lose, and I’m gracious about it, and the
people who are sore losers, well, all they’re gonna do is send me a nasty message, right? Big deal… and if they live in China or they live in Wisconsin, who knows where they are, and they don’t know who I am.”

Interestingly, neither of these players seemed to shy away from online play because of the behavior of other players. Both Jeff and Isaac expressed that they’ve had some encouraging and fun play over XBox Live, as did Garrett. Their descriptions of their encounters with sore losers seem to be less about explaining their distaste for online play than about their dislike for sore losers who use the relative anonymity of online play to lambaste their opponents. In some cases, dislike is less accurate than “outright amusement;” Jeff’s tone especially conveyed that he was telling amusing stories about people he sees as silly or foolish.

Issues of lag are presented as considerably more serious barriers to online play than bad behavior from anonymous opponents. Consalvo (2009b) identifies lag as one of three types of "noise" in online play – the other two being more linguistic, such as language and jargon barriers – that affects communication. Specifically, she refers to the ability of lag to disrupt temporality, so that different people experience events that are expected to be simultaneous at different times and speeds. The effect on an online fighting game match is effectively the same; rather than experiencing the event as continuous and smooth, it becomes choppy and disjointed.

Again, however, the suggestion is that while online play is flawed – either technologically or socially – it’s better than nothing at all. What this points to is that there
is a preferred context for the fighting game experience, and one can begin to understand what makes up that preferred context by considering what online play offers and what it does not. The reservations considered here point to some of the things that players desire but do not get out of online play: smooth, uninterrupted control of the game, being in the physical presence of your opponent, and having a sense of good sportsmanship rather than being a sore loser.

Conversely, what are some of the benefits of online play that make it worth enduring these shortcomings? Isaac, continuing from his comment above, gives some insight there: online play “satisfies [his] requirement for fighting people who play better than I do, and playing with… and more importantly, what the online feature has much more than arcades do, is that you’re guaranteed to run into a much more variety of players [sic].” Nicholas described a situation in where he was able, thanks to online play, to fight against a player he might never have a chance to face off against in person:

Respondent: And so I ran into [a Street Fighter 2 Super Turbo] game [on XBox Live], and then I went to Dhalsim, and then the loading screen showed me I was fighting against a Dictator player, and I had heard about… there’s this guy named Yuu Vega in Japan, and he’s one of the top Dictator players, M. Bison players… he’s known as M. Bison in the USA but we just call him Dictator.

Interviewer: Right.

Respondent: Yeah, he’s a Dictator player in Japan, and it’s first of three rounds and so, what happened was, I got him dizzy in the first round, but you know that… Dhalsim has the Yoga Flame trap on Dictator in ST, and my execution was off just a little bit, so he was able to get out and kill me, and second round I managed to get him in the corner again but my execution was off again and so he got out and killed me, and the third round he perfected me. He did Psycho Magic in the corner and Touch of Death and I was done.

Interviewer: So you were… you were actually fighting this top-ranked player from Japan.
Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: What was that experience like? Was it any different for you? Did you see his name and go “OMG!” and then just kind of…

Respondent: (laughs) Actually, yeah, that is kind of what happened.

Interviewer: (laughs)

Respondent: I was like… I lost, but I was really happy about it. Like, I might never get that opportunity in my life, to go play Yuu Vega, and it was really him, I could tell. I might have caught him off guard at first but he just totally wrecked me. In Japan, the tournament standard is best of one game, so… they have to be on point every time or otherwise that’s it.

Thus for all its flaws, online play in this instance was worth it. It provided the opportunity for a match that otherwise would likely never have happened; much as Ryder & Wilson (1996) suggest about internet technology and education, the online capability offers a set of affordances that offline play doesn’t, enabling certain opportunities that might otherwise be missed. What this suggests – in Nicholas’ case, at least – is that these rare opportunities to fight challenging and experienced opponents are worth putting up with the inherent flaws. Though the ideal would be to face them outside that context, the opportunity is enough to make it tolerable or even desirable.

In a different vein, online play also provided opportunities for some players to attempt to bring players “into the fold,” so to speak. Jeff described a situation where he was actually able to turn a sore loser around by reaching out to him:

Last night another guy I played against, I picked Sentinel, Cable, and… someone else, and right away he’s on the mic complaining, he’s all “Oh, you’re picking Sentinel. Oh, I’m so surprised,” and I was like “Alright, dude, whatever,” and then later on in the match I hit him with this combo with Cable that should have been really easy to block, if you know what you’re doing, and I told him, I said, “Hey, dude, I know you got a mic so
you can hear me. I’m not trying to be a dick, but, if you ever see a Cable jump like that, just keep holding block for 2 more seconds, otherwise he’s gonna get a free hit on you, and that’s why I hit you then,” and he actually turned it around and said “Oh, you know what, I didn’t know that,” you know, “Thanks for telling me.” So it’s kind of like, we connected, and hopefully I bettered his play and that’s gonna make the fighting game community better as a whole.

From his point of view, Jeff saw this not as a reason to abandon online play, but to help bring a player into the "real" fighting game culture. The ideal fighting game player isn’t a sore loser, and doesn’t blame his losses on the characters that are chosen. Instead, s/he learns from mistakes and helps others to overcome theirs, even if it means s/he might end up losing future matches. The phrase “gonna make the fighting game community as a whole” combined with “bettered his play” is very telling in that regard. The concept of the gracious winner/sore loser as an ideal player is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

Into the fold: entry into the community via the arcade ideal

Interestingly, a number of respondents who did not have access to arcades spoke of meeting other players who used similar (if perhaps less antagonistic) moments to encourage them to enter the fold as well. There’s a very common thread where a respondent would either engage with a home console port, or play a new arcade game, and in the process end up having a match with other players already in the community. At this point, online forums such as SRK and 8 Way Run become prominent figures. Ibrahim, Jeff, Garret, and Aaron all tell stories where an initial foray into play led them back to forums, which then led them to other avenues of play different than their previous modes. Ibrahim and Garret, players of Soul Calibur 4, were introduced to 8WR (and its spiritual predecessor, Caliburforums.com; according to both, a schism in the community
and internal shuffling at Namco-Bandai led to the creation of 8 Way Run.com), and from there made connections with other local players. Those connections then branched out into regular, in-person play in their area, which led to tournament participation, and in general served as their gateway into serious fighting gaming.

Evan’s experience as an arcade player in Philadelphia is much the same. His local arcade – which he frequently helped arrange tournaments at – hosted an *MvC2* tournament in October of its release year. A number of players from nearby New York City who were regulars at Shoryuken were in attendance: “It was the first time I got to see people from other places, and they played different characters… they had a different style of play and stuff, so. They told us about SRK while they were there, so I think I just went home that night and signed up and got an account, but uh… that was sort of the introduction to tournaments.” He was surprised at first that players from as far away as another state might show up to participate, but their distinct style of play and encouragement brought him to SRK, where he then branched out to contribute to the fighting game culture and develop his own skills, including arranging more tournaments at his local arcade.

What is notable about these instances is that they inevitably lead the respondent to revise their patterns and styles of play. Forum participation leads to regular social play, or at the very least a period of regular social play that may be interrupted by more practical concerns (e.g. a few respondents, such as Jeff, who stopped playing briefly due to financial factors, or Jordan, whose play is limited by his graduate work taking up the majority of his free time). As is explored further in the following chapter on social play,
the “right” way to play is against other people, not against the computer, which these experiences support.

Some respondents had different stories about their entry into the serious fighting gamer way of play that have some relation to the arcade ideal. Isaac’s is perhaps the most striking, tied as it is with his personal history as described above, but also to his desire to attend EVO in 2009. Diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer and having been told by doctors he didn’t have much time, he made it a life priority to attend EVO that year. Rather than being drawn in by experiencing an instance of serious fighting gamer-style play and moving to a forum, he was driven by his memories of arcade play in his youth. The memories he describes include very vivid, visceral language and it is clearly his emotional and even physical resonance with the arcade experience that drove him to participate in an event like EVO: “One, because I should have been there to begin with because I love that environment and just never could break away from work but this is… my circumstances and all the extra time I had made it impossible not to go. Unforgivable if I were to skip that opportunity to do what I love, and I’m so glad I went.”

He goes on to describe an instance of play where he went to a retro arcade bar in his hometown, and played the original Street Fighter 2 arcade cabinet against a stranger:

It’s that… I didn’t know who I was dealing with, and one of the dude’s friends was talking shit and I was kicking his ass but I was sweating really bad… technically there’s another aspect of someone playing right next to you, you can really hear him touching the keys and if you’re really careful, people will look at your fingers and see what you’re charging for, what you’re about to do. That’s something you don’t get. You hear the environment and you feel the recoil of somebody else slamming buttons on the same machine. You’re rubbing shoulders. There’s… right there, there’s already some primal thing about two dudes ponying up to save their quarter, you know? The practice of losing and reaching to your pocket to see if you have a quarter and bending down and sticking… there’s like, a submission there, which you try to minimize subtly but you
can’t help it as a man, you know? So there is that aspect of rivalry at the arcade that you can’t repeat online.

He then notes that his experiences with EVO, while not in the same literal frame – EVO matches were played at small tables, on televisions, with home console ports – he got much the same feeling out of playing at the tournament that he did in that scenario. The vividness of his description stands out – it’s highly likely that Isaac’s context makes him more reflective in this situation than the other respondents might be – but other players interviewed gave descriptions of events that resonated with enjoying the affective dimensions of play in person.

Aaron, for example, was not able to attend EVO 2009, but looked forward to attending the event in 2010. He spoke about the differences between an in-person competitive fighting game and other competitive online games such as Blizzard's real-time strategy (RTS) title Starcraft; for Aaron, the difference between the team play of an RTS and a fighting game is that a fighting game (to him) is as much about connecting with your opponent as it is about actual competition. Much like Isaac, he believes that playing a fighting game in person gives a player a chance to "connect with the person next to you" that online play does not. Similarly, part of his desire to attend EVO in 2010 is to compete in a scenario where the opponent isn't just the person next to you, but "your own nervousness;" the in-person setting adds an entirely different dimension to the experience resonant with Isaac's description as well.

What these various responses point to is that the experience that's associated with the arcade presents an ideal scenario that serious fighting gamers should aspire to be part of. Arcade cabinets and settings themselves feature prominently in the history of almost all of those interviewed, and even those without arcade access frequently were
drawn into the hobby by isolated play on arcade machines. While online play is a possibility in the current technological landscape, it's seen as a lesser alternative to play in person. It can provide many of the benefits that respondents were looking for in play – access to a variety of opponents, convenience – but usually at a great cost in both technical difficulty and dealing with players who have differing ideals about play, or who are simply antagonistic or sore losers spurred on by the relative anonymity of online play.

Play in person, by contrast, provides a number of benefits, primarily social and affective ones. Respondents spoke to the positive feel of the crowd, particularly at events like EVO, and the affective dimension of having your opponent in close physical proximity beside you. Entry into the culture, often via forums such as SRK, would then lead inevitably to a greater amount of social play on a regular basis, and the experience of playing in person is often transformative for respondents, encouraging their further participation. Finally, the experience can even deepen the challenge for some, adding a dimension to the fight beyond just controlling characters and predicting an opponent's moves. As Taylor and Witkowski (2010) observed with World of Warcraft players at the DreamHack LAN gaming event in Sweden, play in public adds a new social dimension to the activity, with players on display. Interestingly, this also has some resonance with Jansz and Marten's (2005) findings that players at LAN events were more motivated to attend by the desire to socialize in and around the gameplay space than for the competition itself.
Under control: the arcade stick and the influence of technology on play

A phenomenon I noticed while observing play at EVO was the ubiquity of the arcade stick. For games played on home consoles, there are a wide variety of possibilities for controlling the on-screen character. The typical method of control for most console games is an input device that for our purposes will be called a "pad:" these are often rectangular or wing-shaped devices that are included with the console at point of sale, including a series of individual face buttons, typically a "cross pad" – a +-shaped directional controller – and one or two analog "thumb sticks." An arcade stick, by contrast, is a different animal; those observed at EVO were typically in a relatively large wood housing, roughly the size of a large city phone book, with two rows of face buttons and a single tall joystick. The term "arcade stick" comes from the fact that these sticks are built to resemble the joysticks and buttons that are used to control arcade fighting game cabinets.

Certainly, reflecting on the previously discussed importance of the arcade experience, the prevalence of arcade sticks made a certain amount of sense. If replicating the feel of the arcade is important, then using a controller that duplicates that experience is a logical extension of that. However, it seems unlikely that a group of respondents that puts such an emphasis on the context of play and the proper play environment would embrace widespread use of a particular peripheral only for that reason. A secondary concern here is also cost. A look at the official stores for two arcade stick manufacturers mentioned by respondents – Hori and MadCatz – shows sticks costing well over $100 ("Real Arcade Pro. EXSE", 2009; "GameShark Store – Arcade Sticks", n.d.), a non-trivial amount of money, to be sure. What advantages does the arcade stick offer over the
alternatives that justifies the cost and accounts for such widespread use? The answer involves a number of factors, but it contributes to the idea of a "comfortable environment."

Almost every interview respondent reported owning and using an arcade stick; even players on the more casual end of the spectrum such as Isaac and Jordan. In general, their logic was quite specific: arcade sticks offer a level of control that a pad does not. The reasons for this are numerous, involving everything from the speed of button presses to the ways in which moving an object with one's thumb is different than doing so with the palm of the head, the wrist, or even the entire arm. Ibrahim gave a quite detailed explanation of how this works:

Interviewer: I’m guessing that people who learned how to play in arcades tend to favor arcade sticks and people who learned on home systems tend to favor pads? Is that a…

Respondent: Yeah. Although a lot of people who came to the scene much later and played on home systems have seen the advantage that people with sticks have, and just forced themselves to learn how to play it. A good example of that is, if you’ve ever seen that video on YouTube of the master Tetris player? The speed that he can move a stick – because he’s moving it with each of his fingers individually and his palm – he could not possibly do on a pad with just a thumb, because he’s inputting five inputs in the amount of time it would take you to move your thumb once.

I: I hadn’t even thought of that. I just thought I sucked. <laughs>

R: <laughs>

I: Granted, I don’t think I would do any better with an arcade stick. But… you know, I’m actually sitting here holding my hand like an idiot, trying to think “Okay, if I was holding the stick, how would it move?” But that’s a good point.

R: Well with a stick, each of your five fingers can move the stick, plus your palm. With a pad you only really have your thumb, so while one finger is reflexing [sic] from having to press the stick, the next finger is ready to fire.
Jeff also spoke to the relative difference of performing inputs on an arcade stick, physically. He described the difference between holding a pad and attempting to reach every face button with one’s thumb, and hovering a hand over an arcade stick where each fingertip is poised to strike a button; a player can make more precise button strikes, and a greater number of them, with the fingertips than with only the thumb. Thus on a simple level of human anatomy, an arcade stick presents a better, more facile control setup than a pad.

Beyond the physical ability to input buttons, however, there is also the actual construction of the stick itself, compared not only to pads, but even between different types of arcade stick. Notable here is the distinction between quality parts and the styles of both American and Japanese-style arcade stick parts. Jordan, Jeff, and Ibrahim in particular had much to say on this subject, referencing Japanese manufacturers Sanwa Denshi and Seimitsu. The situation they describe is one where sticks with Japanese parts – particularly parts from those manufacturers – are superior to those made in the U.S. by manufacturers such as Suzo-Happ. Jordan put it thusly:

So part of the advantage of the custom build things, and part of the reason they’re so expensive, is that they’ll usually come with authentic parts, so they’ll either be Sanwa parts or Seimitsu parts, and as I understand it, it’s mostly a matter of preference, but they’re more durable, they’re more accurate, the buttons are a lot more sensitive… like Sanwa buttons, you can… you think you’re resting your hand on them and you’re engaging them. They’re super sensitive… and in most of the kind of things where, like, if you haven’t experienced it and you look at what people are paying and you look at how obsessed people are you think it’s like technology fetishism, right? Like, “oh, this is authentic and that means I’m great because I have authentic,” well, no, actually it’s a hell of a lot more playable on good parts.
Jeff made a similar mention to the high sensitivity of Sanwa buttons: "you can literally, um, hold a piece of paper – like notebook paper? – and just push it against the buttons, like, holding the other end of the stick, and it’ll count the button being hit, just a feather’s touch will make these buttons go off…". Descriptions of non-Japanese sticks focused on the stickiness of the buttons, and the unresponsive nature of the control stick. Their observations closely mirror a thread on SRK that discusses the various technical advantages and disadvantages of Sanwa and Seimitsu parts compared to those from other manufacturers ("The Sanwa and Seimitsu FAQ", 2006).

These factors encourage the idea that if you aren't using an arcade stick with the proper parts, you're already at a disadvantage against serious fighting gamers who are. Most respondents echoed that, although Ibrahim did note that for 3D fighting games – such as his chosen Soul Calibur 4 – the difference isn't as critical as it is for 2D games, which require more precise inputs. As for Ibrahim himself: "I prefer to use stick because I grew up on the arcade system, and it feels most natural to me." Isaac describes it as a generational thing, suggesting that players who didn't grow up playing on arcade cabinets (as he did: "I have to make my joystick resemble the American arcade experience that I… was inculcated with, you know?") don't have the right context to prefer sticks over pads.

However, learning to use an arcade stick is an important part of the process for people without arcade experience; it isn't as if the stick itself presents an immediately-accessible comfortable playing environment. Quite to the contrary; some of the respondents I spoke to who had not always used a stick were emphatic that learning to use one properly – particularly if one is used to a pad – takes practice and acclimation time. My own inability to use an arcade stick provided a useful entry point to discussion
on this topic. Both Jordan and Jeff responded by mentioning that it was primarily a matter of time and exposure, though they differed on what that time period might be like; Jeff suggested a relatively short 24 hours, while Jordan indicated it could be a much more conservative 6-8 weeks. Recall too that Ibrahim's language above speaks of players unfamiliar with arcade sticks who "force themselves" to learn to use them as part of the entry cost to the culture of serious fighting game play.

Interestingly, Evan told a slightly different story. Having played primarily on arcade machines his whole life, playing without an arcade stick presents a challenge of its own. On the subject of the adjustment period mentioned previously, he had this to say:

[Adjusting] isn’t a problem with me since I’ve been playing at home and in the arcade for as long as I remember, so I, um… actually the reason I got an arcade stick is actually going the other way, and being frustrated that stuff that I was doing all the time was harder to get in the… when I played at home, so it was just like, using the arcade sticks at home, since I was switching back and forth and doing worse on the controller, probably, but it was things that I knew that I could do that I couldn’t get out because of the way the buttons were laid out, so.

In either case, learning on a pad or an arcade stick initially seems to have a great influence on preference. Because playing on them has such a wide range of differences, switching from one to the other isn’t easy.

Jordan's feeling is that despite their learning curve, the technical advantage of sticks contributes to a comfortable and level playing environment because it is a way the technology can contribute to – rather than detract from – the experience. It's worth noting that my discussion of arcade sticks with Jordan followed from speaking on another similar topic: the ideal TV or monitor to use while playing. At EVO during the Street Fighter 4 finals, the players once requested that a different TV be swapped in for the one that had been used up to that point. I was unclear on the reason why, and he explained
that depending on the TV/monitor, there could be perceptible lag time between inputs on
the controller and their appearance on screen, which then led to a discussion of the
influence of technology on play:

Interviewer: So, but it does… it kind of seems like about minimizing the
interference of technology on…

Respondent: Yeah, certainly.

Interviewer: …what’s going on in the match.

Respondent: Well, I mean… that’s kind of a broad way of putting it.

Interviewer: Narrow it down for me?

Respondent: My only quibble with that is, if you think about arcade sticks,
right? I mean, people clearly have preferences – arcade stick over
controller – but then what’s your button layout, are you using… what kind
of parts are you using? It’s like the… the technology needs to facilitate the
match, not…

Interviewer: Interfere with it.

Respondent: Yeah.

The link between the lag on a monitor (and finding a monitor with the least amount of
perceptible lag) and an arcade stick, in this situation, is that in both cases the technology
should be something that makes play easier rather than more difficult.

One striking example of controller use that I observed personally was during the
Soul Calibur 4 finals at EVO. At one point a competitor who had using an arcade stick up
to then suddenly switched to a console control pad after losing a match. Since arcade
sticks had been the norm at the event, this struck me as odd. That impression was
confirmed by the sudden explosive and, to me, inexplicable booing that occurred when
the crowd noticed it. Confused, I turned to nearby attendees who were also watching the
finals, and asked why the crowd had suddenly turned against this player. One of them
informed me that the character he went on to pick for the match that followed – Hilde – had a particularly powerful combination of moves that is easier to perform on a pad than on an arcade stick, and thus his switch in controllers was proof to the audience that he was about to pick the character in question, Hilde.

I return to the issue of Hilde and her unpopular combination attack in later chapters, but I mention this here because it, again, speaks to situations when certain technology choices are part of creating the "best environment" for intended play. Since the moves that player wanted to perform were easiest to do with a pad, that was what he used. The "norm" – in this case, arcade stick use – is pervasive, but only to the extent that it facilitates play in the right manner. If arcade sticks were not widely seen as providing an effective tool for optimum play, their use does not seem as if it would be nearly as widespread.

There is also a resonance here with the narrative that David Sudnow (1995) presents in his book *Ways of the Hand*. The book tells the story of Sudnow learning to play improvisational jazz piano. For him, part of the journey was one of coming to grips with an interface: specifically, his hands, and a piano keyboard. When he began, there was a period of looking at the keys to make sure his finger positions were correct, but the more he played – and practiced, and internalized – the more automatic and non-conscious his actual hand movements became. In the process, he was able to devote more of his attention to the higher-level issues of playing jazz improv piano. The narratives presented to me about using an arcade stick seem to follow the same trajectory. Although the stick presents a point of interface – it literally controls the game – practice with it is intended to make it become so natural, so effortless, that the possible noise (see Consalvo, 2009b)
created by using the interface is minimized or even obliterated. In short, using the right technology and adapting to it helps to bridge the gap between the more higher-level issues of skill and strategy in the mental realm of play, and the execution of those strategies on-screen.

Summarizing the arcade ideal

What the above examples suggest is that the material conditions of the arcade – everything from the ways in which games are literally controlled to the geography of social interaction around a machine – constitute a set of norms for both the players at EVO and those I spoke with during interviews. This is not necessarily to say that these players adopt the norms of the arcade solely on that merit alone. There are a number of contextual factors that make the arcade experience salient. However, the sort of situations in which many of these players find themselves most "comfortable" at play have a resonance with the arcade setting, even among those players who never had the chance to experience arcades first hand.

The end goal is to create a play environment that is both comfortable and enjoyable. In most cases, the arcade ideal provides that. Arcade sticks provide precision, easy-to-use controls (once the player acclimates); offline play on a lag-free LCD monitor minimizes the negative impact of technology on the match itself. As many players mention – Evan refers to it as "the greatest thing ever" – the feeling of a crowd surrounding you while you face off against a skilled opponent who's right next to you in physical space lends a unique and important quality to fighting game play. Thus do situations like the EVO tournament itself arise. They're not simply a way for players of
like mind to meet, but a physical space where the comfortable, enjoyable pursuit of fighting game play is maximized.

However, there are also clear situations where the arcade ideal cannot provide what players want. As the arcade institution dies out in the United States, home consoles more and more provide the most accessible, and sometimes only, outlet for play. Despite lag and "haters" who are poor sports thanks to the relative anonymity of internet socialization, online play presents an opportunity for engaging in the activity that, in the days before online console play, would have been denied to those players entirely. Some, like Ibrahim, engage in online play only in a "casual" sense, never playing a game they are serious about for fear of hurting their offline game. Others, like Nicholas, embrace the rare opportunity to engage players from all over the world in their chosen game. Interestingly, EVO provides a little of both in this scenario: although it is a once a year event, it gives players the opportunity to meet and engage with players they might otherwise never encounter.

