Competitive Video Games and Social Capital: New Frontiers of Community Formation

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1 Introduction

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) outlines the decline of social capital in America over the past 50 years, and describes its effects on everyday life:

“We maintain a façade of formal affiliation, but we rarely show up. We have invented new ways of expressing our demands that demand less of us. We are less likely to turn out for collective deliberation - whether in the voting booth or the meeting hall - and when we do, we find that discouragingly few of our friends and neighbors have shown up. We are less generous with our money and... with our time, and we are less likely to give strangers the benefit of the doubt. They, of course, return the favor.”

(Putnam, 2000: 183)

Putnam’s observations are in line with a large and lengthy body of literature that describes modern society as a place where individuals have become increasingly isolated from each other. Scholars claim that industrialization, globalization, and unprecedented levels of global migration and cultural exchange have lead to the destruction of traditional forms of community and the supportive infrastructures that they once provided. It is also argued that this deterioration of social ties negatively affects the safety and productivity of our neighborhoods as well as our general sense of well being. The disappearance of community and the consequences it entails poses a complex challenge to social theorists. Although some scholars call for a return to traditional values as a way to restore community, we observe that mechanisms that encourage social connectedness exist in new technologies, and comprise a new frontier for community formation.

In this context, we turn our attention to a new form of rapidly developing electronic social media, and examine the ways in which individuals are utilizing it to produce social capital and maintain community identity in social networks. Video gaming represents a relatively new form of personal entertainment that has remained largely unexplored by social scientists, especially with regards to offline social contexts and their potential for supporting real social networks. In addition, video games and the people
who play them are portrayed in popular news media one dimensionally (and usually negatively); the vast diversity in different genres of games, mediums of presentation, and the specific behaviors and cultures associated with them has remained unacknowledged in both popular culture and formal literature. In our case study, we examine the social construction of community among individuals who play video games competitively. Specifically, we identify how social capital and community identity are formed through a competitive gaming culture centered on a genre known as “fighting games”.

The “Fighting Game Community”, as it refers to itself, is a network consisting of several thousand individuals across the country that regularly play and compete with each other in arcade style fighting video games such as “Street Fighter”, “Mortal Kombat” and “Marvel Vs. Capcom”. Competitions occur at offline tournaments, which are regularly organized through social networking websites by community members on local, regional, and national levels. Besides playing and competing in video games, community members also express a shared cultural identity through various forms of art, language (slang), fashion, merchandise, and electronic media.

In our study, we explore how competitive fighting game players often foster long term friendships with each other through shared experiences based on a unique competitive gaming culture, sometimes lasting throughout decades of frequent offline and online interaction. We then observe, on a larger scale, how these friendships comprise a dense, multi-stranded social network which promotes the formation of social capital and community identity. In addition, because of the competitive nature inherent in this particular gaming culture, community identity is expressed in the context of a defined social hierarchy based on gaming skill and individual contribution to community
initiatives. We examine how this explicitly hierarchical social structure allows for nuanced and intersectional expressions of identity within a communal context. In conclusion, we extrapolate our findings to the implications they have for other competitive game cultures and to community identity formation.
2 Literature Review

Downfall of Public Life and Community in Contemporary Society

Scholars in the early twentieth century were focused on bringing a specific definition to the term community. A multitude of case studies tried to link community to specific geographical locations, or focused on distinctions based on class, or “rural” versus “urban” locality. (Day, 2006) Despite this effort, the term has remained one of the most elusive, amorphous, and resilient concepts in social science. Nevertheless, apparent trends appear within the literature to show that regardless of any specific definition, the progression of society through worldwide modernization has lead to the deterioration of traditional social bonds.

Dozens of scholars have collectively described the dissolution of various aspects of public life in western societies since the industrial revolution. Perhaps one of the earliest accounts of this narrative can be found in Durkheim’s Suicide. Durkheim (1897) claims that economic development has produced a constant state of anomie in industrialized societies.

“…liberation of (human) desires has been made worse by the very development of industry and the almost infinite extension of the market… Such is the source of the excitement predominating in this part of society, and which has thence extended to the other parts. There, the state of crisis and anomie is constant and, so to speak, normal.”

(Durkheim, 1897: 256)

This constant state of moral deregulation was significant to Durkheim because of the implications it had for higher suicide rates. However, an underlying observation in his claim is that industrialization and the structural change it brought on has lead to more social incoherence between the individuals within society. Anomie in itself can be viewed as a consequence of modern society, and implies the absence of a public or community identity.
More recent literature has focused on the incompatibility between community and postmodern society. Bauman (2001) argues that individuals in today’s world lack the sense of security that is the defining characteristic of belonging to a community. This insecurity in social standing was to some degree brought about by economic “disengagement”, in working environments where employees fear constant and unpredictable change. The successful elite, on the other hand, have also “disengaged” themselves by “escaping” their locality. They have become “exterritorial”, traveling and living in various global metropolitan city centers. Bauman describes a world where the masses are constantly fearful, insecure, and isolated. As a result, society’s longing for community manifests itself in a misguided search for safety and security.