It should be noted that the ramifications of this ideal play environment both extend outward into other areas, and also are fed into by those other areas. The arcade ideal influences social play, for example – the focus of the next chapter – but the way in which fighting game culture is created and maintained reinforces the arcade ideal as well, creating a cycle. Arising from these material conditions of play are social play and play practices, which have their own strong influences on the fighting game phenomenon.
Chapter 5

Social play

If the trajectory of research in game studies has proven anything, it’s that digital games can be, and often are, highly social activities. Even the earliest scholars to examine games acknowledged that they can be and are sometimes played alone, but they also situated them in the context of culture and shared creation of meaning. Huizinga (1950) and Wittgenstein (1953; see also Bloor, 2002) both connect games with the practice of language. Wittgenstein goes so far as to call language itself a game, developing the idea of the “language-game” in exploring how the variability of words themselves – how dependent they are on interpretive context – can turn simple social discourse into a type of game. In the sense that any given conversation or social contact involves navigating contextual rules to reach a given goal (being understood), language becomes like a game.

Gary Alan Fine (1983) studied a specific type of social game: fantasy role-playing, or what might be called today “pen and paper role-playing.” He explores how the games are played in social settings, noting that the players involved would often move in and out of certain play frames as context demanded; in one moment they may be speaking “in character,” in another, speaking as the person playing the character, depending on the situation. The actual play of the game in these situations was socially dependent; what happened in the fantasy realm was determined partly by its written rules, but as Fine observed, the written rules were flexible depending on the social actors involved. Any given instance of fantasy role-playing was a complex interchange of written rules, social agreements, and personal desires and interactions.
In modern game literature, studies of social gaming are often focused in two directions: social gatherings or events (Jansz and Marten, 2005; Taylor and Witkowski, 2010) and massively multi-player online games, or MMOs (Taylor, 2006; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 2008). By contrast, studies that examine social play in other contexts are more rare; Helen Thornham (2008) studied families that play together ethnographically, and Hilary Kolos (2010) researched a social group playing together in a university dorm context. What this research suggests – particularly ethnographies such as Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* and Thornham's work – is that even when a player is playing alone, s/he is also playing inside a particular culture, and how that culture defines itself then circles back to influence play, even when the player is alone. In short, there is a clear link between games and the social context in which they are played.

The themes in this chapter explore the social contexts in which players at EVO and the fighting game fans that I interviewed play. The data suggest quite strongly that, in the eyes of this particular player culture, the purpose of a fighting game is multiplayer competition rather than single-player engagement with the games. Branching out from that central idea are a number of thematic concerns. What’s expected of players during competitive play, in terms of social behavior? In particular, what behaviors are valorized and which others are stigmatized? Secondly, online forums such as Shoryuken.com (SRK), Smashboards, 8 Way Run.com (8WR), and others clearly have a powerful influence on how the community shapes and maintains itself. This chapter also explores the role of such online spaces in both social play and community maintenance. The final part of the chapter looks at the idea of shifting performance between social settings,
drawing on both the experiences of players interviewed and observations of social play locally as well.

The central conceit: fighting games as multiplayer rather than single-player

It became clear that one critical value was shared across the interview respondents that has resonance in all of the themes identified from those interviews: the notion that a fighting game is designed to be played against other human beings. As video games, fighting games can and often do have a mode where the player can fight computer-controlled opponents; interestingly, the home console versions of many such games refer to this mode as "arcade mode." However, the play situations that the respondents described to me almost universally involved playing fighting games against other human opponents.

This isn’t to say there weren’t mentions of playing alone; Nicholas, for example, talked about playing against the CPU on his home console, and Jordan also said he enjoyed playing against the computer by himself as well. However, the context in which these quotes are presented suggests they aren’t the norm. When Nicholas was mentioning playing this way, it was in the context of his very earliest days as a gamer, well before his entry into fighting game culture, and while he sometimes played alone, he just as often played with friends or siblings. Likewise, Jordan indicated that he plays against the computer mostly for fun and to relieve stress, since he doesn’t have enough time to devote to multiplayer practice anymore; when I asked point blank if multiplayer was his preferred mode, he responded “Yeah, totally.” Among the other interviewees, there was almost no mention of solo play at all, with the possible exception of passing remarks
about using training or practice modes – a mode in the game where the player can attack an unresisting, unplayed CPU opponent – to improve and practice.

Naturally, social play was the norm at EVO 2009, considering the event’s purpose as both a social gathering and a tournament. However, even there, certain events suggested social play was the desirable norm. One instance in particular stands out; I spent some time late on the first day observing Capcom’s demo stations for the then-unreleased *Tatsunoko vs. Capcom*. Since people were filing out of the convention space some stations had no players at them, and one had a single player at it, practicing combos and playing against the computer. I was content to watch him play for a while, as well as those around him; that player, however, made frequent attempts to pull me into the game. At first, it’s likely that my standing nearby was taken as an indicator that I did want to play. However, in the end he asked multiple times, clearly trying to draw me in to playing despite having the console to himself. Across all three days at various open stations for play at EVO, this drawing in of others – or inserting of oneself into an open space – was the norm.

It is difficult to say if this is a foundation stone upon which other aspects of the phenomena noted in this chapter are laid, or if it is a byproduct of a particular normative attitude toward the experience. However, it is important to note that in the following discussion of social gaming behavior, the assumption made by the respondents, and by extension the fighting game community, is that fighting games are ideally played not against a computer, but against another person controlling the other character.
EVO as gaming social event

At the Evolution tournament, play is certainly the sun that the event orbits; the socialization that takes place on the convention floor is surrounded by and takes place inside the context of fighting game play. However, it is also a time for enthusiasts to be around other enthusiasts, and to engage in the activity that they love as a social group. There is a significant comparison between EVO and an event such as Campzone 2 (Jansz and Marten, 2005) or DreamHack (Taylor and Witkowski, 2010). Each case is a large-scale social event taking place in the context of a shared pastime or interest involving gaming technology.

Many of the observations that the above scholars made at their events carry over to EVO, particularly the demographics of the attendees. I was struck by how few women were in attendance; only a handful caught my notice, and of the even fewer I had a chance to speak with, none were actually attending EVO to play. One was a supportive girlfriend who had come to watch her boyfriend compete; another pair were the mother and sister of a competitor who had traveled from California to support their son/brother in the tournament.

That said, I did observe some women players carrying arcade sticks and wearing convention badges, identifying them as probable participants in the tournament itself. However, as the event progressed (and potential fighters were eliminated from the brackets in the pool matches) these sightings dwindled to effectively nothing; on the last day, all competitors in the finals for each game were male. The issue of the lack of women players is not without notice inside the community, however. There was considerable discussion about a "women's' invitational" for EVO 2010 on SRK ("The
Role of Girls and Women in the FGC", 2010) that spiraled out into a discussion of
women and fighting games in general. As of this writing, the EVO 2010 tournament is
over and there was indeed a Women's Invitational of Super Street Fighter 4, with four
fighters from the main tournament competing on the main screen as part of the main
event.

As one might expect of an event with global reach, there were a wide variety of
ethnicities in attendance at EVO. In terms of broad groups, Caucasians, Africans or
African-Americans, and a number of different Asian cultures were represented over the
course of three days. Attendees from the United States came from all over; interestingly
enough, the proof of this is that many who came to EVO brought t-shirts or other clothes
that identified their region or even city of origin, typically advertising a gaming group
from that locale. Washington (Seattle), Texas, New York, and a number from California
were the most numerous. During the finals it became clear that there were competitors
from as far away as France (the Soul Calibur 4 champion, Malek) and Japan (fighting
game icon Daigo Umehara, who would go on to win the Street Fighter 4 tournament).

It would be remiss to not discuss the ways in which attendees – particularly those
simply playing together on the demo stations and BYOC floor compared to the
tournament matches – played socially. During the first few days of the tournament, the
majority of the space was taken up by elimination pools; a full half of the convention hall
was devoted to those pools, with the Smashboards-run Smash Bros. Brawl tournament
taking up a full third of the remaining BYOC space on the south half of the room (see
appendix C). As the need for the existing technology at the elimination pool tables
dwindled – via the progression of the tournament – these tables were eventually co-opted
by casual players who would gather in small groups to play there, though they were limited to whatever game had been played during the elimination pool at that station.

On the BYOC floor, the range of games being played was quite high. Some stations involved people playing recent releases like Street Fighter 4. Perhaps more interesting were those few stations where attendees brought not just games and televisions or monitors, but entire wooden arcade frames they had constructed themselves to house hardware and give the impression one was playing on an authentic arcade cabinet. Over the course of the event, there were two such places. One involved someone set up near the north entrance doors to play the original Street Fighter 2. Another was at the far southern corner of the room and was a collection of 2-3 red-painted cabinets containing a wide variety of games, from old Neo-Geo arcade selections to a version of the X-Men arcade game made by Konami in 1992… notable because it is not a typical fighting game per EVO’s focus, but rather a member of the related side-scrolling "beat 'em up" genre instead. Gamers moved between these areas as their interest drew them.

For the most part, socialization at EVO seemed to center in small groups with actual gameplay – or more specifically, the displays and monitors on which gameplay took place – as an organizing space. This isn’t to say all socialization was necessarily based around play. To echo earlier statements, not all “participation” was play-based; on the third day, most participation involved watching and cheering for matches in the finals. However, particularly on days 1 and 2, when the elimination pools were still filled with competitors playing through their matches, the relatively intimate setting of the pool booths – a table no more than a person height across with a TV and enough room for two side-by-side chairs – gave rise to batches of small groups together.
Similarly, the bring-your-own-console spaces and even the booths for both Capcom and Namco-Bandai to feature their upcoming and current games were roughly the same: a TV and enough space for a few people to stand close together around it, connected in sequence. These close gathering points, with a small cloud of onlookers centered around the two people playing the game, have considerable resonance with the crowds one might find at an American game arcade. In the BYOC and test booth areas, even the “I’ve got next” practice, where the next player in line indicates that they will play the winner of the current match, was commonly seen.

Because much of the observed socialization at EVO was in a play context, many of the behaviors I observed did involve play in some form. Perhaps the most common was the practice of good sportsmanship. The pre- and post-bout handshake was so ubiquitous that there were very few times it didn’t happen; after three days it became very jarring to not see it. One such instance occurred in an elimination pool match of Street Fighter 3 where one player performed a “full-parry.” In SF3 it is possible, with quick and precise timing, to “parry” an incoming attack, rendering it ineffective and actually giving an advantage to the defender to counterattack. However, an attack that hits multiple times must be parried for each hit, so someone who parries every hit of a multi-hit attack has “full-parried” it; the popularity of Daigo Umehara’s EVO 2004 full-parry of a move by Justin Wong – viewable online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtuA5we0RZU – goes a long way to emphasizing both the rarity of such an event, and the skill required to pull it off. When the match I observed was over, interestingly, there was no handshake involved.
That said, however, gestures suggesting good sportsmanship were the norm. The handshake is perhaps the most common, but there were a number of other ways in which it manifested itself. The “fistbump” (touching of fists at the knuckles) was one of them; vocalized thanks and congratulations like “Good fight” and “Thanks for the match” were also common, as were exhortations to the crowd to give both competitors applause during the day 3 finals. This was observable in the BYOC areas as well. The general trend is that at the end of a fight – win or lose – there should be some acknowledgment of the other player that one spent those 30-90 seconds (the length of a usual match, based on the in-game match timer) with.

The notion of good sportsmanship extended outward to other instances as well. One noticeable moment of camaraderie and cooperation among players was at Capcom’s demonstration booth for the (then-unreleased) Tatsunoko vs. Capcom. The company representatives, using the Japanese full version of the game, created a contest to see who could do the most damage/get the highest hit count in practice mode. Despite the competitive nature that “contest” implies, over the course of the day I saw numerous players huddled together near the TvC booth, commiserating about what attacks and techniques might be most useful. One player asked, of a character being used, “Would light kick be faster?” Others would enter the conversation, suggesting entirely new permutations of moves in combination to try, even other characters; when the contest first began a small group were experimenting with the character Hakushon Daimaou, but by the time I next made my way to the booth, fragments of the original group plus new members had moved on to trying a different character, Roll. They compared notes, tried
new combinations, evaluated the results, and in the end came to a community decision on the best way to proceed despite it being, nominally, a “contest.”

Interestingly, this seems to stand in contrast to the booing behavior observed during the finals, and in fact even the announcers got into the act when it came to the crowd's booing of unpopular Soul Calibur 4 character Hilde on day 3; at one point the commentator during the SC4 finals informed a Hilde player there’d be “no cheap win today” after he lost a round. During one of the aforementioned Guilty Gear finals featuring the well-known player Marn, an observer sitting two seats to my right and one row back shouted, quite loudly, “You suck, Marn!” I blinked in surprise and turned to look, catching the attention of someone sitting nearby, who offered an explanation: “I know [Marn]. He’s a cool guy but he goes out of his way to be an asshole.” This was resonant with another instance a few days earlier during the Street Fighter 3 pool eliminations, where during a doubles match – teams of two who would alternate to play 1-on-1 matches – one of the inactive players suddenly shouted “You suck, man!” after an in-game event. Thus it’s not clear to what extent these sorts of comments are more considered an acceptable level of “trash talk” or friendly ribbing rather than actual expressions of disapproval. Certainly, they were more isolated and, in an affective way, felt different in character than the mass booing responses to Hilde players.

In summary, the social aspects of the tournament were consistent with the sorts of events described by Jansz and Marten and Taylor and Witkowski above: gaming (or technology) enthusiasts from various backgrounds coming together in celebration of their hobby. Good sportsmanship and collaboration provide a social context surrounding the game play that the participants have come to enjoy. In this sense, the rules of the game
are part of the scenario, but not all of it; like the players of Smash Bros. noted in Jakobsson (2007), the experience is as much about being in the context of that play, sharing expertise and a feeling of being among other enthusiasts, as it is about the literal rules of play. The behaviors and trappings of the people attending EVO, much like the attendees of DreamHack, strode an interesting line between showing their personal identity and cultural affiliations and engaging in large group activities as a cultural collective. Certainly, attendees were fans of different games, from different locations, and from the discussions and matches overheard and seen had differing ideas of what ideal play should be like. However, in the end, what was critical was that they were there, together, to be in the presence of play and among other lovers of the same types of play.

Iconography, clothing, and other badges of the culture

The issue of the clothing and iconography I observed at EVO extends the discussion into another dimension: the attendees as fans not just of fighting games, but of video games in general. Scattered throughout the tournament were shirts and even neckties that built on various memes and icons from video gaming. Among these were a stylized Mario (of Super Mario Bros. fame) labeled "Thug Mario," someone wearing a necktie with a screenprint of Blazblue character Arakune, Pac-Man shirts, and a shirt featuring the character Bub from the 1980's-era game Bubble Bobble. Many similar shirts were observed beyond these specific instances as well. One attendee on the first day even came in full costume as a Street Fighter character, though his M. Bison outfit was the only example of such costuming ("cosplay") observed.
The ubiquitous arcade sticks also served to identify a certain gamer chic; these controllers are often housed in quite large wooden "boxes," and while some players left their stick boxes unadorned, others decorated them. Prints of fighting game characters were common observances for decorated boxes, though there were also characters identifiable as being from current Japanese anime series (the most common being at least two representations of protagonist Ichigo Kurosaki from the anime/manga series *Bleach*).

The decoration of the arcade stick seems to be twofold in such a case. Firstly, it helps to identify the owner's interest in games, anime, or both; secondly, it creates a distinctive art that points to the owner specifically and his/her interests as well. In the case of interviewee Evan, whose favored game is the anime art-inspired *Arcana Heart*, his most treasured arcade stick is decorated with artwork of his favorite two characters – Konoha and Mei-Fang – from the game.

These emblems and badges – both the sticks themselves and the ways they are decorated – are very much props in the front stage performance of identity that Goffman (1959) discusses, working on many simultaneous tiers. Even having an arcade stick in the first place says "I play fighting games in a particular way;" decorating it with decals of characters as Evan did may indicate a number of additional things. In the interview, it was clear that he chose those decorations because he enjoys playing those characters, but we also discussed that his choice of character reflected his preferred playstyle in game as well. It may be that having Konoha on his arcade stick indicates his love of *Arcana Heart* and Konoha, his love of characters that play *like* Konoha does, his appreciation of the art style, his adoption of the arcade stick norm, or many other things. Comparatively, there were arcade sticks at EVO that were simply undecorated, plain wood; what might the
messages there send? What's important to recognize here is that the various props and decorations favored by these players may contribute to a wide variety of performed identities.

It is also worth considering these badges of gamer and fan identity in the context of Taylor and Witkowski's discussion of personalized spaces and public activity at DreamHack in Sweden. As they note, "[t]he range of performances on show pushes the sense that, for these participants, gaming is a meaningful leisure activity and that participation in this activity can be very many different things" (2010, p. 5). They also cite Simon (2007) on case mods; his notion that visual modifications are tied to instrumental modifications for more useful hardware can likely be applied to arcade sticks as well. Players use arcade sticks for their greater level of control and precision; the need to decorate them as a badge and flag extends outward from that.

Being a good sport: winning, losing, and fighting to improve

Out of both EVO observations and interview responses, it's possible to create an image of the types of behaviors that are valorized in the fighting game community. Overall, the data suggest that it is critical to be a good sport as well as a gracious loser, to take fighting games "seriously," and to have a willingness to learn and improve as a player. Some examples of this have already been discussed in the context of the EVO tournament; the handshake or congratulations, the spirit of collaboration and improvement, and other behaviors. However, concepts of what sorts of player behaviors are worthy of respect, or which please fighting game fans, were threaded into a number of interview responses.
The issue of winning or losing is important, if only because it covers not just an attitude about the activity – is winning important, and if so, what is it more important than? – but also about social responses to the activity. A poor loser doesn't shake an opponent's hand, doesn't thank him/her for the fight, and often blames the equipment or the setting rather than his/her own skill. Shortly after discussing a type of player he didn't like – boastful, rude players who go on to win anyway – Garrett went on to talk about players who focus on winning more than playing in more detail:

Interviewer: That's worse than them… oh. Okay, I see where you’re going with that.

Respondent: They talk so big and they talk so much trash and then they win! Ah, there’s nothing worse. Hahaha.

Interviewer: I see where you’re going with that.

Respondent: They normally don’t win. They normally… I’d say that normally their pride prevents them from learning, for the most part.

Interviewer: So it sounds like people who are more interested in their win or loss ratio then.

Respondent: They suffer, yes. They, um… or they change and they become great.

He then went on to tell the stories of two players that he did not name: one who did exactly as Garrett described – changing his behavior to become well-respected – and another who continued to "talk smack" at matches while constantly losing who effectively dropped off the map.

A key text that highlights many of the attitudes common in the fighting game community is David Sirlin's aptly-titled Playing to Win (Sirlin, 2006), where he argues that a player can and should use whatever tactics are necessary to achieve victory, within
the bounds of fairness. It is important to note, however, that in that same work, Sirlin also argues that winning is not only about the actual result of competition, but that it is also about constantly striving to improve. Jonas Heide Smith (2005) argues persuasively that researchers often see game players as always aiming to win, considering them as "rational actors" in the same way economists might view consumers. For him, the goal of a specific player can trump the desire to win depending on the situation. Stewart Woods notes that "the appeal of intimate multiplayer games lies in the uniqueness of each iteration, the emotive involvement in the winning/losing condition and in the encounter with the other player which transforms the dry rule sets of formalist understanding into the social world of the game" (2008, p. 8). These assertions suggest alternatives to the raw win that might be of interest to the serious fighting gamer. Winning can feel nice, and certainly a player should aim to win, but ultimately the goal is a satisfying match against another skilled player.

Isaac actually contextualized the difference between playing for the sake of the fight and playing solely for the win as the difference between Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat. For him, Mortal Kombat's flashy, gory fatality wins were the aim, but that was never satisfying to him, whereas the competition of a Street Fighter game was. Recall too Jeff's story of online play from the previous chapter about an Xbox Live player of Marvel vs. Capcom 2 who constantly berated Jeff for his choice of characters and playstyle. That player also blamed his losses on the characters Jeff picked rather than his own play. This, combined with some really aggressive non-play behavior – name-calling, shouting – caused Jeff to entirely lose respect for him.
Conversely, being a good winner or loser is an important skill among those I spoke to. More to the point, it was important to these players to not only lose with grace – to shake your opponent's hand and be polite – but to also see a loss as an opportunity for self-improvement. In speaking about the types of players he respects, Matthew talked about both technical respect (based on gameplay skill) and "human respect" based on social behavior. One of his instances of positive human respect had to do with the behavior of players more skilled than he was:

Um… some of it’s just as simple as like, the handshake or being polite or funny before the match, and a lot of it comes down to after. Like, if you lose, some of the great players will give you tips and be like, “Look, I beat you because this, if you want to get to the next level, work on this aspect of your game,” or sometimes they’ll just be like, “Hey, we should play some matches later just for fun.” … Like, someone will be like “You roll to the left too often” or whatever and they’ll joke “Gotcha again, gotcha again, stop rolling to the left!” and, you know… it’s funny, and you’re like “Yep, I’m definitely doing something idiotic,” whatever. But then sometimes people just completely berate you for it, like “…you’re a complete idiot. Why are you even trying to do this? Why are you here if you’re gonna make such mistakes like that,” and you’re like “…oooh.” And that’s when it starts to get different.

In this case, he respects the good winner because that player encourages him to improve, get better, and play more. Conversely, the flip side is a winner who berates the loser personally, discouraging them from further play. In both cases, the key component is that the ideal player encourages other people to continue playing. In an ideal situation – such as Nicholas' story about facing (and losing to) a semi-famous SF2T player online noted in the previous chapter – the loser even comes to enjoy the loss if the match itself was good enough. In that scenario, Nicholas was so happy to face off against a skilled player that the notion of winning or losing became mostly irrelevant.
This isn't behavior that's necessarily endemic to "serious" play, however. The casual *Smash* players of Jakobsson (2007) and Kolos' college dorm players (2010) both exhibit a similar focus on continued play rather than winning or losing. Those two cohorts were focused on social play as a primary goal, and so who wins or who loses takes a backseat to the process. As Kolos puts it,

"Formal goals were important in helping shape the play process and in motivating each students' actions during the game; most students enjoyed winning. However, whether or not someone won the game did not affect how he or she was accepted in the community. Instead, how the students interacted during the game – with humor, kindness, and sociability – determined the valued members of the community," (pp. 127-128)

Clearly, something similar is going on in the fighting game community as well. Their construction of the game as a skill challenge might account for a greater focus on the actual match elements and displays of skill that lead up to the conclusion, but the conclusion itself is not as important. For them, winning with grace – in other words, "with humor, kindness, and sociability" – is critical.

In that regard, Jeff's experiences are also quite telling. He describes both sides of that fence, coming from both the point of view of a more-skilled winner dealing with an opponent, and also as a less-skilled player who has just lost a match:

Interviewer: No, it does, it does! I’m kind of getting the impression that if you’re playing somebody and they’re not necessarily at your level, then it’s more fun for you if they’re interested in improving their game, right?

Respondent: Oh, absolutely. …if someone’s willing to learn, willing to take a beating and like, learn from it, that’s a lot of fun.

…

Interviewer: So conversely… like, if you’re playing somebody who’s… who you would consider better than you are, it’s more fun for you if they’re willing to help you come up to their level.
Respondent: That’s the most fun, absolutely, but even if they’re not, as long as they’re willing to keep playing, like… there’s those kinds of people who are like “Oh, you’re not worth my time, I’m not even gonna play against you” if you lose a couple times against them, and like, sometimes it’s just nice for someone to just keep beating you down over and over, especially if they use the same tactic to beat you down, because that’s how you learn to get around it.

…

Interviewer: So it seems like being able to take a loss, pretty much a required skill.

Respondent: Absolutely, and as long as… I wasn’t… the ideal is not just taking a loss, but taking a loss, figuring out why you lost, and not doing it again, or at least if you do it again, knowing why you did it and working on it.

What these three connected quotes identify are various manifestations of the same core concept: the best social play enables continued play. If the winner is gracious, attempting to encourage the loser to continue to learn and improve, then s/he is enabling continued play. Likewise, if the loser is gracious, and displays a willingness to learn and improve his/her skills, then s/he is also enabling continued play. Aaron, speaking about his desire to go to EVO 2010 after missing EVO in 2009, noted that while he isn't "good enough to win money," he wanted to attend the tournament solely for the experience of playing against strangers and other skilled, dedicated players.

This continued play has a cyclical effect. Good losers are exposed to tactics and strategies that their own play might be deficient in, so they study, train, and improve, using each loss as a method to up the level of their game. Presumably they, in turn, pay it forward as Jeff did (see the story of his "bringing someone into the fold" in the previous chapter): as they win and become gracious winners, the people they play may be
similarly inspired. Thus the community grows stronger as a whole when multiple people are encouraged to play.

This isn't to say that this experience is always the norm. Gene in particular mentioned that his experiences in his native North Carolina were considerably different than those he had in the crowded arcade scenes of southern California:

No, it’s just, like… one of the things is like… the arcade culture is really great here but at the same time, there’s so many people, so it’s in some ways… it’s harder to break in on a social level because they don’t really need new players, you know? In North Carolina if anybody started playing fighting games, then they would immediately be welcomed into the North Carolina fighting game community and immediately be invited to gatherings and stuff because North Carolina needs people while in SoCal there is a ton of people and a ton of top players, so unless you’re like, this new, like, really great kid comes along, there’s… nobody’s gonna like, just coddle someone who’s interested in fighting games, you know? So that was… it was a different experience, coming from a tight knit fighting community to a much more sprawling, bigger, kind of anonymous place. … Unless you can offer [experienced players] something, which… oh, like, they don’t need to groom anybody. They don’t need to teach anybody and get them up to their level; they’ll just take the people who are already at the level, who are already bringing a different look to top tier play, that they can train against… versus North Carolina, you wanna get what you can get, and always invite new people because people are always leaving or coming and there’s not that many of them, so.

While this does suggest the same sort of organizing principle, where strong play betters the community as a whole, it’s a slightly different angle. In Gene's story, North Carolina can afford to welcome any interested players and spend time with them to help them improve, because the base population of "good" players is lower and everyone is needed. In southern California – where the arcade scene is still quite strong – this is a different story entirely. If a new player doesn't show promise or the potential to add something to the community, there isn't much benefit in training him/her. Of course, Gene's story in no
way implies hostility, but it does suggest that the intensity or likelihood of the welcome may vary depending on how large the population of serious fighters in any given locale is.

As Tracy Kennedy (2009) also notes in discussing the Xbox Live women gamer community GamerchiX, the desire to organize and support one another can also come as a response to a perceived hostile environment; her research focused on the ways in which the players of GamerchiX come together and shared strategies for dealing with the highly patriarchal – and far too often outright abusive – behavior of some men on Xbox Live. It may be that players in more populated areas don't feel that pressing need for inclusiveness and support because the population is already quite large, while in places with fewer fighting game fans, anyone interested presents a stronger community.

Thus, the ideal social player is a person who is a good loser or gracious winner, is interested in improving his/her skill level, and works in the spirit of collaboration and group improvement. A sense of responsibility is expected; players should realize when losses are due to skill level and not blame external factors, then take steps to improve themselves. However, while a degree of mentoring and training by more skilled players is often welcomed, and interviewees respected those strong players who did so, there are other social factors at work there as well, as Gene's story indicates.

The role of online communities in social fighting game play

As big as the EVO tournament is, it's an outgrowth of a particular online forum called Shoryuken.com, named after the signature move of Street Fighter character Ryu. It is not the only community of its kind by a long mile; most fighting games with a wide
enough userbase and a competitive tournament scene have their own similar online communities. Fans of Namco-Bandai's *Tekken* and *Soul Calibur* series have Tekken Zaibatsu and 8 Way Run.com respectively; players of the *Guilty Gear* and *Blazblue* series congregate at Dustloop.com, and there is a large and active community of *Smash* players at Smashboards.

The experiences of the players I interviewed suggest that these online communities play a vital role for the users who make them up. Online forums serve as a place to share and pool information as well as connect players. Considering the working assumption that this base of players believes fighting games are meant for play against other human beings, this second function is particularly important. As I will discuss, forums such as SRK and 8 Way Run serve not only as gateways to a wider community of fighting gamers, but also as an exposure for some to how fighting games "should" be played.

Almost everyone I interviewed, when asked how they got into fighting games, would eventually bring the discussion back to online forums. Garrett mentioned discovering 8WR after looking online for tips on *Soul Calibur 2* play, while Ibrahim was pointed to it by people he met in an arcade. Evan described meeting players from out of state at a local tournament who were SRK regulars, and after being struck by their skilled and (to him) new and different style of play, was compelled to go online and join the community. Gene tells a similar story, where SRK regulars from another arcade came to his regular playing space and demonstrated the SRK playstyle through numerous wins; he "came around" their style of play, which led back to SRK. Jeff came back to fighting
games after a long absence by participating in a local *Street Fighter 4* tournament, and another entrant saw his play and directed him to SRK… and so on, and so on.

It's worth noting that for many of these stories, the entry into the online forum is also the entry into serious fighting game play, rather than more casual play. Gene and Evan's stories in particular are excellent examples of that, in that it was observing (and being beaten by!) the playstyle used by SRK regulars from another geographic location that led them to make the leap, giving a relatively clear delineation between "who I was before" and "who I am now." Take, for example, Gene's description of the process:

People from other cities started coming to our places because people want more competition and they started beating us because they were kind of doing all the tricks, and so that got us to, you know, kind of drop what we thought the game was supposed to be played like and kind of play it like it was *really* [vocal emphasis his] supposed to be played like.

That last sentence is very telling; it suggests that however he played before – whatever his "style" happened to be – was the "wrong" way to do things. Garrett's whole reason for joining such a community in the first place was to expand his knowledge of the game. Nicholas, interestingly, came to SRK because of the 2004 Daigo Umehara/Justin Wong EVO match where the now-famous parry video was made; being exposed to that level of skilled play, he "wanted to see what the community was like."

Of course, given that these respondents were recruited via online fighting game communities, it isn't surprising that so many of them have histories where entry into an online community figures prominently. Still, that fact alone says something about the link between serious players and community membership. Even Isaac and Jordan, who are relatively casual players despite being serious fighting game fans, regularly read and post on SRK. The community is both a source of knowledge and a beacon to those who seek it
out, and in the process, new visitors are welcomed into the fold and exposed to a
playstyle that they often come to embrace. Jeff described his experience playing *Marvel
vs. Capcom* 2 in the post-SRK-join era as "almost like you're playing two different
games." Later chapters address how this also impacts normative ideas of play as well.

Beyond serving as a gateway to the rules and mores of serious social fighting
game play, such forums also serve a more mundane matchmaking function. Remember
that the ideal for fighting games is that they are played against other people, and as
previously discussed, online play presents certain opportunities but also has a number of
drawbacks that make it less than ideal for some players. How sites like SRK, 8WR, and
the like fill that void is by allocating space for "matchmaking," where players can post
invitations to play or requests for opponents inside a geographic area in the hopes of
meeting new people to play against in person.

Shoryuken's matchmaking forum is quite large and very active, consisting of
nine separate subforums: seven for various regions of the U.S., one for Canada, and one
for "World" (presumably: everything else). 8WR has three subforums for the United
States, one for the rest of "the Americas," and a fifth for "Europe, Asia, & Australia."
Smashboards focuses on tournament listings, both those held online and those held
offline, including a number of regional subforums for various parts of the world. This is
merely a surface-level cataloging of available forum spaces; inside each forum there are
even greater subdivisions, with threads for states and even individual cities in some cases.

When it comes to those interviewees who play in local social groups, a number
mentioned that they came upon those groups via online forums. Ibrahim, Jordan, Jeff,
Gene, and Nicholas all described situations where they created social connections with
people they could regularly play against – either friends, in Nicholas' case, or groups and local events for the others – via matchmaking at an online forum. Jeff plays regularly with a group at the University of Maryland – Baltimore, for example, and while he no longer has the time to devote to it, when Jordan first moved to Boston, he spent time regularly playing with a handful of friends he met on SRK.

Nicholas is an interesting case, in that he also is a common user of other matchmaking online than forums. Because he is a fan of an older generation game, Street Fighter 2 Turbo, he often plays on a matchmaking service called GGPO, developed by Tony Cannon, an EVO founder and SRK moderator. GGPO (which stands for "Good game, peace out") allows players to connect via PC to play emulations of arcade fighting games, and Nicholas was a longtime GGPO player before he eventually moved to consoles with the release of SF2T: HD Remix.

In these cases, what the online framework – be it forums or a service like GGPO – provides is an opportunity to connect with like-minded strangers for play opportunities. Since the culture of online fighting game forums suggests that most frequent users are serious fighting game fans, the matchmaking forum is a place where one can satisfy a desire to play in-person (or even online) against other serious players to provide a new challenge. While much of the play that is arranged on the matchmaking forums is either at events in public spaces or online via Xbox Live or Playstation Network, it's worth noting that a number are also simply at the homes of forum members, who make the information available to interested parties through private message via the forums. Surprisingly, in many threads, these non-tournament matches are often called "casuals" or
"friendlies," which suggests that even within the hardcore community there's a stratification between matches for serious competition and matches to improve.

The role of the online forum in the fighting game community is twofold. As a repository of expertise and information, it serves as a gateway for new players to be drawn into the serious fighting game way of life. Effectively, it is both recruiting tool and acculturation effort. Once the player becomes invested in the culture, the matchmaking services are a way for players to engage in the activity the way it's "supposed" to be done: one-on-one competitions with other skilled players, be it (primarily) in offline social groups and events, or sometimes through online play. However, there is also a potential downside to such a community, especially in a scenario where it suddenly leaps into the public eye.

The downside: Shoryuken.com and the 09er phenomenon

In some regards, recruiting participants for interviews proved quite challenging. As the initial focus of the study was on the EVO tournament, the online forum created and maintained by EVO's organizers – Shoryuken.com – seemed like a natural first place to go. However, the initial call for respondents did not yield many responses, even after it was expanded to include fighting game fans of all kinds, not merely those that had attended EVO. While posts on other forums – 8 Way Run and Smashboards being the primary places to search – turned up scattered interest, it was via word of mouth from the few SRK interviewees (and an endorsement from one, Jordan, in a recruiting thread) that the majority of my respondents who frequent SRK volunteered. Even offering a financial incentive did little to encourage response rates.
While the reasons why populations might be unresponsive to calls for participants are varied, one phenomenon came up in discussion with a few interviewees that suggested events in the fighting game culture, particularly as they apply to Shoryuken.com, might have been serving as a hindrance in my case. As Jordan relayed, there is a term among longtime SRK users for someone with a 2009 forum join date, who appears to know very little about fighting games: an "09er." The dislike of 09ers stems from the sudden surge in popularity for fighting games after the 2009 release of *Street Fighter 4*, and the consequent effects that had on the fighting game online communities, particularly one as strongly associated with the *SF* series as SRK is.

When *SF4* came out in early 2009, there had not been a major fighting game release from Capcom in a very long while; *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* was its closest match in 2000, leaving nearly a decade of gap, as both Jordan and Nicholas discussed when giving me background on the phenomenon. By that time, the SRK userbase – which had been a smaller, relatively tight-knit group of high-level players – had already solidified into social equilibrium, with no real mass influx of new posters. Jordan described SRK as "a highly insular, very specialized community that's used to being discarded" in the pre-2009 days, and as "highly knit, tightly wound" in general. In truth, that description could likely apply to the fighting game scene in general during that period as well.

Once *SF4* was released, everything changed. Suddenly not only were fans experiencing a renewed interest in fighting games – particularly *Street Fighter* series games – but gaming media and other mass media were also pointing to Shoryuken as the place to go for information. As a result, massive amounts of new users suddenly poured
into SRK, and the resulting effect on the existing userbase was, as Jordan describes it, just shy of catastrophic:

And so the… the forums were crashing constantly. Like, it really sucked. I remember I was in the middle of a couple, like, trades, and trying to like… buying and selling things, and you know, I like to go here to hang out and I can’t, ‘cause there’s a million people showing up on the forums and so the site was tanking all the time, and… and then you just get constant… and so these newcomers are just constantly making the threads I talked about, right? They’re just these stupid speculation threads, they’re like “Oh my god, in Street Fighter 4, Akuma should be able to throw three fireballs because that’s awesome and Akuma’s awesome!” and that’s like…that’s what it was like all the time, and… you’ll notice that after the site upgrade they no longer show the join dates, because there’s such prejudice against the ‘09ers, but it used to be it would show when someone joined, so you’d say “Oh look, this person joined the month that Street Fighter 4 was announced like everyone else, there’s no reason to take them seriously. In fact I want them to go away because they’re disrupting my life.”

As he describes it, the SRK regulars were suddenly on the defensive. New users with no knowledge of or appreciation for the culture that the longtime userbase had developed were suddenly breaking all the social rules and mores, posting "like 20 different threads about the same thing… when there's already probably one big thread that's stickied that says, that answers like, 90% of your questions" as Nicholas put it. Jeff described a similar situation with the Marvel vs. Capcom 2 forums. The clutter and traffic negatively impacted the servers, which crashed repeatedly, depriving the normal userbase of their online space and communication altogether.

That the established users of the community went on the defensive is not a surprise; their territory was being threatened on multiple levels and so they reacted against it. Jordan and Nicholas both noted a potential good side: more players. As discussed above, more players equates to more challengers, more play, and presumably a
growth in the community… provided they’re players who follow the proper model of play. On the other hand:

Jordan: …there’s a little bit of a pride issue, right? Like, when you’ve been on the site… like, I only joined in ’06. If you’ve been on the site since 2000 and people are showing up and saying “Oh, I’m hardcore, I’ve played all these games, blah blah blah” and then you want to be like “Well where have you been for all this time? Why do you only care now that there’s a new, shiny toy?”

The dilemma, of course, is identifying the potential "good" new members from what must have felt like a horde of "bad" ones.

Interestingly enough, a thread on SRK dated early February of 2009 ("Message to Newcomers who Feel Unwelcome", 2009) is an attempt by one SRK user to elaborate to new members why it is they might be made to feel unwelcome by SRK regulars. His argument echoes many of the sentiments and ideas Jordan suggested above; on the subject of posts with simple questions that are already answered on the forum, the original poster – username "eoneo" – made the following analogy: "[emphasis original] it’s a bit like going on a chess forum and complaining that the knight’s movements are too confusing. Can you imagine how much shit you’d get?" (¶ 10). The poster argues that SRK is "[emphasis original] first and foremost a forum for high level discussion about fighting games" and thus constant "newbie" questions are out of place. His hope is that new users will use permanent ("sticky") threads and reading to answer their questions, rather than new topics that clutter the forum.

There is a significant link between the type of behavior toward the 09ers described here, and much of what goes on at the World of Warcraft community Elitist Jerks (EJ), a forum and community for players interested in theorycraft: exploring the
numerical and statistical "best practices" for high-level play in *WoW*. Chris Paul (2009), in examining the role of theorycraft in *WoW*, performed extensive research looking at EJ. Among other things, he noted that the problem of numerous threads about "stipulations of who is right and who is wrong with little to support one's point" is "solved on EJ because of the high level of moderation on their boards; they are notorious for deleting posts and banning users" (pp. 19-20). The userbase of Elitist Jerks – in speaking on his research, Paul noted "they live up to the name" – has an expectation of serious attention to the site's theorycrafting model, which produces a certain standard of forum behavior that is then enforced vigorously by their moderation team. Expertise is valued, and posts that show serious thought and expertise remain; those that don't, are cut.

It's reasonable to argue that the userbase on Shoryuken is doing something highly similar, but in a less regimented way. Rather than having a moderation team that strikes undesired content from the space, the userbase relies on social pressure and unfriendly communication to discourage new members that don't follow the social rules of the community. The social stigma against people with a 2009 join date is a defense mechanism designed to keep the social structure of SRK itself intact, and in the process, it defines publically what values the site considers important, foremost among them being a slightly more cynical echo of the ideal mentioned above, where willingness to learn is valorized. New users who keep their heads low and learn the ropes are likely to be left alone; those who break the social rules face swift social retribution.

This illustrates some understandable but contradictory rhetorics about the community itself when it comes to who can become part of it. Interviewees spoke of a pervasive belief that the more people the community has, the greater the base of potential
players and challengers. It's an inclusive rhetoric that seeks to draw other people in to the activity; the root of why, for example, someone playing online might take the effort to bring an opponent playing in a way outside the ideal performance into the fold. Yet at the same time, there is this powerful negative reaction to the 09ers at SRK (though in fairness, SRK is only one community among many). It's not clear if the players I spoke to are aware of this contradiction, or even if they would see it as one; Gene's story of southern California's community suggests that there are contexts where the community doesn't feel the need to bring in every possible new player, just those who exhibit great potential.

It may be that the users at Shoryuken were particularly on the defensive because their space was being literally threatened as the flood of new users crashed the site and new forum threads crowded out "legitimate" discussion, and this made reinforcing the borders a bigger priority than bringing in new blood. What this illustrates is that the community does embrace an inclusive rhetoric, but that contextual factors influence when that rhetoric comes into play. A sign of adhering to the existing norms that make up the community – as inferred by the forum post on feeling unwelcome described above – could go far to helping a potential new community member make inroads.

Not the same each time: shifting behavior in social play

As the various examples noted above make clear, playing socially creates specific norms, during both actual gameplay and the social participation surrounding it. However, some of those examples also suggest that core terms like “casual” and “hardcore” are also in flux even within the fighting game community. Serious fighting
gamers think of themselves as distanced from casual gamers, yet they refer to non-tournament matches as “casuals.” Hardcore *Smash* players consider themselves serious, while Shoryuken.com regulars look down on *Smash* as a party game for casual players.

As with many things in our social world, the meanings of various behaviors – and the labels that refer to them – are context-dependent. The question that arises is, do gamers perform the same sort of identities and embody the same praxis in every context, or does their social play shift?

Fine (1983) and Juul (2010) would likely argue for the latter, based on their own research into multiplayer gaming. In Fine’s case, he observed that players of pen-and-paper, fantasy role-playing games move between frames related to the game constantly. At some times, players would act wholly in character for the sake of enjoyment or immersion; during others, players would shift out of the gaming frame entirely and act as themselves, in order to resolve a rule dispute or deal with some “real life” issue. In many cases, he observed players inhabiting both frames – character and player – at once, bridging the two.

Juul argues for conceptualizing a social game as having three frames: a game orientation frame that focuses on the basic goals of the game (such as wanting to win), a game experience frame that focuses on making the experience enjoyable or interesting, and a social management frame that focuses on the gameplay process as a social event. For example, a parent playing a board game with a child might consider making tactically unsound choices – losing on purpose – in order to make the experience fun for the child.

At a basic level, Butler’s notion of performance and performativity accounts for the idea that a performance isn’t particularly static. The idea of performance as resistance
is based on the reconfiguring of individual acts to create new performances that counter hegemonic ideals. Performance isn’t always voluntary, either; someone may embody or abandon certain acts that make up a performance based on the situation. In short, a performance can and often is shaped by context.

To explore the ways in which social play might change depending on context, I shall examine two areas of focus: differing play situations and experiences among my interviewees, and the observations made of local students engaged in competitive and cooperative social play.

“Well, I’m Wii bowling”: moving between play modes

Although many – if not all – of the fighting gamers I spoke to are dedicated to fighting game play in specific, they are all also gamers in general. A number spoke to me about playing other non-fighting video games, or at the very least mentioned having played them in the past. Others talked about the difference between playing their “main” game – the one on which they focus their energy – and how they play other fighting games that may or may not be related. What became clear from examining those narratives is that these players can and do move between playstyles and sometimes even social behavior when it comes to different games.

The quote that leads into this section is from my interview with Smash player Matthew. We had been discussing the various games that he enjoyed playing in the context of his being a “hardcore gamer;” I asked him if, while playing Wii Sports with friends, his highly analytical and competitive Smash Bros. mindset appeared while he was playing a more friendly, casual game. He responded,
Respondent: They’re pretty discrete, because I only really get into that mode if I’m playing to win, or playing to learn as an amendment to that. So if I’m playing Wii bowling – a game where like, to be honest, the outcome of me winning or me losing has no bearing on almost anything – I’m not gonna get competitive about it. It’s just gonna be fun for me, you know? Throw the ball, just… yeah. Even though competition is inherent in, like, bowling, because… you know, you are trying to get a better score than the other person, I don’t take it seriously. So. I dunno… it’s just, in a game, if you’re gonna play to win, yeah, there’s a different mindset to take into it.

Interviewer: So it’s not necessarily that you’re… it’s not necessarily that you’re doing different things between “friendly game of Wii bowling” and “competitive game of *Smash Bros. Melee*,” but that *Smash Bros. Melee* is a very high-investment activity for you, and you’re throwing, you know, throwing more of yourself into it, and the Wii bowling experience is kind of “Well, I’m Wii bowling.”

Respondent: (laughs) Yeah.

He went on to elaborate that his competitive or casual mindsets were not so much about the nature of the games themselves, but about his level of investment. For Matthew, playing competitive fighting games is a high-investment activity in terms of time, effort, and energy. When he plays those games, he adopts a more serious playstyle. A friendly game of *Wii Sports* bowling, by contrast, doesn’t require that, and he relaxes many of the norms that affect not just his playstyle, but even his mood, in a competitive fighting game.

Ibrahim, a *Soul Calibur 4* player, noted that even within his favored game there is a more focused, hardcore tournament playstyle and a less regimented, almost teasing style he uses for casual matches:

Interviewer: So whether or not the game is casual doesn’t have a lot of bearing on [which character] it is you pick [to use].
Respondent: Yeah. Not who I pick, but I might play slightly differently in a casual game than I would in a tournament game.

Interviewer: How so?

Respondent: Um, I might… I won’t go for absolutely every trick in the book in a casual game. In a tournament game I have to be unpredictable and keep my opponent off their game, so I will play, like, a more varied game in a tournament game, but in casual it’s… too difficult to try and keep up with that, so I’ll just, you know, do the same move over and over until it wins.

Interviewer: Do you ever do, kind of like… when you’re playing casual, do you do stuff that you know is stupid but you don’t care because you’re playing casually?

Respondent: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. All the time. Or I will make it a point that I must do a certain move in a casual game; something very slow and flashy and stupid, and if it hits it becomes a moral victory.

This quote is interesting in that in it, Ibrahim admits to playing in a style that is, though perhaps not outright mean or antagonistic, certainly not consistent with the ideal observed at EVO, or even described by the other interviewees. This sort of moment was rare among the players I interviewed, who for the most part did not relate stories of their own “bad behavior.”

In both of these cases, there’s a casual mode, and a hardcore mode. Matthew swaps between them based on the game he’s playing: *Wii Sports* bowling is low-investment casual play, *Smash Bros.* is high-investment hardcore play. Ibrahim moves between playstyles based not so much on game as on his perception of what the match is for. In a tournament game he has to bring a particular playstyle to be competitive, but in a more casual match he can “spam” (repeatedly perform) a special move or artificially limit
his play (e.g. “I must hit with [x] move this match”) and be satisfied with the result, despite that being incongruent with his typical competitive style.