“We miss community because we miss security, a quality crucial to a happy life, but one which the world we inhabit is ever less able to offer and ever more reluctant to promise. But community remains stubbornly missing, eludes our grasp or keeps falling apart, because the way in which this world prompts us to go about fulfilling our dreams of a secure life does not bring us closer to their fulfillment.”

(Bauman, 2001: 143)

Bauman does not offer any detailed prescription for how we might go about finding real community. He only mentions that real community would require “sharing and mutual care”, as well as “concern and responsibility for the equal right to be human”. Bauman’s main objective is not to suggest a possible solution; rather he intends to point out how the notion of community is irreconcilable against the backdrop of “liquid modernity”.

In addition to the authors above, there has been much scholarship by American social scientists describing how the realities of community are changing specifically within the United States. In his seminal work, Bowling Alone, Putnam (2000) provides a large range of evidence to suggest that American communities have been suffering from decreased levels of formal and informal social interaction over the past several decades.
Putnam shows that this decreased level of civic engagement and informal interaction has negatively affected Americans’ sense of health and well being. Based on these findings, Putnam emphatically claims that “Social connectedness matters to our lives in the most profound way.” Putnam (2000: 403) makes a plethora of suggestions regarding finding paths to collectively building more social capital, such as more civic education in schools, more participation in extracurricular activities, and encouraging sociality in the workplace. He suggests that methods for building social capital should not be “civic broccoli- good for you but unappealing”, but rather should be a “combination of values and fun”. Putnam implies that people cannot be forced to be connected to each other; motivation to be social must come from the individuals themselves.

The decline of American community has also been linked to observable consequences regarding the economic and political exploitation of American people. In his interesting analysis, Freie (1998) describes the phenomenon of “counterfeit community” in America. He claims that despite the virtually universal agreement of authors and scholars that community in America is in decline, claims of community have ironically become ubiquitous throughout society in places like the workplace, exclusive housing developments, and political dialogue. He sees the vast majority of these claims as instances of counterfeit community, where the image of community is utilized for economic gain or manipulation, accomplishing the ulterior goals of corporations and politicians. Freie (1998: 3) claims that it is the “disjunction between the longing for community and the reality of separation that makes us vulnerable to counterfeit claims of community.” The fact that real community has been in decline is what makes the counterfeit so appealing. The underlying value of Freie’s claim is that counterfeit
community is a realized consequence of the exploitation that occurs when real community bonds are absent throughout society.

**New Visions of Community**

Possibly the most daunting issue regarding studying community is the fact that the definition of community itself has always been widely contested in the social sciences. The term has meant different things to different scholars throughout history. The vision of traditional community, as it was written about in the early twentieth century, is a definition that links a community to a specific geographical location, where societal structure has produced a dense social network of people working, living, and interacting within the same space throughout their lives. As society has progressed, however, the geographical boundaries associated with these traditional communities have disintegrated, and individuals have found access to unprecedented levels of mobility. This progress has lead to new definitions and understandings of community identity. A growing body of literature is showing that communities can exist without the traditional constraints of geography. In fact, Day (2006) writes:

“spatial connotations are far from exhausting the possibilities of community; neither is a shared geography any guarantee that the other expected features of community will arise. After many years of study, no inherent connection has been established between place, and the formation of the distinctive sets of social relationships, forms of sentiment, or conceptions of common identity that are regarded as typical of community.”

(Day, 2006: 183)

This view implies that an individual’s sense of community does not necessarily need to be linked to any particular physical space. Groups may still be able to share the “typical” aspects of community listed above regardless of any immediate geographical connection. Modern communities, much like the individuals who comprise them, have become mobile.

As the bonds of traditional communities are becoming less prevalent throughout society, individuals have also gained more freedom to choose whom they associate with.
Wilkinson (2010) analyzes the role of voluntarism in “personal communities”. Citing previous literature, Wilkinson writes that personal communities are “self selected and individuated”, and include “elements of individualism, including self-identification, freely chosen attachments and individualized belonging.” In essence, a personal community consists of an individuals’ active and/or intimate personal relationships that have been self selected, rather than imposed by structural constraints. Writers like Bauman have criticized communities based on voluntarism as lacking “solidity and permanence” (Day, 2006: 230). His reasoning is that voluntary communities exist simply because individuals choose to identify with them, and as a consequence can disappear as soon as members choose otherwise. Wilkinson (2010: 454), however, finds that personal communities create opportunities for individuals to “construct their own personal narratives through forms of public engagement”. She argues that when “voluntarism is expressed publicly, as through volunteering, subjective preference and personal commitment can be a means of realizing collective outcomes as well as an impetus to build personal communities.” (Wilkinson, 2010: 467) In contrast to Bauman’s argument, Wilkinson finds that voluntarism, the choice to self identify, is actually a real, personal commitment which does not necessarily imply the absence of permanence. The personal community can be viewed as a legitimate modern alternative to traditional community.