The idea here is that what shifts in these scenarios is less the games themselves, but more the sorts of goals for play that come out of them. Juul describes a critical element of multiplayer gaming being a shared understanding of goals. Games themselves, social situations, and context of play can all alter what this shared understanding of the goal of the enterprise is. When Ibrahim says he has to be “unpredictable” in a serious game, this is because the expectation about the goal of the game is that it’s a skill test to determine a winner between challengers. The shared goal demands a certain play performance. The behavior of online players who are bad losers is likely attributable to the same thing: the serious player might – as many of the interviewees did – view a casual match as a way to improve and practice. The bad loser, on the other hand, is playing specifically to obtain a victory. In this situation there is no shared understanding of goals, and the inevitable result is social conflict.

Certainly, shared goals of play were important to the players Kolos (2010) observed, and in her conclusion she argues persuasively that a focus on play rather than the game – on what people are doing and why – may be a useful critical tool for studying social play. For the players in her study, the important thing was that they viewed fun, casual social play as their collective goal. As a result, the group was able to accommodate a wide variety of playstyles, personalities, and backgrounds. Even players who would otherwise be considered more hardcore or serious gamers shifted their play somewhat in the context of gaming as a group.
One element of my research focused on observing volunteer players of varying levels of gaming investment and experience. The players were brought into the Gaming Research and Immersive Design (GRID) Lab on campus in groups of 3-4 to play three games: *Mario Kart Wii*, *Left 4 Dead 2*, and *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*. I observed their play, asking occasional questions about both their experience playing in the study, and their experiences playing socially in other venues. In particular, I was interested in two possibilities: that gaming experience or investment might alter how they played socially in differing combinations, and the effect a game’s nature – competitive, cooperative, or a bit of both – might have on social play. The three cohort groups included one group of experienced players, one of strictly beginners (or even non-players), and one group that mixed the two.

Interestingly, the mixing of different experience levels across the three groups did not seem to have a major impact on their play. For the most part, the social situation and knowledge of the players seemed to dictate more how a given group of players behaved around each other. For example, the group of casual or non-players were the least talkative of the three groups, with some of their play taking place in relative silence, broken only by occasional questions about the in-game situation. When I asked if their social play experience outside the study was comparable, two of the players in that group – one male and one female, both casual players – said it was not; playing with friends they would often throw around “trash talk” or jokes that they weren’t during the study. When I asked why, the response was matter of fact: “We don’t know each other” and “Strangers make it stranger.”
The experienced player group’s interaction is the flip side of that; the three players in that group were acquainted, and thus they were more chatty, bantering back and forth during play. In particular, they would reference other play moments. One of the participants in the experienced group, during play of *New Super Mario Bros.*, looked at me and said “This is a surprise. Usually [another member of the group]’s got 30 lives and I’ve got 2” after he had acquired a stock of “extra lives.” The players in the mixed group were more talkative than the beginner group, but less talkative than the experienced group. In their case, it may be that there was a shared experience of games – an understanding that everyone in the group was a “gamer,” even if two were casual and two were more serious – that provided a common language, but the lack of social ties between those players limited interactions.

That being said, each cohort had a “talker” in it, much as Kolos’ college dorm players did. In each case, the talker was a combination social connection and narrator of the experience. The beginner group’s talker was an experienced *Left 4 Dead* series player, and so during that period he often gave advice and coaching to the others, who had little to no experience. However, he was also the player who would make short, funny comments on in-game events, such as giving an ironic “Teamwork!” and a smile after he and another competitor managed to collide and hurl themselves off the track in *Mario Kart*. The talkers in the other two groups were similar. In the mixed group, the talker was a less experienced gamer who offered similar joking exclamations about what was going on in the game as they happened; for example, while playing *Left 4 Dead 2*, he picked up a pipebomb weapon, and then announced brightly, “I’ve got a pipebomb!”
Also of note is the fact that when I intervened, either to ask a question or, experimentally, to make an offhand joking remark to join in the experience, even non-talkative players would briefly become more vocal, taking part in the joke and responding as it spread through the group and was taken up or modified by the players involved. Generally speaking, the amount of talking also went up during play of *New Super Mario Bros.* compared to the other two games, a phenomenon discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

It’s likely that the somewhat artificial nature of the social situation is largely responsible for the quietness of the groups. It may be that this is also why the group tended to respond when I spoke up; doing so brought me into the experience, rather than situating me as a silent, even voyeuristic observer taking notes and controlling the flow of play through time management. Kolos talked about how “the 5N players projected their frustrations onto the characters on the screen and made game play into a performance for anyone in the lounge to observe or interact with” (p. 76). It may be that in the relatively artificial lab setting, this wasn’t viable, and so many of aspects of playing in that particular mode – such as vocalizing and trash talk – weren’t salient. It’s worth noting that while the other two groups played during periods where the lab (which also has computer editing stations for digital media students nearby) was empty, the mixed group had other people in it to perform for; it may be that this accounts for their higher level of chatter during play.

Also, there was one type of in-game event that accounted for many of the vocalizations and brief conversations that did happen: failures. Whether it’s being driven off the road by a competitor in *Mario Kart*, tackled off a bridge by a charging zombie in *Deadpool*.
*Left 4 Dead 2*, or losing a valuable powerup to another player in *Mario Bros.* time and again, instances of failure were times when players would speak up. Naturally, responses ran the gamut from the assertion of many – particularly players in the beginner group – that they “suck” at that game, to metacommentary on the design of the game, to (often) simply laughing aloud. What’s interesting in this case is that the players are clearly more focused on the game experience frame (per Juul) and the social management frame than the goal orientation frame, since this last would presumably have them expressing more frustration at the in-game setback than the humor or helplessness of the situation they were expressing.

The behavior I observed didn’t suggest that players moderated their play overmuch based on experience in gaming. Certainly, there were times when more experienced players *in a particular game* would then offer help with controls or information about the game itself, but they didn’t actually play any differently across all three groups. Social situation seemed to be much more salient a factor in determining how one played. An interesting point for future research may be to identify if players are more openly antagonistic during play among those they know than among strangers. Players in this study were rarely, if ever, openly antagonistic toward others during play, and never openly outright hostile. However, the players in the experienced group, who knew each other outside the study, had a more teasing or “trash talk”-like edge to their interactions than the other two. Considered against the claims of the two players in the beginner group that their normal social play involved a certain degree of smack talk, social familiarity rather than the game itself seems to be a more likely factor.
The issue of a game's nature – competitive, cooperative, or both – did seem to have an effect on social play, but in a slightly unusual way. Of the three games that were chosen, two follow a relatively traditional model when it comes to competition or cooperation. *Mario Kart* is a racing game and for the most part, the nominal goal of the game is to win the race, beating one's opponents using driving skill and the various weapon-like "items" one can pick up. *Left 4 Dead 2* is a first-person shooting game where the players must work together to safely reach the goal of each level (a "safe room"). The game admonishes players with on-screen text as each level begins: "Stay together to survive," though the more advanced players in the experienced group often had trouble with one player who knew the level leaving the group and leaping ahead of his partners… and then getting killed once he was isolated.

Nintendo's *New Super Mario Bros Wii.*, however, is muddier when it comes to determining cooperative or competitive. *NSMB* is a new game in the vein of the original *Super Mario Bros.*; the two games play very similarly, and clearly the design and stage philosophy of not just the original *SMB* but also its successor games in the series influenced *NSMB* as well. The new twist is that unlike the previous 2D side-scrolling *Mario* games, *NSMB* is designed for four players simultaneously. Thus players must budget power-ups, navigate stage hazards, and interact not just with the game world, but also each other. Sabotaging or even killing your fellow players is as much a possibility as helping them along. In short, the game's structure supports play in a competitive mode and a cooperative mode; in fact, it may even be said to support both simultaneously.

It became clear that across all three groups, *NSMB* was creating a different sort of play from its more traditional counterparts. The increased social chatter is just one
aspect; players who had appeared more bored or restrained playing *Mario Kart* or *Left 4 Dead 2* became more animated during *NSMB* play. One of the women in group one, a casual player with some game experience, was very blasé toward the first two games, but even the mention of *New Super Mario Bros.* made her excited to play. A player in the mixed group who had been quite reserved to that point suddenly opened up while playing *NSMB*, joking about the situation and becoming more engaged; when other players would hurry ahead of him in the level, he – as the player of series regular Luigi – would often cry "What about Weegee!" in a tone of affected despair.

The players were also shifting between cooperative or competitive modes on the fly, as well. In the beginner and mixed groups, the first few stages that got played had a very autonomous character. Rather than being "four players playing together" they were "four players playing in the presence of each other." That is to say, they would play through the stage almost as if the other people present weren't even there. More experienced players would run ahead, much like the *L4D* player mentioned above did. However, as time went on, people began to move more into a mode where they were playing together.

The beginner group especially began to gel as a group after 2-3 stages; interestingly, it was the discovery of new game elements that tended to suddenly create cooperative behavior. This is a phenomenon I have observed before in a different setting; during my previous research on games and meaning-making (Harper, 2007) I noticed that in a multiplayer environment, discovery of a new technique or game element often led the players to converse about it, attempt to use it, and explore its boundaries within the game. In that study, players of adventure game *Gauntlet: Dark Legacy* would slowly
evolve their playstyle over time to cooperatively incorporate new information. Something very similar happened here. Discovering that players can pick up, carry, and throw their teammates around the stage led to numerous attempts at it, both as a sort of joking or teasing thing to do and as a genuine way to defeat stage obstacles. For example, one player in the mixed group who wasn't doing particularly well would often simply be carried through parts of the stage by a teammate, both metaphorically in terms of someone doing the work of play for him, and literally in that his on-screen character was being carried overhead by another.

Such play wasn't always cooperative; one player in the mixed group who had experience with *NSMB* said, up front, "I apologize in advance; I become a huge dick when I play this." True to his word, he often used the carry/throw in game to tease other players, or even sometimes to beat them to power-up items. The advanced group, who not only had experience with *NSMB* but had also played together before, played in a similar way. While this was less common among the beginner group, I don't believe experience was the major factor there; for the advanced group, their existing social ties contextualized the possible intent behind such play, and for the lone player in the mixed group, it seems more likely that the game afforded him an opportunity for a particular playstyle. More to the point, once his actions made that style apparent to his fellow players, they began to follow suit.

This idea of what the game affords or doesn't afford seems to be the critical measure. As a point of comparison, the beginner group were the only players of *Mario Kart* to step outside the traditional racing game modes and try something else. Some of their play was in "team battle mode," where they split into teams of two and drove around
a closed arena, using weapon items to try and pop balloons attached to each go-kart.

While still competitive, this mode provided a different style of play, and the reactions and social play of the group changed a bit. The shift was not dramatic, but their play during team battle was more vocal and animated. Between team battle mode and *NSMB*, the similarity is the potential for working together while maintaining the competitive or antagonistic aspect. *Left 4 Dead 2* did not appear to have such a range; the players weren't able to damage each other with their weapons, for example, though players who were experienced with *L4D* explained that there were settings that would allow for it (which no group elected to turn on).

The conclusion to be made here is that whether a game is nominally competitive or cooperative appears to be less important than the game code supporting multiple playstyles, much as Juul discusses in regards to *Guitar Hero* in *A Casual Revolution*. In that scenario, he noted that the game supports both social/casual play as a social event, and solo/hardcore play as a game of mastery. It seems likely that *New Super Mario Bros.* engaged these groups the most because it supported both competitive and cooperative ways of playing inside a relatively simple game framework of side-scrolling stages with simplistic controls and familiar characters.

What these issues of game experience and cooperative/competitive play say about shifting performances in social gaming is that they are less dependent on the game itself but more on both social context and what the game allows. As Matthew and Ibrahim's stories suggest, it's possible to play a game one takes seriously in a casual way by shifting play performance to fit the social context, and as the players at the GRID Lab proved, contextual factors like knowing the people involved or the artificiality of the setting were
more likely to adjust player behavior than the game itself. The key to social play in both scenarios is understanding that the people you are playing with are on the same page. The result when people are not, as with online poor losers, is a dysfunctional social experience.

Conclusions about social play

Social play is clearly a complex thing. For fighting game players, there is a commonly-accepted ideal performance that focuses on being a gracious winner or good loser, downplaying the importance of winning or losing in favor of seeing each battle as a way to improve. Poor losers, people who blame their losses on external factors, or the openly antagonistic who put the emphasis on winning a match rather than participating in a social experience are the flip side of this, the player performance that serious fighting gamers look to avoid. Online communities serve as ways for like-minded players to meet and reaffirm, but when others who don't share that norm enter the space for whatever reason – as the 09ers did on Shoryuken.com – these players went on the immediate defensive, not only of their space itself, but of the playstyle and social norms it represented. The systematic exclusion and ostracizing of 09ers on SRK shows some of the consequences of not matching those norms.

However, it's also apparent that even serious players can play in non-serious ways. The perceived goal of the experience in social play – what each of the participants expects to get out of it – shapes the experience considerably. When expectations are the same, the flow of social play is generally harmonious. By contrast, when the context of social play is uncertain or the goal unclear – players don't know each other, the game, or
both, for example – then social play can become less "people playing together" and more "people playing near each other." The key question for examining behavior in social play as it shifts between contexts, then, is generally "What are we doing here, and why are we doing it?" In the next chapter, I explore these questions through examining the practice of fighting game play itself: what gameplay norms and behaviors are part of maintaining and performing the social norms discussed above?
Chapter 6
The practice of play

Up to this point, we have considered the situation and context of play – its environment – as well as the ways in which players behave socially inside that play context. Now we turn to a discussion of actual technical play itself: what the players are doing in regards to the game code. What happens when a fighting game fan picks up an arcade stick, plugs it into a console, and sits down for a match of Street Fighter 4? S/he may be embodying the arcade ideal, as noted in previous chapters, and s/he may be aiming to be a gracious loser. At some point, however, those contextual factors have to surround actual play. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which play practice, and more importantly normative ideas of play practice, have an impact on the performativity of fighting game players.

In speaking on the performativity of gender, Butler (1990) frames the process of performance as an exercise of various activities that leads to an identity, or more properly the creation of a social construct called "gender" with which people can identity and be identified with by others. In short, a series of discursive practices results in this thing called gender, and through those practices we identify and are identified in a gendered way: "[g]ender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constructed in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 179, emphasis original). Butler's aim in Gender Trouble is to separate gender from being considered an essential material condition and put it more firmly in the realm of discursive social practice. As I've discussed in previous chapters, criticism of how this downplayed the
influence of materiality on discursive practice emerged and Butler revised her thesis somewhat, allowing for a model where material conditions present a persistent influence but where discourse still does much to contextualize how those influences are read.

Consider, for a moment, the digital game text. As Juul (2005) argues it, a game is a combination of fiction and rules, with the computer code that makes them up defining the expansiveness and capabilities of their universe, with the encompassing fiction contextualizing and explaining it. Comparing this to the effect of the body and Butler's desire to divorce socially-constructed gender from it, there are certain parallels to the game text. As the last chapter discussed, there is a significant social aspect to play – particularly with fighting games – which the community regards as a primarily interpersonal activity: intended to be played against a human opponent rather than alone against the computer. If the code of the game, then, presents a variation of the "material body" of the game – the literal, physical dimensions of its existence, the boundaries of the text's capability – then it stands to reason that a "stylized repetition" of playstyles would have a similar relationship to the "body" of the game that discursive gender does to the physical bodies of people.

The ways in which fighting gamers feel the games should be played – both through expressed opinions and actual gameplay – are the praxis through which the game experience is defined. By interrogating and exploring those discursive practices, it's possible to get a sense of what fighting games are, not just as a genre or a codebase, but as an actual text that fighting gamers make meaning from (see McKee, 2003). In this sense, the players in question not only perform an identity as game players, but indeed perform identities for the games themselves through play.
Particularly, this chapter's themes focus on a major conflict that arose from data collection between casual and hardcore approaches to play, and on two normative concepts that were commonly applied to fighting games: what makes an "ideal match," and the necessity of the "level playing field" in competitive fighting games. What these two areas point to are important discourses that define the basic level of the experience: what is this game we're playing? In each case, the various sides of the arguments and their expressions of those arguments indicate key factors of what makes fighting games the experience they are for the people who play them.

*Smash* is a party game: the casual versus the hardcore

In his book *A Casual Revolution*, Jesper Juul (2010) discusses at length the rising casual gamer market, and in so doing makes a number of major comparisons between the "traditional" hardcore or dedicated gamer, and the more casual player. His discussion ranges from issues based on the code of the game – ways in which some games are more inclined to support casual players versus hardcore ones – to more social issues, such as the different desires each type of player has for the game experience. Although Juul does not frame the differences between the two player types as particularly antagonistic toward each other, the two styles of play and sets of expectations about what a game provides are quite different in scope. Within the community of serious fighting game fans, however, they appear to be almost entirely incompatible.

This incompatibility is evident in the fighting game community, at least among enthusiasts. Players with whom I spoke described very different scenarios for casual play versus serious play, and the valuing of one as "authentic" over the other was very clear
cut. As I’ve discussed previously, it is important to the gamers I spoke to that the people they play with show a certain degree of respect not just for other players as people, but for the play of fighting games as a pursuit. To accompany the social markers of someone who is serious about fighting games explored in the previous chapter, here I will discuss some of the more technical, gameplay-oriented ways in which being serious/hardcore is constructed.

Perhaps the biggest example of this in action is in the conflict surrounding the play of the Smash Bros. series of games, particularly the tournament scene for Super Smash Bros. Brawl (SSBB or simply Brawl). In a multi-tiered way, there is conflict within Smash players about how the game should be played, and then conflict between "Smashers" and the rest of the fighting game community – particularly the fans at Shoryuken.com (SRK) – about if Brawl or the Smash games in general are even fighting games in the first place.

In speaking to the only Smash player among the cohort of interview respondents, Matthew, I asked him about the internet meme mentioned in the introduction that describes the popular image of the competitive Smash player: the "Fox only, Final Destination, no items" meme where players of competitive Smash are said to go totally overboard in their restrictiveness playing the game, knocking the many possibilities the game offers down to one character (Fox), one stage (Final Destination), and no items. In discussing the potential roots of that meme, he identified a rift within the Smash community:

R: Well, yes. That’s… I can’t speak from any surefire experience, this is purely my theorizing, is I think that meme started because of the casual vs. competitive Smash rift there is. I think it started on the casual side as someone once offhandedly remarked, “I don’t wanna play competitive
Smash because all they do is play Fox only, Final Destination, no items,”
and I think it just started spreading like that. Purely a theory behind the
meme, but that’s what I’d say. Especially…

I: It’s interesting. Do you know the site TV Tropes?

R: Yes, actually, I do.

I: The TV Tropes entry which discusses Fox only, Final Destination, no
items, is titled “No Having Fun Guys.” And of course the gist of the trope
is that the Fox only, Final Destination, no items person is not about having
fun, but about something else. And again, trope, meme, these are things
that are more cultural constructs than they are realities, I’m sure.

R: Yeah.

I: But I’m interested in this casual vs. hardc… sorry.

R: Versus hardcore rift?

I: I didn’t mean to say hardcore, but.

R: Hardcore and competitive, to me, are synonymous. They mean the
exact same thing so I take no offense. But it’s… a lot of people argue,
they’re like “Well, Smash is a party game, you should play it with items
and four-person free-for-alls,” and then other people are like, “Well, yeah,
that’s fun, but I have more fun doing this,” and then the casuals are like
“Well I have more fun doing this, so therefore you’re wrong,” and then the
competitive players are like “Well you don’t know enough about the game
so you’re stupid,” and then the casual players are like “No, you’re stupid
’cause you’re taking it to this level and it’s not supposed to be there,” and
it’s just a big… there’s a big rift of people who think Smash should be
competitive and those who think it shouldn’t be. In the end, I have a lot of
fun playing with items. If I’m playing for fun I sometimes put on items,
like, if I’m with my little brother or something, give him a fighting chance
to try and beat me, but in an actual competitive environment, I’m not
gonna trust my luck. I’m trying to factor that out of the equation in
everything I do.

What’s clearly at stake here is a discussion of what purpose the game is even for.

Hardcore or serious Smash players, in accordance with their playstyle, are not interested
in the game's potential as a "party game" solely for a given external definition of fun. To
them, the challenge of the fight is the primary source of enjoyment, not the random
wackiness that erratic factors such as items involve. These beliefs also contribute to the wider idea of fighting games as a skill challenge, as described later in this chapter.

As Matthew observes it, casual players are the opposite end of that spectrum. To them the primary enjoyment of *Smash* has little to do with the challenge of testing skill against another player. It seems plausible that casual players of *Smash*, frustrated by the differing ideals of serious or hardcore Smashers, would develop a meme that lampoons what they would see as an overly-restrictive, even joyless way of playing the game. Interestingly enough, however, Hilary Kolos' (2010) research on a social gaming group formed in a university dorm describes a group of casual players – she defines their motivations as "playfully socializing" (p. 73) – who specifically turned items off because of their effect on the match. Perhaps what is critical in both cases is that what the game code affords or does not afford is effectively set. Characters and stages can be chosen or not chosen; items can be turned on or off. The major difference in the "sides" of this conflict is that both view normative methods of play in differing ways. The result is that each is playing a version of the game that is effectively incompatible with the other solely due to communal play practice, though the group in Kolos' study suggests that even within casual or hardcore groups, there is a certain variability to the playstyle, just as the labeling of practice, non-tournament matches in the Shoryuken.com community as "casuals" or "friendlies" does. The critical issue is that in either situation, the rules of the game have to fit the social goals of the playing group.

Interestingly enough, this is also at the root of the conflict between non-*Smash* fighting gamers and *Smash* itself. Although most of the fighting gamers I spoke to were not particularly hostile to the *Smash* games, one in particular – Gene – was vehemently
against them as fighting games. Although he couched his objections in an admittance of being an "elitist," Gene went so far as to assert, when I mentioned I was speaking to fighting game fans including Smash players, that I shouldn't bother with them since Smash isn't a fighting game in the first place.

His objection centered around the idea of "house rules:" normative ideas of play that particular groups of players might institute at a particular location or setting that are socially enforced rather than being part of the affordances or limitations of the game code. For Gene, house rules were a part of his early arcade fighting game experience, until he played against fighters from a different locality with their own set of norms:

Yeah, yes, yeah. I believe it was true, because at cert… at certain points back in the day, because we were a mall arcade and we got a ton of casual people and with casual people… makes, like, you know… house rules and arcade rules come into effect a lot, which is the antithesis of SRK, which is “play to win” versus stuff like… at the beginning of our arcade it was always like… you try not to throw the guy and other things that you try not to be cheap about, thinking that that’s like, an honorable way to play or anything. So there was stuff that we had to get over at some point, especially with Marvel, ‘cause Marvel… like, Marvel vs. Capcom 1, you’d be like “Oh, we’re not gonna use helpers, helpers are cheap,” but in Marvel vs. Capcom 2 the game is about helpers, so when we were continuing to try and play it without helpers, you know, someone from Fayetteville could come in and just destroy everybody because they were using, you know, Storm, Sentinel, whatever. So. When we all got on SRK, it stepped our games up a huge amount just because we started playing differently. Like, we started playing the way it should be played and it kinda went from there.

This is a very telling anecdote, not the least reason for which being that it spells out quite clearly what the effect of meeting these other players was. The new players introduce a new norm – thoroughly beating the people at Gene's arcade in the process – and in response those players seek help to improve, leading them to a large fighting game
community on SRK who then bring those players into the institution of serious fighting gaming via gameplay norms.

Gene does not seem to hold particular rancor toward his time as a casual player; he couches the "house rules" of not using helper characters in *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* in terms of honor and good sportsmanship, both being values that are also paramount in the serious fighting game community. The difference is more revelatory than anything else; it is as if the SRK way of playing, where playing to win may involve using tactics others see as "cheap," finally led him to understand what fighting games are all about.

In discussing *Smash*, however, he is clear about why *Smash* is not a true fighting game. The notion of house rules features into his argument; in Gene's view, the game's base code presents the game as-is (hearkening back to the idea that arcade versions and arcade play are the "real" fighting games) and thus going against it implies the game isn't a fighting game to begin with:

Respondent: So the whole point of... house rules and of the... the whole reason against house rules, the whole argument against house rules is, they’ve made the game this way for you to play it this way. Like, they put throws in the game for a reason. They’re not cheap, they’re coded specifically for a reason, whether that’s the rock/paper/scissors analogy or whatever, you use what’s in the game. *Smash Bros*... it’s a bigger grey area. I would say... like, again, I haven’t even played *Brawl* and *Melee*, but it seems to be that you either play the way the game is supposed to be played – without artificial house rules imposed on it – and if you can’t play that way, then it’s a crappy game. Then it’s a broken game that there shouldn’t be tournaments of in the first place, which would be their argument. Which goes back to them saying: *Smash* sucks.

Interviewer: Gotcha. So it’s a matter of... it seems like it’s built for casuals. “Well, we can play it tournament if we turn off all this stuff,” “Well if you have to turn off all this stuff then it’s not tournament worthy in the first place,” and you’ve circled all the way back to “Well, the game itself is bad.”
Respondent: It’s a casual non-fighting game, and when they tried to make it a fighting game was when people started hating, because people said “You can’t turn it into a fighting game without changing all these things and all these things are not only artificial, but they also make the game stupid and boring,” like you said, where… the story about how nobody wants to attack first, because the options are so limited now.

Gene's opinion toward *Smash* has much in common with fan attitudes toward series canon, which is both "a slippery thing" that is communally defined (Brooker, 2002, p. 106) and a perceived unbreakable norm which constrains fan and community creativeness (Markman, 2005). The story he refers to in the final paragraph actually comes from my interview with Matthew, who had given up *Brawl* for its predecessor in the *Smash* series, *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. For Matthew, the structure of the game in *Brawl* – the attack and defense options, even the physics engine – had led inevitably to a situation where taking the initiative and attacking first became inadvisable strategic moves. As he put it, "[a] game where if you go for the first hit and you go to attack you’re at a disadvantage is eventually gonna start becoming stalemates between two people just sitting there, hopping around, waiting for the other person to make a mistake, and unfortunately that’s what’s happening in *Brawl*. In *Brawl*, even the top player right now has timed people out because he’s not gonna put himself at the risk of approaching because it puts him at an inherent disadvantage." Even though Matthew is a fan of *Smash*, *Brawl* isn't satisfying to him in this situation. Considering that Matthew enjoys other, different fighting games besides *Brawl*, it's clear that a particular way of playing trumps affection for a particular game.

He's not the only *Smash* player to comment on this, either. Although he doesn't consider himself primarily a *Smash* player, Jordan has logged considerable time playing
games in the series. In discussing why communities like SRK have an antipathy toward

*Smash*, he also noted that the standard mode of high-level play in Smash games is to be extremely defensive, never making the first move, and that he didn’t enjoy that sort of play at all:

> It’s like… because you have to play so safe. I mean, it’s a fun game if you’ve got 4 people and you’re screwing around and you don’t mind the randomness of it, like… you know, Nintendo’s recent design strategy is “random is good,” and so in *Smash* I’ve seen countless instances where you’re trying to hit someone or you’re mid-swing and a bomb materializes in front of you, because that’s what they do, and then you hit it and it explodes and you die, and it’s actually common enough that I consider it a problem, and you’ll notice in *Smash* tournaments they turn off all the items and they only play on approved stages, and they ban half the characters, and blah blah blah. So *Smash* is one of those things that can be really fun and entertaining but I think that it does not engender the same kind of “hard fun,” the same kind of tactical challenge that other fighting games do.

The connection here is that in casual play, this need for safety does not exist.

Randomness in the form of items and stage events make the result so chaotic that the dynamic he describes for tournament play likely isn't viable. Even the goal is different; casual *Smash* involves "screwing around" and randomness and playing with friends.

Hardcore *Smash* is something else entirely.

This is effectively the tension between "smashers" and "anti-smashers" that Jakobsson (2007) identified in a local community of *Smash* players in Sweden writ large, and indeed, it's likely that the tension he observed locally is an echo of continuing tension in the global *Smash* community. Interestingly, the 2007 date means that in that context it predates the *Brawl* conflict described above, suggesting that this is a cycle of discontent with a great deal of persistence. Jakobsson describes the smashers (hardcore players) viewing "gaming as sports" but that for anti-smashers (casuals), "the joy of gaming
comes from an endless stream of new games” (p. 390). The aspects of the game associated with casual play support that: the randomness and unpredictability of items encourages quick matches rather than long-term strategic play.

However, this notion of casual versus hardcore play and games isn't limited to just Smash. Earlier, Jordan had made an explicit link between party games such as Smash Bros. and games like the Mortal Kombat series, which (according to Jordan) focuses on the visceral thrill of graphic violence rather than technical play: "Yeah, yeah. It’s funny that I punched off your head three times. I mean… there is that element, and honestly, like… I’ve never met anyone who plays Mortal Kombat and a major goal is not just winning so you can do the fatality. I mean, that seems to be a pretty continuous major motivator." The idea here is that while the Mortal Kombat games provide a certain aesthetic – heads punched off, spines ripped out, opponents exploded – it is fundamentally a casual game at heart because it lacks the ability to support a certain style of play.

As for what that style of play is, Isaac had a similar discussion about Mortal Kombat and its relationship to serious fighting games where he suggests at least some of the dimensions involved:

Street Fighter is not about pugilism. It’s not about kicking somebody in the stomach. It’s not about watching… it’s why somebody, that’s why you’ll find – if you’ve talked to enough to Street Fighter people – that you’re not going to talk to people who like Mortal Kombat. It’s not the gore. Not the victory. It’s not ripping somebody’s head off. I’d say it is the victory more than those other things, I misspoke, but it’s not the… the appeal is not punching somebody in the face or blasting them with a fireball in itself. The appeal is knowing that you two walk up to the same arena, and you have to force the other person to make an error. You both have the same ability to block, to jump, to avoid, to… to advance, to retreat, to footsie, do all these things. To counter, to parry, um… to
crossup. It’s… it’s a give and take, it’s the strategy, it’s the mind games that makes all these games really similar.

For Isaac, the appeal of the game is actually independent of the code. It's about the practice of play. If a game supports that practice of play through its codebase, then it has the potential to be a serious fighting game. If it doesn't, then the game leaves consideration. In a somewhat ironic twist, Gene – whose distaste for Smash as a casual game was the entry point to this discussion – began his fighting game career as a youth by playing Mortal Kombat games.

In this conflict of the casual and the hardcore, the core issue is a merging of ideal game practice and the affordances of the code. In the case of Mortal Kombat, the code does not allow ideal game practice among the fans I interviewed, and so it's not really considered a true fighting game. Smash on the other hand occupies a more nebulous space. Fans of hardcore Smash argue that a particular practice of play applied to the affordances of the codebase produces the right match to satisfy hardcore play, while the prevailing view of players at communities like Shoryuken.com is that those affordances create an untenable – indeed, flat-out boring – playstyle that doesn't mesh with the ideal. Interestingly, there was no evidence either from those who played Smash I spoke with, or on communities such as Smashboards, that the games favored by those at SRK weren't "real fighting games."

Thus, there are two critical issues here. One is an issue of material embodiment: what does the code of the game allow? This seems relatively clear cut, even in the case of Smash. What muddies the waters is conflicting notions of play practice. When opinions differ about what the gameplay experience is supposed to be like – normative ideas of play practice – then the viability of the game itself for serious play comes into question.
An ideal performance: characteristics of the "ideal match"

One interesting question that arises from this, is what makes an ideal match in the first place? What styles of play do players desire and respond to? Both the matches observed at the EVO tournament and the experiences of the players interviewed paint a particular picture of this notion of the ideal match: what styles of play are rewarded or rejected, and what elements of the match contribute to the idea of a satisfying gameplay experience.

The final day of the EVO tournament – the day when the final tournaments for each game were held – had a distinct character compared to the previous two. The bustling, busy, lots-of-things-to-see aura of the first two days seemed to put the emphasis on gameplay: the participants were obviously there to play in matches, to play fighting games with others, and to generally take part in the event. The third day was entirely different. Changes in lighting and physical space (see appendix C) helped to convey a complete change in mood: now the participants were there to watch. This isn't to say that watching matches wasn't part of the experience on days 1-2; quite the contrary, some pool matches involving famous players drew such large crowds that the organizers had to force people to move simply so the players could actually play the game at all. However, on the first two days the "watching" part of the experience seemed to run concurrent to the "playing" part. On day three, "watching" was foregrounded to the exclusion of all else.

That being said, "watching" should not be construed as "not participating." In fact, some of the more intense examples of how the participants valorized or rejected
certain types of play come from crowd responses to public matches. As mentioned before, this brings us back to the idea of the gaming paratext (Consalvo, 2007): the act of playing the game is not limited just to the literal act of holding a controller and engaging the game itself, but in consuming and taking part in peripheral activities related to the games. In fact, it was the crowd’s participation as observers that helped to best identify how different styles and forms of play were held up as good or desirable, compared to which ones were instead considered negative in some way. Watching for what events got a positive response or negative response from the crowd – cheering, booing, and other crowd activity – helped create a sense of how tournament participants performed being “good players.”

In terms of crowd response pointing to particular types of play, there are both general themes that held across certain scenarios, and specific examples from certain games that are endemic to that game alone. One of the prevailing general themes was technical excellence. Consistently, across both official matches I observed on the main stage and pools and casual matches in the BYOC zone, a player who was able to perform special techniques, moves, attacks, or defenses that were difficult, flashy, or both, received accolades and cheering from the observing crowd. I make the distinction between “difficult” and “flashy” based on the way in which fighting games are played. Controlling one’s character involves multiple aspects of control and timing; most attacks and defenses require varying amounts of actual physical interaction with the controller, ranging from pressing a single button to throw a punch to performing a series of directional inputs on the joystick followed by multiple button presses to perform a highly complex attack or pattern of attacks. On top of that aspect, however, there’s also the issue
of timing: your attack must fall into a time when the opponent is defenseless, otherwise your opportunity will be missed and the opponent may counterattack. So, technical skill may refer to performing a particularly difficult or hard to use attack all on its own, or performing a relatively simple input under difficult circumstances, or both.

One common example of this are what are called “supers:” techniques that require some degree of build-up to use (typically an in-game meter that is filled by attacking, defending, or taking hits), have slightly more complex inputs than normal, but do considerable damage and can turn around a match if they connect. In SF4 there are two types of such moves, “supers” and “Ultras.” In many matches, merely performing one was enough to evoke a crowd response. During exhibition matches on day one, a player using the character Zangief attempted his “Final Atomic Buster” ultra move against the opposite player. He didn’t connect, but the crowd still responded with an “ohhhh!” to acknowledge its use. Later in the same match, his opponent, playing as Dhalsim, interrupted a string of attacks with his own ultra, prompting an “oooh!” response. Of course, the spelling out of the vocalizations strips them of their tone and inflection; the players were clearly expressing something like sympathy to the Zangief player – the “ohhh!” had the sound of, for example, a crowd responding to a near miss of the hole in golf, or missing a spare in bowling. Conversely, the “oooh!” for Dhalsim was more a sound of appreciation and congratulations.

However, technical play need not be flashy to garner crowd response. This was particularly true during the finals on day three in games such as Street Fighter 3: Third Strike, Soul Calibur 4, and SF4. What was noticeable in the way participants played those games was a similarity to fencing; rather than going brutally all out to overwhelm the
other player, those players instead seemed to trade a series of opening moves, feints, and forays intended to test the opponent’s defenses and create an opening. This is actually a marked difference from the more frenetic style of play I observed for *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* and *Guilty Gear XX*; those games instead seem to involve a whirlwind of action and attacks rather than the slower pace of the previously mentioned games.

In the former type of game, the crowd responded to sudden changes in momentum. During the back and forth of testing attacks and defensive maneuvers, little was said. On the other hand, when one player’s defenses were open and the other took advantage of it, the action and the crowd response changed considerably. In that situation the attacking player with the advantage has the opportunity to perform a long string of attacks with no chance for the victim to defend him/herself, known as a “combo” (short for “combination”). During said combos, the audience shows their appreciation through cheering: “oooh!”’s and “ahh!”’s, and the like. Even if the combo was simply a straightforward series of normal attacks, the fact that the momentum of the match had shifted drew in the crowd. Likewise, a potential combo victim who saves him/herself at the last moment through a sudden defensive maneuver would likewise evoke a response.

What seems to be at play in these scenarios is drama. The more technical the play, the more fantastic the footwork, and the more close the shave, the greater the crowd’s sense of drama and enjoyment. Consider by comparison the (very rare) occasion that a player in a match managed to defeat his/her opponent without taking any damage whatsoever, known in fighting game circles as a “perfect.” While they were rare in tournament play – among the matches I observed, there were no more than 5 out of nearly a hundred – they did occur. Yet the crowd’s response to them was generally
lukewarm, even during the finals, where presumably the most skilled players were on
display. I found that response curious until I considered it against this idea of drama: a
perfect victory is, more or less, a fait accompli. The match tends to be shorter than
normal, as one player dominates the field. Such fights lack drama; there is no tension, no
instability in the outcome. As a result, it seemed as if players reacted less well to those
situations. This is why a Zangief player who misses with his ultra – by all accounts a
really unfortunate technical play which leaves him open to counterattack – can still get a
response from the crowd: they appreciate the sense of drama that this flashy move
presents.

Beyond that, there are other considerations that arise from this comparison of
the perfect fait accompli to the dramatic. The first is that while technical play is obviously
valorized, it has to be within a particular context in order to be recognized as such.
Consider that the player who obtains a perfect victory must have at least some degree of
technical skill, particularly at the highest levels such as the finals on day three. This is not
to say there is no recognition – a player in the GGXX finals managed a perfect twice in a
row, which did get some applause, and in fact an observer behind me yelled “Double
fucking perfect!” as well – but that recognition is typically lower key. One potential
reason is that dramatic play seems to involve both players; cheering would often escalate
when one player gained momentum, and then his/her opponent suddenly turned the tables
and made a comeback.

This was especially apparent in the SF4 finals between Justin Wong and Daigo
Umehara, whose matches were so close and so full of sudden reversals that they extended
the entire affair by nearly an hour in order to play enough matches to resolve the victor.
To call the crowd’s response to those matches explosive would be an understatement; the *SF4* finals being the capstone event to EVO 2009, the room was full nearly to capacity and their visceral response was deafening. In such a case, the dramatic matches bring the decision to the wire, enable more matches (and more chances for displays of technical excellence), and generally create a feeling of tension. The perfect win, by contrast, shuts down play; it moves things forward too quickly, creates no tension, and fewer chances for players to show their skills.

On suspense at sporting events, Bryant, Rockwell, and Owens (1994) mention that when fans had a positive emotional investment in one of the winners, then suspense about the outcome made the entire experience more enjoyable. Their focus was on identification; the idea is that if a spectator has an emotional connection to one of the participants then suspense about the outcome has actual meaning; in other words, if they don't care who wins or loses, then there's no chance for suspense to build in the first place. Gan et al. (1997) had similar findings in regards to suspense, where identifying with the winning team was a contributor to enjoying the game.

Taken in context of Killian's remarks about the personas of the community – "We have heroes and villains here" – this doesn't seem surprising. A rapidly seesaw-ing match with dramatic shifts of tempo and advantage creates suspense over the winner; when it's not clear who will be the victor, the crowd would get more into it. One possibility, however, is that the reactions of the crowd observed over the space of the entire tournament suggest that investment in one player or "side" alone might not be required; it could be that these attendees are so invested in the activity itself – in "serious fighting
games” – that this alone creates the necessary suspense… and makes them less responsive to situations where there is little to no suspense, such as perfect wins.

On that note, the crowd is clearly important to fighting gamers; Evan describes his first encounter with a massive crowd around a Street Fighter 2 machine as "the greatest thing I ever saw," and Gene notes that it was wanting to be "that good player in the middle of the crowd" that drew him to play in the arcades rather than at home on consoles. The crowds at EVO were no different; during the finals the announcers whipped them into a cheering frenzy for many of the final matches, and during the MvC2 finals, the additional commentary by IFC Yipes (a well-known Marvel player with a unique, game-specific lingo) produced some of the strongest crowd reactions of them all.

What’s also noticeable here is a focus on play rather than winning. This type of crowd reaction is clearly predicated on the actual play of the matches being the focus rather than who wins or loses. In a sense this is perfectly understandable; as observers rather than players, the crowd hopes to see more play. This is also not to say that who wins or who loses is entirely unimportant, either; when French SC4 player Malek finished his match in the tournament, a number of friends and fans in the crowd rushed the stage to hug him, congratulate him, and otherwise acknowledge him. This happened to a lesser extent to the winners of the other final tournaments as well. However, while winners are acknowledged, it is reasonably clear that the process leading to that point was more important to the crowd, overall, than the result.
What not to do: proscribed play

Conversely, instances at EVO of proscribed play – modes of play that engendered obvious social disapproval – were exceedingly rare. The reason for this isn't clear; it may be that attending the event represents a tacit agreement to a social contract. Even among the pool matches and bring-your-own-console area games – more informal, smaller-scale instances of play away from the notoriety and visibility of the big screen – I observed no real moments where players expressed their displeasure, got into arguments, or otherwise gave an indicator that proscribed play was occurring. That being said, my relative inexperience with the community and my incomplete knowledge of deep fighting game mechanics means that there may be instances of such that were not readily apparent, particularly if those who would express their displeasure had some sort of incentive not to do so: not wanting to interrupt the match, make a scene, or simply not wanting to confront the player using a proscribed tactic.

However, there was one major and extremely notable instance of attendee reaction to proscribed play that needs mentioning in extensive detail. It occurred across the *Soul Calibur 4* finals in matches featuring a character named Hilde. Unlike the other games featured at EVO, *SC4* is a 3D fighting game; the action takes place in a 3D zone rather than a two-dimensional flat plane, allowing for more directions of movement and adding an additional level of complexity to landing attacks. One common feature of 3D fighting games is the concept of the "ring out:" most stages have outside edges, and if one player can force the opponent's character off the edge, the opponent (typically) instantly loses the match regardless of their remaining health points. The feature is so common
that, at one point, an attendee nearby watching the matches that I was conversing with said "it's not 3D if there's no ring outs."

In *Soul Calibur 4*, a character named Hilde appears to have, judging from the instances of play I saw at EVO, a certain combination of moves that, if it connects, sends the opponent flying a considerable horizontal distance. Thus it's relatively easy for a Hilde player to aim for a ring out win, rather than a more traditional fight where each opponent wears down the other's health. From the other characters in the *SC4* matches I saw, no others exhibited the same capability, and of the matches involving Hilde between the semi-finals on day two and the finals on day three, a significant number ended in ring out wins.

What's interesting about this situation is that the crowd's response to the use of Hilde, particularly during the finals, was intensely negative. Booing and shouted comments were almost always part of matches where Hilde was used. In some cases the negative reaction started before the match even began; as players moved around the character selection screen, the crowd would often boo and hiss at a Hilde player the second s/he selected Hilde as his/her character. I had initially wondered if this reaction involved a particular player that the community viewed as a villain of sorts, but these reactions continued regardless of who was fighting. As each game's final bracket began on day three, the EVO staff prepared intro movies featuring play from each game; the mere appearance of Hilde's ring out combo – viewable online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhn8HxE43_4&t=00m36s – sparked a rash of boos from the crowd. In short, a use or even suggestion of Hilde and her ring out combo would result in an instant and intense boooing.
Beyond the simple negative visceral reaction there were a number of ancillary ones as well. One thing that was notable about the finals on day three compared to the previous two days was the introduction of an announcer, likely due to the aforementioned concept that the final day is for "watching" rather than "playing." Although there is not necessarily any promise of impartiality on the part of the announcer, I found myself taken aback when, during the SC4 finals, the announcer was among the people who booed Hilde players. At one point, when an opponent defeated a Hilde player, the announcer commented over the PA, "No cheap finish today!" In this sense, "cheap" refers to a technique or ability that offers great power or utility at relatively little risk.

During these matches, players in the audience would also shout counter-Hilde strategies in addition to booing, suggesting that the opponent move in a certain way, or defend in a certain way, to shut down this rote combination of attacks that resulted in (apparently easy) ring outs. In a slightly more complex way of showing their opinion on Hilde, the crowd in general reacted very positively to situations where Hilde's ring out combo, or Hilde play in general, was "shut down." Other players, using characters such as Cassandra and Ivy, were able to defeat Hilde users to much greater applause. In particular, one Ivy player – Malek, who would go on to win the championship – managed to ring out Hilde herself with a throw in one of his matches. Crowd response to that particular win was ecstatic and vibrant, with lots of cheering; one assumes that the combination of the "cheap" ring out combo being defeated with the ironic twist of a victory by ring out played to both sides of the drama coin. It was also technically savvy and flashy, as previously mentioned. It seems that adding the aspect of proscribed play made the crowd all the more enthusiastic.
In a similar vein, at one point a competitor in the *SC4* finals who had been to that point using a different character, and playing on an arcade stick, suddenly switched to a console control pad after losing a match. Since arcade sticks had to that point been the norm at the event, this struck me as odd. That impression was confirmed, however, by the sudden explosive booing that occurred when the crowd noticed it. Confused, I turned to nearby attendees who were also watching the finals, and asked why the crowd had suddenly turned against this player. One of them responded that Hilde's ring out combination is easier to do on a console pad than an arcade stick. Sure enough, that player went on to pick Hilde – prompting more negative reaction from the crowd – and the combination did indeed make an appearance. Aaron noted in his interview that this is due to the ability to "macro" on pads compared to arcade sticks, where unused buttons on the pad can be set to combinations of button presses. Since Hilde's "doom combo" involves attacks that use multiple combined button presses, the pad makes performing it easier.

These incidents stand out for two reasons: their intensity, and the fact that such responses were so uncommon outside this context. The question that remains is why this particular combination is so proscribed. In considering that question I was drawn back to my conversation with Seth Killian, who noted that EVO strives to impart as few hard and fast rules as possible, preferring that modes of play emerge from fighting gamers playing against each other (personal communication, July 17, 2009). What this suggests is that the proscription of the Hilde ring out combo arose out of the community. Why? Answering that question provides insight into values of play embraced by that community.
In the context of the previous discussion on what makes a match appealing, it may be that the use of Hilde and her "cheap" or "easy" ring out constitutes the same principle as a "perfect" win lacking drama or tension. Rather than enabling a dramatic match, it presents one player with a simple tactic for victory. This is quite similar to what Consalvo (2007) describes with certain uses of cheating in games; she cites Aarseth's (1997) discussion of aporia and epiphany, where finding a resolution to a game challenge is part of the enjoyment of it. Cheating removes that moment of epiphany, creating a "hollow win" (Consalvo, 2007, p. 91). Since the crowd relishes the back and forth of dramatic play compared to a decisive and one-sided victory, the choice of Hilde – which, it should be noted, almost universally meant the consequent use of her ring out combo – was strongly discouraged and proscribed. What this does not account for is the frequency or intensity comparative to perfect wins as the other example. Attendees were lukewarm to perfects, but not hostile; they might clap politely or less enthusiastically than for a dramatic finish, but they still showed some approval.