Cohen (1985) adds a new dimension to understanding community as the use of shared symbols to create social boundaries. According to Cohen, the existence of communities is not structurally determined by political or economic forces, and again is not rooted in geography. Rather, a community is actively constructed by its members as a result of their experiences and the meanings that are attached to them. The inherent
meaning of individual experiences is expressed in everyday life using symbols which are recognized by other community members. These symbols define the boundaries of community, implying that those who are not members of the community will not recognize their significance. In addition, these symbols may hold individualized meanings for different community members, and their use enables nuanced modes of identity expression. Cohen writes the following regarding community:

“It is highly symbolized, with the consequence that its members can invest it with their selves. Its character is sufficiently malleable that it can accommodate all of its members’ selves without them feeling their individuality to be overtly compromised. Indeed, the gloss of commonality which it paints over its diverse components gives to each of them an additional referent for their identities.”

(Cohen, 1985:109)

Cohen argues that the significance of a community can only be understood subjectively through the experiences of its members. Community formation and its subsequent existence cannot be analyzed simply by looking at its structure and institutions, but must be understood on its own terms through every day lived experiences.

**Community in the Age of Cyberspace**

The exponential increase in internet use during the past two decades has drastically changed the way people communicate and interact with each other. As it relates to community studies, the internet is a double edged sword. On one hand, scholars claim that the internet provides a very poor substitute for real life interactions, and that belonging to “internet communities” does not actually imply any real sense of social obligation or commitment. As Day (2006) writes, “Virtual gatherings cannot match the complex integration of private and public life, or the critical mass of interdependent interests, found in actual geo-physical communities.” Similarly, Freie (1998) sees cyberspace as one of the breeding grounds for counterfeit community. According to
Freie, participation in cyberspace communities does not foster real or lasting relationships, and only serve the purpose of temporary psychological satisfaction. There are no long term social relationships because interactions on the internet do not require any kind of real commitment or responsibility towards others.

“When difficult problems arise that threaten one’s involvement in the cyberspace community, it is far too easy to either avoid or withdraw. The community thus fails to provide a genuine and lasting group of relationships. This temporariness is a fundamental characteristic of the structure of cyberspace communities and makes it inevitable that communities on the Internet will be counterfeit.”

(Freie, 1998: 154)

In addition, Freie also mentions that it is possible to falsely represent one’s own identity on the internet, so that self descriptions are not necessarily accurate or true. Anyone can easily claim to be of any race or gender, and social interactions based on these false claims cannot be legitimate. These authors view online social interaction as an activity which is separated from and opposed to offline, real life interaction. From this perspective, online interactions exist only in an isolated setting, separated from other aspects of an individual’s daily life.

However, other scholars have offered more dynamic views of the nature of online computer mediated interactions. They argue that interacting in cyberspace is not necessarily a substitute for social activity, but can simply be another component of it. As Wellman et al. (1996) write:

“In part, concerns about whether on-line ties can be strong ties are wrongly specified. Although CSSNs (computer supported social networks) do transcend time and space, not all ties are totally on-line or off-line. Much on-line contact is between people who see each other in person and live locally… In such situations, conversations started on one medium continue on others.”

(Wellman et al., 1996: 10)

The authors claim that online communities may sometimes be supplements to offline communities, and are not always isolated anonymous text communication. When community members meet and interact offline, the online component of social interaction
can strengthen social ties by serving as an additional method for communication, self-expression, and organizational logistics. Additionally Wellman et al. claim that virtual communities help foster relationships between members who possess diverse social characteristics. The authors claim that interacting online “gives participants more control over the timing and content of their self-disclosures” which “allows relationships to develop on the basis of shared interests rather than to be stunted at the onset by differences in social status.” In this regard, virtual communities provide opportunities for people of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to interact which would not be available otherwise.

The internet is such a newly widespread and transformative technology that its affect on community formation has not been completely realized or understood yet. As DiMaggio et al. write, “To some extent, whether one views the Internet as corrosive to or supportive of community depends in part on how one evaluates the things people do with it.” There are many instances and examples where users of the internet become isolated and antisocial, and also where the internet has facilitated long term positive relationships between individuals and groups.