Hilde, by contrast, got nothing but vitriol. One possible explanation may simply be that the perfect win is emergent, but the Hilde choice is not; while a close match is more desirable, a perfect win can still happen in a satisfying match. Choosing Hilde up front, on the other hand, is almost the promise of a "cheap" and short match, one that's unbalanced. In that sense, the fans seem to be exhibiting the ideal that Killian mentioned; the tournament valorizes emergent events, and by extension, play rather than outcomes. Foregone conclusions and fait accompli go against the social grain.

Although it didn't seem to rise to the level of an actual tournament rule, the choice of character by players in the various official and unofficial games also showed some
particular themes, above and beyond the case of Hilde mentioned above. Across most of
the games played in the official matches, the number of different characters used tended
to be relatively small, compared to the number of options available, which depending on
the game can be as small as twelve and as high as forty-eight. An accurate picture of pool
matches is naturally difficult to produce, since even wandering between stations I saw
only a fraction of the total played matches, yet in the pools I observed heavily – primarily
Street Fighter 3: 3rd Strike and Street Fighter IV – the phenomenon was still notable.
The semi-final and final matches on days two and three were slightly different, but the
problem here is entirely opposite of the pool matches; because there are fewer players
and fewer matches, the potential for diverse character selection is lessened. The SC4
semi-finals and finals, in particular, showed that the fewer players were involved, the
narrower the character selection became.

In three specific cases – observing the Smash Bros. tournament, and the Marvel
vs. Capcom 2 and Street Fighter 4 finals – I took note of the characters chosen in each
observed match. The resulting lists were surprisingly homogenous, particularly in the
case of MvC2, where out of a potential 48 characters, the players in the finals used no
more than ten; in fact, there are three characters – Magneto, Storm, and Sentinel – who
were always picked by at least one player, and usually by both. MvC2 features teams of 3
on each side, with a total of 6 characters per match. Of those teams, most involved at
least two of those characters, with a third choice from a relatively small list of remaining
options.

The Smash and SF4 bouts were not quite that specific, but in the matches I
observed the characters choices there were also relatively narrow. In the case of Smash
Bros. approximately 7-8 characters (out of over 35) made an appearance. For Street Fighter 4, the narrowness had more to do with frequency than comparison to the entire available spread. While around half of the total characters saw use, many of them were used only once, and sometimes not even for the full series of bouts that determined a matchup; characters such as Cammy, Abel, Zangief, and E. Honda appeared for single fights, and then were replaced by characters like Ryu, Balrog, and Akuma, who made consistent repeat appearances. The other games observed had similar behavior; while some characters would make infrequent appearances, on the average a smaller number of choices were common and consistent across different players.

Why does this phenomenon occur? One potential and likely explanation is the existence of what is known in the fighting game community as "tiers:" lists of characters ranked in accordance with their capabilities and strengths. Two players of Smash Bros. Brawl constructed an argument for the existence of tiers on the Smash Bros. wiki (Kirschner & Schumacher, 2008); while they center primarily on that game, the existence of tiers in other games is prevalent, even to the point where one forum has been created solely to retroactively creating tier listings for fighting games that predate their popularity in the community (http://www.gdlkgame.com/forum). To put things simply, a character that ranks high in a tier listing is expected to have a better chance of winning a given match based on the in-game attributes of that character, irrespective of player skill or other circumstances. Thus Ryu, who is considered "high tier" for Street Fighter 4, has a greater expectation of victory than a "low tier" character like El Fuerte, based solely on the in-game attributes of those characters. Tiers appear to be constructions of the fighting game community based on various factors – Kirschner and Schmuacher state they "must
be decided by a very large sample of data under very controlled tournament conditions" (2008, ¶ 8) – and even within a game, various sources of tier listings may differ depending on the ways in which they are determined. The tier listings thread for SF4 at major fighting game forum Shoryuken.com, for example, includes a comparative listing of multiple sources and cross-analysis ("Character Ranking Notes (Tier lists + more)", 2009).

As most games at EVO are tournament play, participants choosing characters from the upper ranges of the tier listing isn't particularly unusual. While the analysis above of valorized versus proscribed play does suggest that victory is less important than a satisfyingly dramatic match, this does not necessarily contradict the idea that players would want to choose a character that gives them a competitive edge. If a perfect victory is boring, then playing a character that puts one player at a disadvantage isn't going to produce a dramatic match. That being said, players who chose characters in official matches that were not high tier – for example, one player in the SF4 finals choosing Zangief – often got crowd approval on that apparent basis alone.

Considering that she became an almost iconic example of this phenomenon in action, I was interested in where Hilde of Soul Calibur 4 fit into the tier listings for that game. Definitive results were difficult to find, especially given that, as previously noted, tier listings are not top down, developer-provided lists but something constructed by the community. To that end, I looked for promising threads on tier listings at 8WayRun.com, a large and popular SC series forum. One well-discussed thread places Hilde in the highest tier, noting that "Hilde is just amazing, and everyone can agree that she is top tier" ("Official SC4 Tier List And Character Guides", 2009, ¶ 8) for various technical
reasons. Interestingly, the same forums also contained a thread from a potential Hilde player who was interested in her tier standings without the ring out combination observed at EVO: "We all know she's S-Tier. But what if she didn't have the Doom Combos?" ("Hilde's Tier w/o Combo?", 2009, ¶ 1). The thread (which was not heavy on discussion) varied between those who argued for a considerably lower tier without the use of that combo, and those who feel her problems were either other technical aspects of the character, or endemic to the game itself.

This was resonant with something Seth Killian had mentioned in passing: that the people at this tournament know the tiers, but that they also enjoy "rooting for the underdog." In that sense, it may be that the choice of a low tier character creates its own degree of drama or tension; will the player of the supposedly weaker character have enough skill to make up the difference? Can s/he overcome an inherent deficiency created by the game rules to pull out a victory? Ibrahim mentioned that "if you pick [a low tier character], you will instantly garner respect from other players because he’s known as a low-tier character and you’ve decided to choose that character because you’re trying to show your skill rather than how powerful your character actually is, with or without you." He goes on to note that "[i]n Korea they actually have a title for people who pick low tier characters… it's like an honorific title they'll give you for choosing that character. You're a hero to them." Interestingly, the focus there seems to be less on the inherent can or can't of the character, or even on winning or losing, but on what that particular player's skill can "bring out" from the low tier character's capabilities.

What we return to in this case is the idea of the match as an uncertain outcome created by a number of variables, and that the primary enjoyment of the situation is in
seeing the result emerge through the actions and choices of the players. A win in the match is useful only to the extent that it signals an end to the competition, and is perhaps a determination of who had the greater degree of skill or quality of play.

Making it even: the level playing field

This concept of deciding who has the greater level of skill is an important idea to fighting gamers, and it illustrates a both pervasive and divisive argument in the community. The idea of fighting games as being about skill rather than randomness, about control and execution rather than dumb luck, is a powerful and widespread normative idea in play practice. It touches on everything from specific use of technologies to debating which characters – such as Hilde – are favored or even usable at all in a competitive setting.

In his discussion of types of play and games, Roger Caillois (1958) presents a four-part typology: alea (games of chance), mimicry (games of illusion or simulation), agon (games of competition), and ilinx (games of vertigo). It is primarily the contrast between the last two – ilinx and agon – that sheds light on the idea of video games as a skill challenge. His brief definition of agon draws heavily on the structured competition of sports (p. 14), while he describes the vertigo-seeking games of ilinx as those that "consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" (p. 23). In vertigo there is the pleasure of being shocked, surprised, or overwhelmed. For Caillois, agon and vertigo are fundamentally incompatible: he claims that vertigo

"destroys the conditions that define agon, i.e. the efficacious resort to skill, power, and calculation, and self-control; respect for rules; the desire to test
oneself under conditions of equality; prior submission to the decision of a referee; an obligation, agreed to in advance, to circumscribe the conflict within set limits, etc. Nothing is left." (pp. 72-73).

Thus the goal of ilinx, to lose oneself in the unpredictable obliteration of the sensical moment, is at cross purposes with the structured, skill-focused, competitive nature of agon.

If this sounds familiar, it's hardly surprising. Substitute "casual Smash" with its random items and focus on the unpredictable for ilinx, and "hardcore fighting games" with their structure and precise gameplay requirements, and the argument still holds. If this example is any indicator, fighting games as the hardcore player understands and supports them are agon: rule-bounded competitions, tests of skill and cleverness.

Certainly, elements from previous discussions are relevant here as well. In chapter 4, for example, I discussed the impact of technology on the environment of play. Arcade sticks are preferred by fighting gamers because they create a comfortable feel reminiscent of the arcade. However, they also provide a technical advantage in that sense. Using the controller that feels the most right for you allows skill to shine forth. Likewise, the discussion of lag in online play and the effect of display lag on an LCD monitor are similar. As Jordan emphasized, talking about both arcade sticks and monitors, the idea is that "the technology needs to facilitate the match." Part of the goal of the comfortable play environment is to remove outside factors that would inhibit the perfect agon: the test of skill and cleverness that Caillois describes.

In a similar vein, the previous discussion of casual versus hardcore Smash explored how that conflict arose and how it affects the tension between casual and hardcore players, but it did not necessarily explore why players of Smash might construct
their elaborately restrictive rulesets for tournament play that so frustrate players like Gene in the first place. Considered in the context of this tension between agon and ilinx and the creation of the skill challenge environment, the reasons become somewhat clear.

Part of this difference may simply come from the code of *Brawl* as a game, compared to the other games in the tournament. For example, in *Street Fighter 4*, the choice of which stage characters fight in has no rule-based effect on gameplay whatsoever; it is merely a visual backdrop for the action. While the stage has some bearing on matches in *Soul Calibur 4* – particularly the size and shape of the stage being more or less friendly to ring out victories – for the most part those stages were also mostly window dressing, as far as I could observe. However, stages in *Brawl* are a different animal; many of them feature layouts with natural hazards and random events that can influence the outcome of the fight, up to and including the defeat of a player.

Likewise, the issue of items is very similar. Unlike the other games in the tournament, *Brawl's* base design involves random items which appear in stages at random intervals. These items range from the relatively harmless, to those with the potential for a major and decisive effect on the match, such as instantly knocking a player out or restoring one's health to full. As these are ludic aspects unique to *Brawl's* individual structure, it stands to reason that competitive tournament play of that game would involve much greater rules that define not just the "real life" context of play, but the ludic context as well. In short, because *Brawl* has more rules to tweak than *Street Fighter 4*, it's sensible that tournament play might involve more restriction.
However, as for the goal of such restrictions, *Brawl* player Matthew was both emphatic and definite on the subject, suggesting that leaving on random elements creates a "horseshoe effect:"

Interviewer: So it’s sounding like… mmm, hmm. How to put this. From that very brief description of items that you just gave it’s seeming like their presence in competitive *Smash* – hardcore *Smash* since you said they’re the same so I’m gonna run with that – items in hardcore *Smash* is a disruptive influence in terms of their randomness, or…?

Respondent: Yes. Their randomness is the big thing because it has been argued that using items takes skill. I support that. Using items takes a huge load of skill, to know when to use them, how to use them, when you should grab them, when you should leave them and try to trick your opponent into grabbing them… that’s a huge aspect of skill. However, there is no control given over the items that spawn, when they spawn, and where they spawn, and a lot of items will disrupt the gameplay without you even triggering them. So like, you could be having a match. The person’s going, they make a mistake, you’re about to hit the kill move… and then a bomb spawns, and you hit the bomb instead of them, and you die. This isn’t a hypothetical… this happens.

Interviewer: It’s actually happened.

Respondent: This actually happens. So that’s why it’s been taken out of a lot of the competitive play, is because it’s pure… like, the person was gonna get punished. They made a mistake, they were gonna lose the match because of it, but they won, not because of anything they did, but they apparently have a horseshoe in their back pocket.

Interviewer: And the whole point of competitive *Smash* is not to find who has the horseshoe…

Respondent: It’s to find who can punish.

Interviewer: Who has the strongest competitive game.

In short: it isn't necessarily that items themselves are the problem; he admits that using items properly takes skill. However, the issue is that the lack of control over their impact
on the match – and interestingly, their ability to seemingly, at random, destroy the positive effects of perfect execution of game controls – is so disruptive that the game is no longer about skill. Instead, it's about luck: who benefits the most from the vagaries of chance? As he summed up shortly after, "the fun of competitive gaming is from the competition itself. Not so much the game, but more the players. Being able to beat them is what the fun is. Knowing that it was skill that led you to that victory."

Skirting the edge of acceptability: Hilde and Metaknight as "broken characters"

The discussion surrounding tier lists and which characters are considered so powerful they potentially destabilize the game is useful for not only the way it helps point at skill as the ideal match determinant, but also the point at which players will start to consider an option "broken" (unfair) Broken is a word that saw much use in the discussion of Hilde. In the fighting game community, the word has a number of different definitions and connotations (the specifics of which are discussed below), but generally speaking, when something is "broken" it presents a perception of the broken element as unfair or giving too much of an advantage to one player or the other. Particularly powerful characters, special attacks that are powerful but incur little risk when used, and strategies that shut down entire avenues of play are just some of the examples that came up when exploring the idea of something being broken. Because these elements are so unfair, they "break" the game.

It might seem like a question with an obvious answer, but one must ask: why is the idea that a character is broken – unfair – so important in this context? The answer is that alongside other factors, discussions of what constitutes fair technical play versus an
unfair advantage drive home the point that the ideal fighting game match takes place on a level playing field, or more specifically, that it is an area where skill rather than external factors are the determinant of a winner or loser. Remember too the earlier discussion of Consalvo (2007) and Aarseth (1997) on the subject of cheating and the hollow win. Beyond the issue of the lack of aporia making the match boring, there's a very real possibility that the perception of brokenness – a character granting an unfair advantage – constitutes flat-out cheating. However, much as the players in Consalvo's work have varying social constructions of when cheating is appropriate, fighting gamers have varying definitions of what exactly gives a character an unfair advantage.

So what does "broken" mean? To the fighting game players I interviewed, the definitions varied. Garrett framed broken characters as those who make it "impossible to win." Both Garrett and Nicholas used the character of Akuma in *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo* as an example of a broken character, with Nicholas specifically using the phrase "he doesn't work like he's supposed to." It should be noted that "fixing" Akuma was one of the goals of David Sirlin, as he attempted to rebalance *Street Fighter 2 Turbo* in the creation of *SF2T: HD Remix* (Killian & Sirlin, 2007)… yet in spite of the claim in the initial FAQ on the rebalancing that he would be balanced, Akuma is banned in tournament play of both games.

Jeff's discussion of brokenness was more socially situated; rather than giving me a strict definition either way, he recounted a story of online *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* play where his opponent – who Jeff was beating over and over – would continually shout into the mic that Jeff was picking "broken" characters. This suggests that for the person he was playing, "broken" simply meant "unfairly powerful;" Jeff's retort was that he was
using admittedly powerful (high tier) characters, but that it was the skill of his opponent that was the problem.

Among those players who had exposure to *Soul Calibur 4*, the potential brokenness of Hilde was a thorny topic indeed. The respondents I spoke to were quite emphatic that her moveset – her list of attacks and their properties – is quite strong, regardless of any other considerations. Even Ibrahim, who had a relatively moderate stand on Hilde’s place in the *SC4* cosmos, put it thusly, when I asked about the EVO crowd’s intense negative reaction to Hilde being picked during the finals:

Interviewer: Yeah. Well, I was wondering about that. I mean, is there kind of a… because it seems like the crowd was indicating that there’s this backlash against… which my untrained eye kind of told me was this regulation, five or six hit combination that’s done every time and you do it until they fall off the edge of the ring.

Respondent: Absolutely. That’s why she is so powerful. She has built into her character the ability to ring you out from almost anywhere. She can just walk you to an edge and push you out. No other character has that kind of ability, and… no matter how much damage it actually does – but it does half life even if you don’t get rung out – a ring out is an instant death and no other character can do that. So, she’s just so much more powerful than every other character in the game for that mechanic.

Earlier in the interview, he noted that he didn’t think “the developers intended it to be that way, but that’s the way it ended up.” Players discovered this combination of attacks that rings out almost instantly – earning an immediate win regardless of how much “life” the opponent has – and so in the process, Hilde leapt up the tier listings.

Garret agreed with Ibrahim’s sentiments about Hilde’s level of power, but he was quick to point out that Hilde is neither indestructible nor unbeatable. If anything, his frustration with Hilde seemed to involve the idea that the appearance of being unbeatable
would make players who encounter Hilde unlikely to come back to the game after repeated losses:

I know the people that started the fervor, and... the bad thing about Hilde is that people don’t realize how beatable she is. Like, she has one of the most powerful things I’ve ever seen in a fighting game, but it’s only one thing. Like, that’s her shot, and if you really put, like, effort into knowing how to beat it, like... she doesn’t have anything else. If you shut that off, the match is over for her. The whole match is over for her. She doesn’t have any other fallbacks; she has nothing, and um... but... the issue with Hilde is that when new players come to learn the game and someone uses Hilde on them, what am I supposed to say to you? Like, when someone says, when someone asks me “Does that happen even if you know how to beat it?” Uh, yeah, it does. I don’t know how many people have turned away from the game because of this broken-looking character.

This followed earlier statements about how Hilde, in spite of her powerful tools, is beatable, an example Garret mentioned to explain that superior skill will beat out in-game mechanical advantage. When I suggested that the various aspects of counterpicking – choosing a character that is strong where your opponent is weak – were similar to rock/paper/scissors, he replied, “In a way, but the better player’s gonna win.” Counterpicking is not always safe, for example, as it may mean playing a character with whom the player isn’t familiar, putting him/her at a disadvantage.

In a counterpick, a player chooses a character whose ludic qualities are believed to balance out/negate/"counter" the strengths of his/her opponent. The usefulness of counterpicking is a subject of debate. David Sirlin, discussing Street Fighter 4's online multiplayer mode, argued that the fact that the game does not hide the character of the first player to choose allows the opponent to counterpick, a weakness of the game (Sirlin, 2009). Discussion of counterpicking on Shoryuken.com ("Counter Picking.. Your thoughts?", 2009) ranged from feeling it was "cheap" (a common synonym for "broken"), to arguing that people who counterpick only do so because they have no actual skill, to
arguing that it's simply a part of play one should come to accept. By contrast, discussion of counterpicking in the Smash community seems to encourage it as a part of the play of the game ("Counterpicking made easy", 2008; "The important of counter picking", 2010). Ultimately the decision there is left to the player. As many posters in the SRK thread mention, counterpicking isn't always a smart move, particularly if the player who counterpicks doesn't have training or skill with the countering character they choose. Whatever the level of expectation there is about its use, it doesn't rise to the level of a tournament rule.

However, not all counterpick situations were similar. In the Guilty Gear XX Accent Core finals between "Marn" and "Flash," Marn lost his first game playing as the character Jam Kuradoberi, and then in the second round changed to the character Eddie. He then went on to win, and so continued to play Eddie. Even at the highest level of play – Justin Wong and Daigo Umehara in the SF4 finals – there was no small degree of character switching, with Justin Wong starting as the character Abel, then moving to Rufus, until finally settling on Balrog. Switching characters did not seem to rankle with the crowd or create problems unless it seemed specifically that the player was falling back onto some perceived technical advantage, as was the case with the Hilde player… and in that instance, the switch seems to have been as much about changing the circumstances of play – moving from a stick to a pad – as it was about choosing an individual character. Not only was the player picking the despised Hilde, he was also creating a circumstance of play where performing the combination of moves that made her despised in the first place would be easier.
This view on play is actually quite resonant with the comments Seth Killian made to me at EVO, particularly on the difference between restrictive and emergent philosophies on play. The emergent way of doing things – which seemed evident in many of the responses from people I interviewed – suggests that rather than restricting a character for being “broken,” it be left to the players of the game to determine how to beat this seemingly game-unbalancing situation. One thread (“Wreaking Havoc in Wolfkrone: The anti-Hilde thread”, 2009) on SC4-focused forum 8 Way Run is a particularly interesting example of this. The thread’s very first line indicates that it is a followup to Hilde not being banned, and focuses on developing anti-Hilde strategies, and it goes on for quite some time with a number of players – even one or two self-identified and dedicated Hilde players! – contributing their thoughts on what moves and strategies work well against Hilde, particularly what they refer to as the “doom combo,” or the series of moves mentioned above that have massive ring-out potential (and thus contribute to her being considered high tier).

The predominant idea in this situation is that skill, more than anything else, is the real determinant when it comes to a match in these games. Characters such as Hilde might be exceptionally powerful, but the thrust of both the responses I received in interviews and read on community forums is that if a serious player makes an effort to learn the powerful character’s weaknesses, then s/he cannot be “broken.” One 8WR thread about the future of powerful characters like Hilde (“The future of Algol, Hilde and Star Wars”, 2009) has responses that point to one interesting metric: since none of the top placers in 2009 at EVO or Nationals (a large Soul Calibur 4 tournament) were using Hilde, that is evidence that she isn’t broken.
Presumably, the logic here is that if Hilde were broken – that is to say, so powerful that she disrupts the natural play of the game – she would be represented among the winners out of necessity. Another read is that if Hilde did appear in these tournaments (and she did at EVO, multiple times) then by virtue of being broken she would confer such a massive advantage that anyone playing her would reach the winners’ circle on the power of her character alone. Since neither of these appear to be true, she therefore cannot be broken.

The flip side of the Hilde coin is a character in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* named Metaknight. Although I was only able to speak with one *Brawl* player, he did have interesting insights to share on a debate in the community about whether or not Metaknight should be banned. Matthew described himself as initially being against the idea of banning, but that over time he’s become uncertain, particularly based on some tournament results:

Respondent: Um… if you would have asked me, like, honestly, like, maybe two weeks ago since the game came out [e.g. from the game’s release until two weeks prior to the interview], I would have said no, and it would have been a resounding no, but it’s starting to become… I’m on the fence, now, because I’m starting to see some data that’s been brought up, just of pure domination in the tournaments.

Interviewer: On the Metaknight front?

R: Yeah. Like, I know every game has its best character, it’s just I’m starting to wonder if Metaknight’s too much “the best.” Then again, local tournaments and the past, like, four major tournaments, he’s only won one of them. So. As of right now it’s a no, but it’s a no that could easily change.

He went on to indicate that the argument over whether Metaknight should be banned was highly fractious in the *Smash* community: “He’s such a polarizing force, a lot of people feel the community is going to tear itself in half soon.”
Interestingly enough, that statement has resonance with one made by Ibrahim about the *Soul Calibur* community after the release of *Soul Calibur 3* on the Playstation2 console. According to him, a large number of bugs in the game code gave considerable advantage to some characters, “breaking” the game. However, due to limitations on the PS2, the game could not be patched or fixed on its own, “so all those bugs just became part of the game, and there was sort of a split in the community of players on whether or not we should try to ban these bugs in tournament play, or let them go, and let them go prevailed, and I was on the other camp, so I just quit playing it.” The community decision as he describes it was that many of the bugs could not be tracked or even noticed in order to be banned, so there was little choice but to let them go unchecked.

Even a cursory glance at Smashboards, the preeminent *Smash Bros.* online community, certainly seems to support Matthew’s claims of intense debate and fractiousness. The moderators, in an attempt to control the spread of new threads on the topic, condensed the arguments into one thread (“Official Metaknight Discussion”, 2010) which then grew to over 800 pages and over twelve thousand posts, though not all of these are “on topic” and the discussion seems to have grown into a wider analysis of top tier characters in *Brawl*. They also include links to two threads summarizing the pro-ban (“Why we can’t wait to ban Metaknight”, 2010) and anti-ban (“Chill out. Metaknight won’t ever be banned.”, 2010) arguments. The pro-ban stance focuses on Metaknight’s tournament dominance and lack of counter-picks (e.g. characters that are strong against his weaknesses), while the anti-ban stance argues that all fighting games will have a “best” character, and that removing Metaknight from the situation does little, if anything, to improve it.
What’s interesting about these two scenarios is that they are effectively opposite ends of the same line. The aim of both of these perspectives – the 8WR thread suggesting ways to defeat Hilde, and the ongoing discussion of banning Metaknight – have the same relative aim in mind: providing a game space where it’s the skill of the players rather than the mechanical advantage of the characters played, the stages played upon, or other random events that decides the outcome. Again, there is considerable resonance here with Jordan’s comment about technology and arcade sticks, noted in chapter 4: the idea that the technology should facilitate play, rather than interfere with it. Character balance is perhaps not “technological” on the same level as an interface point like an arcade stick, but it is part of the game code.

Organizers or oligarchs? Rule creators and maintainers

Of course, the question remains: who is it, ultimately, that decides all this? How is it that these normative rules of play get created and established? Are they community efforts constructed out of social play, or is there a central group that the community as a whole can look to, in the aims of creating norms about play practice in a democratic way? In the end, it varies, but the approaches that were observed suggest much about the role of normative play in the fighting game experience.

_Smash_ provides perhaps the most detailed option. Matthew describes a group of people who make the suggested Smash tournament ruleset – the “Smash Backroom” (SBR) or “Brawl Back Room” (BBR) – as an “oligarchy” who read tournament results, view community input, and then produce a set of rules and community standards for play. A number of threads on Smash Boards support this, particularly the BBR’s public
information thread (“Information and Updates from the Brawl Back Room”, 2010) and their suggested ruleset for tournament play (“BBR Recommended Rule List v2.0”, 2010). The ruleset in particular is illustrative not only in how specific it is about match conditions, but for the broad and quite complex method of choosing the stage (combat environment) of each tournament round. I observed this method at EVO as well, and the representative of the tournament organizer for the Smash event taking place there – which was not tied to the main EVO tournament itself – spent considerable time explaining it to me.

Yet at the same time, Matthew also pointed out that the BBR has no "official" power, per se, and that their recommended set of tourney rules is only a guideline:

However, that ruleset actually has absolutely no bearing on pretty much anything in Smash. Everything in Smash is up to the individual T.O.’s… the tournament organizers, I should be more specific. They’re the ones who have the final say to say, “You know what, I support this rule,” or “I don’t support this rule,” or “I support this level,” and they’re more of a representative of the community that they come from, so really, the Smash Back Room is only like – and they even say – “These are just our guidelines, these are what we think it should be,” but the power is really in the tournament organizer’s hands. So that’s where most of the decisions come from.

Of course, this isn’t to say that Smash tournaments across the globe have wildly varying rules. I presented Matthew with a hypothetical: what if a T.O. was dearly in love with Smash that had more casual rules; for example, what if s/he left on items? Would s/he be able to attract players to tournaments and events? "Uh… generally, people who agree with that sentiment will show up, and people who disagree, won’t, and then he has to make a decision, is he gonna keep playing with his belief that items are awesome and the group of friends and group of players that go there? Is he gonna build, shape the
community for them, or is he gonna try and get more people to show up by modifying his rules?"

In short, while a given tournament organizer has theoretical power to alter play norms, in practice that power is likely very limited depending on the audience the T.O. is attempting to attract. One who prefers casual Smash will no doubt attract players who prefer items and fewer restrictions; one who prefers hardcore Smash will consequently attract a different sort of playerbase. In effect, the organizer only has the power to alter play norms within the limits of the type of play s/he valorizes.

However, Smash is a different animal than the other games and communities described here in many ways. For starters, their method of ensuring the level playing field is primarily restrictive in nature. While the central goal remains the same – creating an environment for the skill challenge between players – their method is to systematically eliminate elements which would interfere with the process. Thus the extensive ruleset created by the Brawl Back Room, which were also related to me in brief at EVO by the T.O. there. Those rules not only call for the turning off of items, but also for detailed lists of stages into various categories (Starter, Starter/Counter, Counter, Counter/Banned, and Banned), ways to resolve conflicts ranging from who chooses characters first to who gets what controller port on the Wii running the game in the first place. Beyond banned stages, there is also one actual mechanic ban of note: while Metaknight himself is not banned, his "Infinite Cape Glitch" is. According to its entry in the Smash Bros. wiki, the glitch allows a Metaknight player who can execute it to walk through a match effectively invulnerable to attacks by other players ("Infinite Dimensional Cape", 2010).
The general ruleset for EVO matches, by comparison, is somewhat different, particularly since it encompasses not just one game, but the entire range of them played at the tournament in the first place ("Evo Championship Series >> Tournament Rules", 2009). A small subset of the rules deals with the actual play of the game, in three ways: who chooses what controller port on the console (which is similar to the BBR ruleset's method), the way characters are chosen, and the rules that go into effect once the match has begun. The remainder of the ruleset deals not with the actual conditions of play, so much as with the way players move through the tournament (brackets and tournament etiquette/rule violations). For example, there is a discussion of "yellow cards" and "red cards" for disqualification, but only one of the potential violations involves anything close to actual gameplay: the description of "excessive stalling" involves "repeatedly 'accidentally' picking the wrong character." The philosophy behind the EVO ruleset is best summed up in a quote from the rules themselves: "These rules are an attempt to insure that the tournament runs fairly and as smoothly as possible."

Yet within the lesser rulesets for each individual game, there are examples of restriction similar to the Brawl Back Room, though typically smaller in scope. In SF2: HD Remix, Akuma is banned. The rules for Marvel vs. Capcom 2 describe a number of glitches that are illegal for use in play, and both the MvC2 and SF4 rulesets give specific scenarios where in-game options – assist characters, ultra techniques, and other in-game choices – can be switched between matches. In Melty Blood: Actress Again, Archetype: Earth (a character) is banned. Considering the idea – mentioned many times above – that EVO prefers to adopt an emergent style for tournament rules, these regulations seem, at
first glance, contradictory. Aren't they in the same class as the long list of banned stages and the removal of items in Smash Bros.?

The answer to this question isn't immediately apparent, and it is the fact that the goal of both rulesets is to ensure a fair match that muddies the water. According to Seth Killian, EVO's logic is emergent rather than restrictive; as styles of play that are considered "cheap" arise in the community, players develop tactics to counteract those techniques through experimentation and play. He considered this attitude a "social collective" view, where a cycle of powerful playstyle discovery followed by counter tactics emerging continues over and over. Yet at the same time, it is clear that repeated play and testing is also how the Brawl players reached their set of rules in the first place.

To call one "emergent" and the other "restrictive" suggests value judgments one way or the other on just how far an organizing body has to go before they're viewed as restricting play. From the standpoint of an outside observer, both groups use emergent gameplay to construct normative ideas of play to the same general end: the level playing field.

Thus the rhetoric in which both communities define themselves publically might be construed not as one community being "emergent" and the other being "restrictive," but rather a commentary on the nature of fighting games to begin with. In other words, the competing definitions end up being a sort of territory war between two imagined interpretive communities (see Zelizer, 1993, for an example of journalists doing something very similar), both formed from normative ideas about play. The conflict between the hardcore Smash community and not only other fighting game communities, but even within Smash players, highlights this. What's at stake in each case is the
definition of what a fighting game is in the first place, and the ways in which those boundaries are described are in methods of play.

The intra-game community split in the Smash community is quite telling, since in their case, the two groups don't even appear to be playing the same game anymore thanks to their differences in normative play ideals. A similar situation in sports might be the difference between competitive basketball and a game of "horse." Both of these activities involve the same physical apparatus – a basketball, a hoop – but fundamentally they are different games, with different contexts, outcomes, and rules of play. Casual Smash players and hardcore ones alike are using the same literal physical apparatus, the basic code of the Smash Bros. games. The difference comes in their normative ideas toward play. Each faction – and then on a larger scale, Smash players versus other serious fighting game plays – is striving for the discursive space to claim legitimacy for their style of play. In short, they're competing for the power to define what fighting games are in the first place.
Chapter 7
Situating the game: conclusions and directions for future inquiry

The public conception of fighting games – indeed, likely of many types of digital games in general – has a number of facets to it. Games are for children, primarily boys; they are reflex tests, where the winner is determined not by who has the strongest strategy or the sharpest wit, but by whoever has the fastest fingers and the best reaction time. Undoubtedly violent, they are played solely for slaking a prurient and pointless need to simulate violence. Certainly, fighting games seem to fit that preconceived notion reasonably well at a cursory view. Their most visible fans are male. They're fundamentally about combat, and at high levels of play the action is so fast and furious that those without superior reflexes will be left behind. Even I, as a longtime gamer and even as a fan of fighting games, envisioned competitive fighting gaming as being all about who has the fastest fingers in the West.

However, the picture of fighting game play that I observed at EVO, and which players and fans described to me in great detail, couldn't be less like the description I gave above. To those fans – fans who take the enterprise "seriously" – having good reflexes is only the most basic part of the equation, and certainly no guarantee of victory. To them, fighting games have more in common with chess than with Pac-Man; winning comes not from having the fastest fingers but rather the sharpest mind: internalizing the necessary expertise, doing research into what works best, and continually striving to find the right level of challenge in order to create constant, dedicated improvement in the art.

Although they perform their punches and kicks with the press of a button rather than moving their actual bodies, these "serious" fighters are very much like many of the
martial artist characters that serve as their representatives in digital bouts. In many ways, this echoes the construction Reeves, Brown, and Laurier (2009) have of expertise in the FPS game *Counterstrike*, where expertise in play is gained through "gradually developed competencies" (p. 223). As Garrett put it, "the top players of these games, they never drop [controller] inputs, they don't mess up, and they never miss anything..." For expert players, the reflex issue of muscle memory and speed is the entry barrier to online play, rather than – as the common view would have it – the totality of the experience. This dissonance between the public conception and the lived reality for these players serves as a useful entry for discussing the implications and interpretations of the data I collected on this subject.

In this concluding chapter I will revisit my research questions, drawing on the thematic areas of the previous chapters to explore how the environment of play, social play, and the normative practice of play present ways to better understand and answer those questions. In so doing, I will shed some light on exactly how these factors position the "game" in "gameplay," much as Butler aimed to clarify the relationship between the body and gender. In both these scenarios, what we consider materiality – be it the physical body of human beings or the metaphorical "body" of a game in its code – serves only as an influence. Ultimately, what defines a game is dependent as much on the social practices of play as it is on what the designers code into the game in the first place.

Three major areas of focus provide the path to understanding these questions. First, I will discuss how ways of play create a self-sustaining praxis that extends outward, via social play, from the material "body" of the game. This praxis then becomes so interwoven with the experience that a new game is born from it: half based on the code,
and half based on the performance of play. Secondly, I will argue how social play and community formation help to institutionalize and acculturate potential serious players into the "right" way of doing things; in short, these community practices become how the play/performance/praxis combination – in essence, the "serious game" – is disseminated and reified. Third, I draw on my observations of social play with local players and the lived experiences of players I interviewed to consider how the play-performance might alter depending on the situation.

Following that, by way of summary I propose a new way of conceiving the game text based on the data collected here. Much like Butler does with gender, I argue that in addition to being experiential in nature, the play of a game is heavily discursive, to the point that two people engaged in two different discourses of play are no longer playing "the same game" anymore. Finally, I explore some of the limitations of this research, and how both my findings and the limitations suggest areas for future inquiry.

"Gaming trouble, games that matter": the cycle of play practice

An important aspect of this research has been to identify what the ideal identity performance is for a serious fighting game player. Both the behavior of players at EVO and the experiences of the interviewees helped to construct some aspects of what that ideal performance is. The first of the research questions I proposed to guide my research – the overarching primary question – was this:

• How do ways of playing intersect with the performance of identity?
The goal of this question was twofold: to identify both the aspects of the serious fighting gamer performance itself, and to examine that performance for the ways in which gameplay and normative ideas of play contributed.

As detailed in previous chapters, it is possible to construct a vision of the ideal performance when it comes to serious fighting game fans. Speaking generally, the ideal fighting game player takes the game seriously, is a gracious winner, seeks self-improvement, has an investment in both gamer culture broadly and fighting game culture specifically, considers fighting games to primarily be a social activity and a test of skill, and both appreciates and seeks to emulate the (American) arcade ideal of two fighters challenging each other one on one. Elements from each of the three thematic areas discussed previously contribute something to this ideal performance, and its elements are both social and play-focused.

The arcade ideal as an environment of play is a major contributor to this. Remember that the arcade ideal encompasses a number of sub-factors. For example, it's the origin of the idea that games are played side by side or face to face, in full view of a crowd, as many arcades in the U.S. would allow for. EVO itself is, according to one of its organizers, an attempt to recapture the spirit of the arcade in a larger event; the earliest EVO tournaments were held in actual arcades in southern California before they branched out to larger events with a console base. However, as I observed at EVO itself, playing on console equipment – PS3s on tables, an endless array of TVs and monitors – does not necessarily diminish the arcade experience. The behaviors of players, such as the tendency to gather in crowds, the "I got next" method of inserting oneself into play, even crowd reactions to major matches… these are all arcade behaviors that translated
over into the new setting. Even part of the technology of play, in the form of the mostly ubiquitous arcade stick, has some of its roots in the arcade, though as I noted previously, there are other concerns that make the arcade stick desirable over the alternatives, regardless.

More to the point, the use of technology is itself a way of expressing adherence to the performance. While the description of arcade sticks and their technological benefits above does indeed provide a number of practical reasons for using a stick, doing so also identifies the user as a serious fighting game player in the first place. Arcade sticks and even the homemade arcade cabinets I observed at EVO are both interfaces for the game and ways of showing that the person who uses or creates them plays a certain way. In terms of Goffman's *The Presentation of Everyday Life* (1959), these are necessary "props" for the performance; like an actor's costume or held items serve to cue our interpretation of what kind of character s/he is portraying, even the *use* of an arcade stick or the creation of a homemade arcade cabinet cue us to understand what sort of player someone is.

Remember too that these fans construct fighting games as a primarily social activity. When describing play, interviewees consistently framed it in terms of competition, and when they did speak of playing single-player scenarios against the CPU, it was only "for fun" or as a method of training oneself for the eventual goal of fighting against other people. At EVO, nobody who played was alone for long; not only did people regularly insert themselves into available stations for play in the bring-your-own-console (BYOC) area, but even standing near one and observing was good enough to garner repeated invitations to join in from people playing alone there. It is a central,
defining assumption that verged on the exnominative. It was just assumed, unless I asked otherwise, that of course I was talking about fighting games as played with others. To do otherwise was unthinkable and of no real use.

Being a good sport and a gracious winner, rather than a sore loser, is also part of the package, and it has both social and gameplay ties. Winning, as I saw at EVO, was not particularly important. When the crowd cheered, it was not always for the winner, and an easy or fait accompli win wasn't particularly interesting. Speaking with players, they indicated almost to a person that the critical aspect of the fight is not winning or losing, but the challenge; losing to someone more skilled is a chance to improve one's own game and, in the process, improve the play of future opponents as well. It is almost as if winning or losing is incidental, a consequence of the game code in that one must be determined, but the process of doing so far outweighs the actual winner in importance. In short: winning is nice, but being a strong, gracious competitor and giving your opponent a good match is better by far.

This is naturally a consequence of the idea of fighting games as a skill challenge between competitors. Discussions of banning, tournament rules, and exactly where the line is crossed between "social restriction necessary" (for example, Hilde's crowd boo phenomenon at EVO) and "official ban necessary" (Akuma in Street Fighter 2 Turbo: HD Remix) have a lot to do with the idea of creating a level playing field and allowing a situation where skill shines through to illuminate the stronger competitor. Though the camps at Shoryuken.com (SRK) and Smashboards have differing views on the nature of a fighting game, both of them create tournament rules with the same goal in mind: "a fair fight." To them, casual players or the non-serious care about fun (which often means
winning) and not necessarily about skill; this is why they "nerdrage" after losing on XBox Live, why they play Smash with items turned on, and why "home rules" such as "throws are cheap, we won't use them" emerge. To the casual player, when everyone has a chance to win, the game is more fun; to the serious player, the source of fun in the first place is in determining the better player by matching skills. As Taylor (2006) points out, "fun" is a highly abused notion in video game study. What is fun for one player group quite clearly might not be for another.

As Butler argues, a performance is a series of iterated events and experiences, moving through time. Part of the way in which this performance maintains itself is through normative play. The ways in which these players choose to pursue playing the game – their normative opinions on the hobby itself – both reflect and reinforce a particular ideological character. In turn, as more players adopt that style of play, the social strength of that playstyle as a norm increases, and the social force of the ideology of play also increases. Much like a gender performance, repetition and indoctrination over time help to turn praxis into a norm, with all the pressures that go along with it.

Chapter 6 on the practice of play is the strongest example of this in action. The clash over house rules and tournament restrictions between the community at SRK and the Smash community (and even within the Smash community) is fundamentally about the "skill challenge" aspect of the performance. Mapped out in a cause and effect fashion, the argument for turning off items in Smash reads like so:

1.) What are fighting games for? Competition with another player.
2.) Competition with another player needs to be fair and even, with skill as the only determinant.
3.) Thus, fighting games need to be fair and even.
4.) Items present uncontrollable situations where player skill doesn't determine the outcome of the match.
5.) Items are not fair and even.
6.) Items must be banned.

While this is somewhat simplified, it shows how one might start with a social norm –
fighting games as perfect, Caillois-defined agon – and how that social norm then
becomes a gameplay norm. The process isn't limited to Smash, either; you can replace the
last three lines with the following:

4.) Akuma's double air fireball and other moves present situations where even skilled
players will be entirely without options or recourse.
5.) Akuma is not fair and even.
6.) Akuma must be banned.

That process would more or less describe why Akuma isn't legal in tournament play for
Street Fighter 2 Turbo: HD Remix despite David Sirlin's attempts to balance him.

Though within the greater community arguments rage about that first step – "What are
fighting games for?" – the process that comes after resolving said step is relatively
constant.

Yet in this scenario, what remains relatively constant is the affordances of the
game code. Smash can be played with items or without; SF2T can be played with Akuma,
or without him. There is nothing elemental in the code, nothing written onto the CD/DVD
media, which says "this is a fighting game" in an incontrovertible way. Recall the
discussion in chapter 1 on the many influences – genre, historical, market – that go into
defining what a fighting game is. Despite differing opinions on all of that, what remains
constant is that norms about play affect player expectations about the experience, which
then affect how they perform play itself.

However, it is also important to note that performance is often intersectional and
analysis of it should take into account multiple aspects and influences on it (Risman,
In terms of the ideal fighting game performance, I observed significant intersectionalities with both gender and ethnicity. Women are not well-represented in the community to the point of near nonexistence, and their lack of visibility suggests a gendered element to the performance as well. As of this writing, the EVO tournament for 2010 recently concluded, including a "women's invitational" for *Super Street Fighter 4* which came down to four competitors from the main SSF4 tourney also fighting a mini-tournament amongst each other as part of the final day main event. Even the creation of the tournament was an issue of great debate on SRK ("The Role of Girls and Women in the FGC", 2010; "2010 SSF4 Women's Invitational: More Info and FAQ", 2010), and the many pages of these threads include everything from reasoned debate on not wanting to send women players to a gender ghetto to "trolling" male players insisting those female players return to the kitchen where they belong. The official information from the second thread gives the impression that part of the tournament's reason for existing is a history of "bad behavior" on the part of the SRK/EVO community and a desire to show "hey, women play these games too!" in the end.

Perhaps what is most interesting is a very common trope in that thread, stating women are just as capable as men at playing, and that if they want to be taken seriously, they have to let their skill speak for itself by playing against the men. This rhetoric has a strong resonance with discussions about women in the workforce, particularly regarding compensation and an equal work environment. In the patriarchal world of fighting games – just as in the patriarchal world of work in capitalist society – it is the privilege of men to insist that women reach success on male terms without addressing the influence of the power dynamic on the process. As an example of this principle in the workplace, consider
Heilman's (2001; also Heilman et al., 2004) exploration of workplace scenarios where women succeeding at male-typed tasks resulted in negative rather than positive responses. In her research, she argues that because women aren't supposed to succeed at male-coded tasks – and hardcore gameplay is unquestionably male-coded – when they do succeed at them, rather than being given credit for their success, they're disliked. It may be that if a large number of skilled women players did emerge, their success would be attributed to something else, continuing their marginalization. At the same time, however, this is also a community of technology users and fans in the margin who don't consider themselves part of the mainstream; in point of fact, one speaker at EVO outright declared, "If you like fighting games, you're not mainstream."

Yet women are definitely invisible in the fighting game community, and when they do appear in the narratives of this study, it is not as skilled competitors, but as observers or supporters. One interesting example of that at work is the few interview subjects I spoke to who either talked about an existing significant other, or a former/potential one. "Teaching your girlfriend how to play" was an infrequent but extant narrative, and it often served as a metaphor for teaching someone who doesn't know what they're doing how to play. It's not particularly seen as a negative; Jeff describes being happy about teaching his current partner to play fighting games. Yet at the same time, his description included sentences such as this: "I taught her how to do a fireball, and she can do it on purpose, and it's exciting to see her do a fireball on purpose 'cause she just knows it's… I dunno. I dunno how to describe that. It's a good feeling." The idea being, he's happy that she's showing skill (which is valued) yet at the same time, it has the ring of teaching a child to walk: she's taken her "first steps" and it's terribly exciting.
Of course, the question remains, if he were teaching a brother, male cousin, male friend, or other male to play, would it elicit the same reaction? Judging only from his responses it's impossible to say, nor do I wish to ascribe any particular misogyny to Jeff himself, but his sentiment was echoed by Isaac and Nicholas, which – read in combination with the wide variety of responses in the SRK thread mentioned previously – suggests a gendered norm of some kind. It may be that the fighting game community's emphasis on skill and expertise means that it echoes a sort of geek masculinity, running parallel to hegemonic masculinity but with a focus more on technology, knowledge, and skill than physical power and prowess (Kendall, 2000; Consalvo, 2003; Dutton, 2007). In this instance the masculinity of these communities is not necessary focused on maintaining patriarchal/hegemonic power, but does create a context where femininity is non-ideal and women remain objectified and marginalized.

Ethnicity, too, has an impact on the ideal performance, though for slightly different reasons. For the most part, race didn't seem discussed or considered by the people I spoke with, nor was it a major issue at EVO, setting aside perhaps the crowd's reaction to French SC4 player Malek during the finals, as discussed above in the context of their booing of Hilde players. The community I saw at EVO was relatively diverse from a surface examination. Where ethnicity really comes into play is a privileging of Asian background as a marker of innate skill. A very telling example of how some in the fighting game community feel about the perceived dominance of Asian players – particularly Japanese players – comes from my interview with Jeff:

Interviewer: Like I just don’t have the experience playing, I don’t have the reflexes either, but that’s neither here nor there. But like…

Respondent: You don’t have Asian hands?
Interviewer: Ha! Is that a…

Respondent: You don’t have Asian hands.

Interviewer: Is that a common way of saying it?

Respondent: Oh yeah. I didn’t… I’ve certainly been upset that I’m not Asian at certain points, when I just can’t, when I can’t hit a move, I’ll throw up my hands and go “Ahh! If only I could have Asian hands!” and I’ve heard other people say it too, because you just see, like the Korean players and the Japanese players, they’re just like “Whatever! Got it first try!” and it’s like, “Aaah! Give me your fingers!”

This came during a moment where I explained my own lack of skill with fighting games and what contributed to it. Jeff's response was joking, but it was part of a larger context where Asian players are considered to be just naturally better than their American counterparts.

Not all such references are necessarily about some sort of elemental quality that sets Asian players apart. As has been previously discussed, unlike the United States, in Japan the arcade scene is alive and well, and many interview respondents were quick to mention that the larger community and access to arcades gives Japanese players a competitive edge. Evan describes a scenario where a known quantity in the U.S. scene, "Arturo," went to Japan to play: "He could beat everybody in America, at that time he would go over there and send back reports of him losing for like an entire day, so. It’s just like, he’d go into an arcade and there’d be like 20 people in there, and he couldn’t beat any of ‘em, or he’d go to a tournament every week and lose first round every week, so." Evan is speaking about the strength of the arcade scene in Japan, but there is also a note of "even one of our best isn't at the level of their average player."
Thus Asia – and particularly Japan – is both a heated rival and a sort of ideal motherland, where the arcade still exists and the players are top notch. The tension becomes a sort of love-hate relationship, where figures like Daigo Umehara win championship after championship, making it look easy and even *claiming* that it takes very little effort (Ashcraft, 2008) are considered heroes for their puissant skill, but at the same time, they're rivals to be defeated and in their own weird way are just "better" than us. Gene encapsulates a bit of the Daigo effect particularly well:

Respondent: Yeah. I mean… yes. Daigo is… Daigo has always been Daigo, and he’s from Japan, and obviously the Japan players, quote-unquote have a “mystique,” and since this is a culture that overlaps very much with kind of the Japan-ophiles or however you call them, that people instantly like and respect the Japanese players, because they… they have such a great arcade culture that we, that people like us have always wanted, and they still have an arcade culture while we don’t have an arcade culture anymore, really, so people are obviously going to like Daigo and root for Daigo because A.) he’s the best, he’s the Japanese player, people like the Japanese players, he’s not the most colorful Japanese player, he’s not, you know, like, he’s not Mago or Kindevu or, you know, guys who climb around, he’s…

Interviewer: He struck me as kind of reserved, yeah.

Respondent: He’s a force of nature in the game. He is what everyone measures against.

Yet those same players who like and respect Daigo for being such an icon would be thrilled if an American player were to best him for the championship at EVO.

Constructing Asian players in this manner has echoes of Said's (1978) *Orientalism*; coming from the mysterious Orient, Asian players have their own aura – "mystique" as the quote above puts it – that makes them both exotic and unreachable at the same time. As Said put it, "[t]his cultural, temporal, and geographical distance [from the Occident] was expressed in metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise: phrases
like 'The veils of an Eastern bride' or 'the inscrutable Orient' passed into the common language" (p. 222). This othering is also very similar to the sort of effects observed in the athletic world in the United States, particularly in discussions of how sportscasters and announcers deal with ethnicity, race, and gender when speaking about athletes themselves. Eastman and Billings (2001) found that Black athletes were often described in terms of their natural athletic ability and physical attributes, whereas White athletes were more frequently described as being skilled or smart players, focusing on mental attributes and effort. The stereotyping of Asian players as being better somehow, either through circumstance (the arcade scene) or simply having "Asian Hands" resonates with that. Certainly, the fighting game community is not downplaying the skill of Asian players; however, the reasons for that skill tended not to be interrogated. If an Asian player is good, it's because s/he comes from the mystic land of free-flowing arcades, where the endless high-level competition has forged them into something altogether different… or, in the case of the nickname attributed to Daigo Umehara – "the Beast" – not even altogether human. This last is particularly interesting, considering that phrases such as "Asian hands" suggest a sort of embodied essentialism of this Orientalism-esque mystique.

In summary: the fighting game performance deals with puissant skill, willingness to improve and foster play, and a dedication to competitive play, testing one's skill against other skilled challengers. However, there's also an expectation that those challengers are male, and that if they happen to be from an Asian culture, that they will naturally be better than the average American player. It may be that other ethnic or cultural factors are at work that were not observed in depth in this study. For example, I
noticed at EVO that many of the pre-eminent players of *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* were from the east coast, particularly New York and New Jersey, something that Evan confirmed in describing his experiences playing in a Philadelphia arcade against players from the tri-state area that travelled to attend tournaments and other events. It's possible that the popularity of *Marvel* and the mores of its subcommunity have something to do with the sociocultural factors of that area, a question that future research may seek to answer.

Normative play, social play, events, and online communities

Before undertaking this research, my initial conception of online communities such as Shoryuken.com was heavily influenced by Steinkuehler and Williams' (2006) research on massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) as potential third spaces. From the outside, SRK was a place for fans of fighting games to hang out, to share their love of fighting games, and perhaps to share tips about better play. For the most part, my conception of those places fit Oldenburg's (1999) eight criteria as Steinkuehler and Williams describe them. Now, after speaking to players who participate in those communities, observing their forums myself, and attending events which those forums help to organize and structure, I would be inclined to disagree with my previous assessment.

In their article, Steinkuehler and Williams suggest that some MMOs start as third spaces for players, but over time, that status starts to fade away; they turn to Putnam's (2000) idea of bridging and bonding in social capital. They link bridging relationships – less deep, more inclusive ones – with third spaces, arguing that the complex relationships of bonding are less likely to flourish in the light and playful atmosphere of a third space.
It was clear that Shoryuken.com was somewhere that serious fighting gamers went to engage in serious fighting game play. Even when they weren't actually interfacing with the game, they were engaged not only in the production of gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007) but also in the reproduction of the playstyle favored by that community. Though the literal content varied, communities based on other games such as Dustloop, Smashboards, or 8 Way Run.com functioned in much the same way.

My second research question for this study sought to examine the impact of ways of playing on social participation, as well as community formation:

- How do ways of playing affect social interaction, particularly in the context and formation of gamer culture and gaming communities?

The ways in which forums such as those mentioned above are not third places help to make salient the answer to that question. Certainly, there is a social element to those forums – most have one "general discussion" forum for topics unrelated to fighting games, if not more – but first and foremost, these are communities of expertise, much as Elitist Jerks.com is for World of Warcraft (Paul, 2009). As an earlier quote from an SRK user noted, users there consider it first and foremost a space for discussing high-level play. Rather than building a community as a social space, the sun around which these forums orbit is ways of playing. The three aspects of that – play practice, normative play, and social play – all encompass different expressions of the community of expertise concept. Further, social participation in that space – and in related spaces such as the EVO tournament – is heavily shaped by this concept of the expertise-based collective. Though genuine friendships and social connections can and do emerge from such
participation, the primary *motivation* for doing so is adherence to a particular way of playing.

The many stories of players I interviewed about their introduction to fighting games are a useful entry point on the topic. As mentioned earlier, the arcade setting features prominently into the history of many of these players. Even for those who started on home consoles rather than arcades, such as Nicholas, the *idea* of the arcade still has an influence on their eventual participation. Beyond that, there are also stories of how players new to fighting games learned "the right way to play" early on, abandoning their old style and adopting the serious fighting gamer performance.

Gene's story is perhaps the most dramatic, in the sense that he outright says that he was taught the proper way to play, but there are more subtle examples. Ibrahim, Garrett, Jeff, Jordan, Nicholas, and others all became exposed to the fighting game community via an online forum, often because they were in need of expertise that was available on those forums/expertise-based communities. Before that point, they describe scenarios where they were primarily casual players in scope: they played "for fun," sometimes by themselves, and typically not in a competitive setting. Exposure to places such as Shoryuken.com and 8WayRun.com opened their eyes in some ways to this new way of doing things, and they've been part of that ever since. As mentioned earlier, viewing fighting games as a competitive thing between two players rather than a solo activity is practically exnominative among these players; this speaks quite strongly to the influence participating in these communities can have.

However, the result wasn't just a change in playstyle. It was also participation socially, be it online forum postings or attending local get-togethers to play in person.
(which is also part of the performance!) rather than alone or online. Attending EVO or other such tournaments is also part of the process. Isaac and Aaron both framed their desire to attend EVO not just as wanting to participate as a fighter, but simply for the experience of it all. Entry into the fighting game community wasn’t just about playing fighting games a certain way; it was about making new social contacts with like-minded people, and building a social network as well. Of course, in the process, they also reinforce the power of the norms that build the community. Players on XBox Live respond to trash-talking, unskilled "scrubs" by offering advice, attempting to sway them to the right way to play. In areas with a smaller population, respondents spoke about always wanting to bring new blood into the fold, and even in more "saturated" cities in southern California, the idea is that if someone shows promise, s/he should be welcomed into the community to strengthen it.

Social participation is much the same. In chapter 4 I discussed the power of the arcade ideal, particularly at EVO, an event which itself embodies the arcade ideal. The norms of play and behaviors of social play from the arcade ideal extended outward even to total strangers at such an event. In that regard, EVO doesn't so much reflect the norms of fighting game play as embody them. By coming to EVO to compete, players reaffirm the idea that players worth playing against will be in attendance. The fact that Isaac and Aaron both wished so strongly to attend EVO despite their relatively low estimation of their chances for winning certainly suggests that the expense of travel was worth it on the experience alone. What was important to them was that they could experience play in a particular way at EVO: "real" play, against skilled and like-minded competitors. The role of the matchmaking forum is the same way. While socialization assuredly can result from
meeting another player to battle via matchmaking, the *point* of it – the reason for the social contact in the first place – is the norm of play. Fighting games are *supposed* to be played against other people, so social contact with other players first and foremost is a way of satisfying that.

In the context of Steinkuehler and Williams, this process of acculturation is much like the "bridging period" they describe for MMO players, a period where light social contact in a third space increases interest in the activity, but once "their activities became more hardcore… the function of MMOs as third places began to wane" (2006, p. 903).

When Gene and Evan encountered players from a different arcade who introduced them to SRK, when Garrett or Ibrahim discovered online communities of players who were also fans of *Soul Calibur*, and when Jeff was introduced to the world of serious fighting gaming by a stranger at a tournament, these players were creating bridging relationships. They were light, low-impact, focused on interest. As time went by, however, participation in the community – and gaining the proper capital to do so – went hand-in-hand with a certain style of play, and these lighter associations gave way to a focus on serious play.

As the 09er phenomenon on SRK shows – and as Chris Paul observes with Elitist Jerks – the membership of such communities rarely have patience for those unwilling to engage the norms seriously. The complaints leveled against 09ers and forum participants of all stripes suggest a more casual and light use of the online space that isn't consistent with the instrumental ways regulars use them. Jordan, for example, noted that one major complaint was that new users would post new threads speculating about the game's fiction, or simply expressing what parts of the games they thought were interesting; in
other words, approaching the forum as a third space. To the regulars of SRK, this was not how they experienced the site. Shoryuken.com is a place for the "work" of play: sharing expertise, setting up games, and furthering the norms of serious play. Much like the difference between casual players and hardcore players noted above, these two frames for social participation were so different as to be incompatible.

In short, ways of playing – particularly gameplay norms – serve as a framework and motivation for both community formation and social participation. Serious players create communities to share expertise and further their style of serious play, and attend social events in order to play the game with others who share the same normative views on the matter. When these ways of playing are not shared between communities, conflict – even schisms – result. Whether it's Ibrahim and Garrett mentioning how community opinions on *Soul Calibur 3* threatened to split the community, or Matthew's dire prediction that the *Smash* community is about to split in half on the issue of Metaknight, the key issue in structuring social participation – be it online or at events – always comes back to the norms of play.

Moving between frames: performance and social setting

"Strangers make it stranger." This quote from one of the respondents I observed playing locally in the GRID Lab says a great deal about the ways in which players may shift their performance depending on the context of the situation. My final research question acknowledges Butler's assertion that performance is discursive, contextual, and subject to change, and thus asks:

- How do players negotiate their identity performance in different gaming contexts?
As Fine (1984) and Juul (2010) have argued, players in a multiplayer situation are constantly presented with competing frames to move between, and as Goffman (1974) makes clear, those frames provide ways that experience is organized and understood. My motivation in asking this question was to identify how players with different contexts might react in different situations. The ways in which they organize their understanding of the process – as well as the ways they move between understandings of the process as it happens – provide a way to understand the process itself through examining the frames of play and the keying process of moving between frames. Both the narratives of players I spoke with during interviews and the observations I made of players at the GRID Lab suggest that gaming context is less important than a combination of social setting and personal investment.

As noted in chapter 5, there were some serious fighting gamers who occasionally play in a way nothing like the ideal performance above. Matthew doesn't apply his highly analytical, precise style of mechanical play to Wii Sports bowling with his friends. Ibrahim is more than happy to spend a casual match "spamming" (see Kolos, 2010) a move over and over until the match is done. When online lag made precise control impossible in Tatsunoko vs. Capcom, Aaron fell out of the typical performance of skill and instead also resorted to spamming until the match was settled. In each of these cases, there is something about the situation that causes these players to move into a different performance of play. Matthew goes from chess player to bowler because for him, Wii Sports is something casual and fun, not worth the serious effort of play. Aaron resorts to spamming – an act he described in apologetic tones – because the noise of lag (Consalvo, 2009b) makes the actual "conversation" of play completely impossible.
The players that I observed locally also had varying reactions to social play, and in most cases it seems as if the social setting or context was far more important than game-related variables, such as the competitiveness of Mario Kart or the need for cooperation in Left 4 Dead 2. As the quote that starts this chapter suggests, the groups would often play in relative quiet because they didn't have a pre-existing social connection to the people playing with them; because they were strangers, the experience itself took on a certain strangeness. Conversely, the group that had a pre-existing social bond were much more vocal, interacting with each other on a more frequent level. It's highly likely that the artificiality of the setting – the players neither picked who they played with, nor the games they were to play – also helped to encourage them to be more reserved as well. While it wasn't an aim of this study to test the method, the results make it clear that such an experimental design might have limited usefulness for this purpose; the social situation was clearly more important than the games themselves. Future research of a similar nature may wish to take this into account when choosing appropriate methods.

On the other hand, after asking about their play outside of the lab context, it became clear that the stone-faced, low-socialization style that many players exhibited is not how they contextualized their social play experience. When those participants who play socially normally were asked how they play with friends, most players agreed that they were much more vocal, participating in trash talk, teasing, and other joking around. As both Juul (2010) and Kolos (2010) discuss, part of the multiplayer experience is a shared understanding of what the purpose of the activity is. Together with friends, the expectation is that the group understands that they are playing for fun, to win, or for
whatever reason, and so tension related with social play (and thus play-related socialization) would be less. Conversely, in a lab setting with a nearby researcher taking silent notes as one plays with total strangers a game not of one's own choosing, naturally that player might be more reserved, because they cannot be assured of a shared goal about the experience. The player to his/her right might be interested in just having a good time… or could be a competitive maniac who is out for blood in Mario Kart. In either case, much as with the context of social events and forums noted above, shared understanding of what the purpose of a game is – what it's for, how it should be played – reduces this uncertainty, and thus becomes desirable.

Yet there were some in-game events that seemed to encourage increased socialization. One of the more interesting ones was failure. As players drove off cliffs, were mauled by zombies, or hurtled down a bottomless pit in all three of the games played, failure was consistently a moment that sparked socialization, be it a helpless laugh, a cry of distress, or even an expression of frustration. Juul (2009), writing on the role of failure in games, argues that rather than being solely a punishment, failure in games makes them interesting and gives them depth. If a game is too easy – if there's no risk of failure – then it's also uninteresting. It may be that rather than the game itself encouraging a player to shift into a more social mode, it's the equalizing factor of failure that puts one at ease.

Regardless, the critical issue here is that moving between ways of play and social performances is guided primarily by the context in which the game is played. Different social situations can lead to different expectations about the experience, and as such, players shift between different frames (and thus, different performances) in order to
accommodate those differing expectations. For the fighting gamers mentioned above, this even seems to separate play into "work" and "play," in the sense that for serious matches that adhere to the ways of play consistent with the ideal performance they are "on the clock" and have to perform accordingly, while in a completely casual match they are free to shift into a different mode of play. Similarly, for the players I observed locally, the more there was a feeling of shared expectations about what they were doing, the greater their level of socialization was. Both cases suggest that context factors are cues for keying between different performative frames, expressed both through play and social interaction.

Concluding remarks and directions for future inquiry

It is relatively clear that, as Bloor (2002) argues while discussing Wittgenstein on rules, that ways of playing – a set of socially-constructed rules and behaviors – are his "collective pattern of self-referring activity" (p. 33). Just as the literal rules of the game built into the computer code shape the possibilities of the experience, the social rules of play become an institution with demonstrable effects on the players. However, this "collective pattern of self-referring activity" is also a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, p. 179); in other words, this collective way of playing that fighting gamers exhibit – a combination of actual play practice, opinions on how play should ideally be, and their social play with each other – is a performance, a discursive structure that, through repetition, becomes an institution: a creator and arbiter of rules.

However, it is not only players that are affected by this fact. As a thought experiment, consider three people on a tennis court. Two are playing a standard singles
game, volleying the ball back and forth with their rackets and adhering to known conventions of scoring. A third is standing off to the side, bouncing a ball up and down on his/her racket, trying to keep it from falling on the ground. In both cases, people are playing a game with rules of a sort, using the same basic equipment: a tennis court, a racket, a tennis ball. However, to say they are playing the same game is a mistake. Certainly, there are similarities; they are both focusing on keeping the ball in play, for example, but in the end it is adherence to conventions – rules – that defines the activity itself. In the case of fighting games, the code (i.e. the actual literal game) is the ball, and the technology used to play it, the racket. After that, the game experience is defined much more heavily by play convention than by anything elemental about the game itself. If one were to walk by this taking place on a tennis court, which of the two groups of players would have the "authenticity" of "real tennis" behind them? It is easy to imagine a scenario where asking the two people playing traditional tennis what they're doing would earn the person asking an incredulous "What does it look like?" response, whereas the one bouncing the ball on his/her racket might sheepishly respond, "Just passing the time."

This is Consalvo's (2007) gaming paratext at work. While her description of the paratext in Cheating focused primarily on peripheral consumption and how extratextual consumption relates to the actual experience of playing the game in the first place: "[p]aratexts surround, shape, support, and provide context for texts. They may alter the meanings of texts, further enhance meanings, or provide challenges to sedimented meanings" (p. 182). One of her examples is strategy guides, which not only provide a literal guide to in-game knowledge, but also guide the reader to play in a specific way. The key issue here is that the paratext has the capability to fundamentally alter the
experience of the text, which is why she quotes Lunenfeld's (1999) claim that in the modern era, text and paratext are inseparable.

I believe that this research not only contributes to recent studies that argue for interpreting games as more situated between the game text itself and social play (Soltis, 2008; Kolos, 2010), but also suggests a new way to conceptualize how different player communities define themselves. Rather than thinking of different types of gamer playing the same game in different ways, it seems more fruitful – based on the experiences of players observed in this study – to conceptualize them as in essence playing two separate games entirely. Much as with performative gender, the "body" of a game – the computer code – is only a starting point; a consistent material influence, but one that is ultimately wrapped in how it is used.

However, this research is primarily about a single type of gamer community and playstyle: serious fighting game players. More research is required to examine if the ways of playing observed here are consistent across different genres of game, both digital and non. Are these behaviors observable in, for example, players of board games or collectible card games such as Magic: the Gathering? Exploring the potential impact on other gaming communities will help cement if this is a behavior that's endemic to fighting gamers or if it has broader applications across game studies.

It is also critical to note that while the analysis of the data made every effort to identify intersectional notions, the fighting gamers that were interviewed were all male, and within a relatively narrow age range. I also did not investigate the ethnicity of the players I spoke to. The gendered and ethnic dimensions of the performance noted earlier in this chapter suggest that those norms in the community would have a large impact on
the experiences of women players and players with Asian heritage, for example. Research that focuses specifically on their experience would be invaluable, particularly as a comparison to the norms uncovered here.

Similarly, a second direction for future research would be to analyze how players construct ways of play across genres. Juul (2010) suggests that hardcore players, for example, flexible in terms of the time and investment they will devote to games while casual players are more inflexible, with more strict constructions of what they are looking for. The fighting game players in this study clearly set aside much of their available time and energy for fighting games. However, they were capable of playing those games in a casual way, whereas it seems as if casual players can't approach it the other way (hence, "Stop Having Fun Guys" memes emerge). Examining how hardcore players of one game type perform play of another type would help to increase our understanding of how players move between performances in differing scenarios.

Methodologically, I made a specific decision not to engage in participant observation, choosing to distance myself from actual play. However, in conducting this research – particularly in noticing how players observed locally responded to my participating socially in the activity rather than remaining distant – I believe that a more ethnographic approach might provide insights into this phenomenon that a more detached approach would not. For example, how might have these findings been different if I had been an entrant in the EVO tournament rather than an impartial observer? Similarly, would the social context of play observed at the GRID Lab have changed if I had been seen not as a scientific observer, but a part of the experience? These are questions that a more participant-oriented approach would be poised to answer.
On one hand, it is somewhat disheartening that many of the casual/hardcore player rifts I observed in this research seem, at first glance, unresolvable. With their differing expectations of the experience and their conflicting styles of satisfying those expectations, never the twain shall meet. However, I believe that this research is among the first steps to closing that gap. The more we understand about how these ways of play get formed, and how people identify with those ways of play, the better our ability to design games that take this into account and create situations where those unresolvable conflicts are less divisive. If this research can help me to overcome my frustration, to see the different perspective of the hardcore players that who were once the bane of my Smash Bros. experience, then anything is possible.
References


Games and Culture.


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Appendix A
Interview schedule – EVO attendees and fighting game players

Personal ludic/gamer identity:
• What's your nick/online name/username? How did you choose that?
• Who is your "main," if you have one? What types of characters do you like/dislike?
  o How did you choose those characters?
• What's your favorite fighting game? What kind of fighting games really appeal to you/do you not like?

Community and social participation:
• How did you get into fighting games?
• Do you go to fighting game-related events or social gatherings? If so, which ones?
• Do you play with friends casually?
  o Do you play online via PSN/XBox Live/etc.?
• When you play with others, what do you play? How?
• Do you regularly read or post on fighting game forums? Which ones?

Fighting game/play practice orientation:
• What's your favorite part of the games you really enjoy/least favorite part of the games you dislike?
• Do you have a playstyle? If so, what's it like?
• What types of play do you really respect or enjoy, and which ones make you upset or angry, and why?
• Do you have an arcade stick? If so, what's it like and how did you get it?

Regional identities (if time permits):
• Where do you usually play? Do you identify as being from a particular "region" as a fighting gamer?
• Tell me about your thoughts on the relationship between the U.S. and Japan in the fighting game culture.
Appendix B
GRID Lab study – initial response filter questionnaire

1.) What is your age?

2.) Do you own any home gaming consoles? If you do, which ones? What games do you like playing?

3.) Do you play games on the computer, such as World of Warcraft, Team Fortress 2, or games like Bejeweled on sites like PopCap.com? If you do, which ones?

4.) If you do play games regularly, how often do you play? Is gaming a part of your normal routine, or something you only do now and then?

5.) When you play games, do you usually play alone, or with other people? Do you play some games alone and different games in a group, or does it not usually make a difference?

6.) Do you normally read gaming websites or magazines, or post in online forums about games? If you do, which ones?

7.) What type of gamer would you call yourself (if you consider yourself a gamer)? Do you think of yourself as casual, or hardcore, or something different?

8.) What days of the week/times of day would you typically be available to participate?

9.) Finally: what experience, if any, do you have playing these three specific games?
   - Any of the Mario Kart games (SNES, N64, GameCube, or Wii)
   - New Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo DS or Wii versions)
   - Left 4 Dead or Left 4 Dead 2 (any platform)

Thank you very much! Please email your responses back to me at th298206@ohio.edu at the earliest opportunity.

The above layout is as the tournament floor appeared on days one and two, while elimination matches and semifinal matches were taking place. On day 3, the following changes were made to the space:

- The BYOC areas were cleared
- The *Smash Bros.* tournament areas were cleared
- The Capcom and Namco-Bandai demo booths were cleared
- The elimination pool stations were cleared
- The tournament officer desk was moved toward the south end of the room
- In the space vacated by the elimination pools and the moving of the tournament desk, additional crowd seating was put in place
- The lights were dimmed