**Games and Society**

Video gaming occupies a very difficult cultural space in modern society. On one hand, video games are a multi billion dollar industry that has enjoyed exponential growth over the past few decades. It is a form of interactive entertainment which is enjoyed by millions of individuals, and their popularity seems to be ever increasing, especially among younger generations. On the other hand, parents and law makers have expressed concern about the supposed negative effects video games have on children and society in
general. Time and time again, consequences of video game addiction and incidents of violence at schools have been highly publicized in news media in a way that emphasizes the dangers of video games. These news reports have promoted an image of video game players as violent and antisocial. The existence of video game addiction support groups such as wowdetox.com further substantiates these images. With this in mind, however, it is important to note that in proportion to the general gaming public of several million people, these highly publicized instances of violence and addiction account for an extremely tiny percentage of game playing individuals. Conclusive research is lacking in regards to video games and addiction. However, the more prominent concern of violence in video games has been researched and debated.

Anderson and Bushman (2001) are two researchers who have studied the effects of video game violence on aggressive behavior. In their meta analytic review of 35 separate studies, the authors examined the reported affects of exposure to violence in video games. They found that the “results clearly support the hypothesis that exposure to violent video games poses a public-health threat to children and youths” because playing violent video games was correlated with “heightened levels of aggression” and negatively correlated with “pro-social behavior”. The authors make it clear from the start that they are against violence in video games by citing cases such as the Columbine High School shootings as the result of exposure to video game violence. According to the authors, “violent video games came of age in the 1990s, with the killing games Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter, and Wolfenstein 3D.” Since there is no such genre to begin with, the mislabeling of fighting and first person shooter games as “killing games” is a conscious effort to imply that the primary objective of the games is violence for the sake of
violence, and an indication of their refusal to acknowledge the narrative aspects of the games that put violence within context.

There has been criticism of the type of media studies research that Anderson and Bushman have done. Referring to media studies on violent video games in general, Jenkins (2010) writes “In these studies, media images are removed from any narrative context. Subjects are asked to engage with content that they would not normally consume and may not understand.” This suggests that to truly understand the meaning behind how players perceive violence in video games, we must understand the cultural context in which the games are being played. Without this contextual background, the derived meaning of the media will most likely be a tiny distorted fraction of how it was originally meant to be understood.

Various aspects of social interaction relating to video gaming have been studied in contexts such as MMORPGS like World of Warcraft and the prominent PC Bangs of South Korea. However, other research linking community to competitive gaming is nonexistent. In regards to fighting games, only one other study has been conducted which specifically focuses on the genre. In Consuming and Localizing Japanese Combat Games in Hong Kong, Ng (2009) examines how Hong Kong youth have developed a localized subculture revolving around the Japanese fighting games Street Fighter and King Of Fighters. He argues that although these games are cultural products of Japan, youth in Hong Kong play these games within the context of their own locality. As a result, players adapt their experiences of the games into their own language and popular culture. In this context, Ng argues that “individual consumers interpret and consume cultural products in order to add new meanings to them”. Examples of this localization manifest themselves
in the Cantonese slang terms and unwritten codes of conduct found exclusively within Hong Kong fighting game arcades. The author also observes that playing fighting games “is largely a subculture for lower class young males in Hong Kong” and the “use of the lower-class language and behavior in playing Japanese combat games in Hong Kong is a cultural representation of social class identity among game players.” However, Ng does not mention the existence of a defined social structure or any sort of community identity which exists among fighting game players in Hong Kong.
3 Methods

For this project we collected qualitative data using ethnographic methods. Our goal was to analyze how community is socially constructed through shared experiences and how value is placed on these experiences in the context of playing fighting games. The most relevant way to accomplish this was to gain first hand experience through extensive participant observation, supported by in depth interviews from community members. At the beginning of the project, determining how to collect relevant data was a challenge, since we initially did not have specific field sites in mind. In addition, we did not have a solid grasp on the extensive social network of the fighting game community, so determining who would be worthwhile to interview was also a challenge.

At this early stage, we actively participated in reading and posting on the forums section of shoryuken.com, which is a newsfeed and social networking site dedicated to competitive fighting games. This site features user profiles, as well as threads dedicated to offline locations where regular gatherings of community members took place. These two resources were particularly useful for guiding us to new field sites and relevant individuals to interview. There are also several resources on shoryuken.com that are intended to help ease new players into the culture of competitive fighting games, such as a glossary for slang terms used in fighting game play, guides for tournament preparation, and discussion oriented podcasts. These additional resources greatly facilitated our understanding of the culture and general values of fighting game players, which in turn helped us clearly analyze the offline interactions we observed at field sites.

We began our data collection through participant observation, which we conducted at nearly a dozen sites around the greater Los Angeles area over a period of 17
months, from January 2010 to May 2011. Through this long-term participant observation, we were able to gain first hand experience in regards to how outsiders eventually become incorporated into a structured social network and develop identity within this specific social context.

Initially, we chose popular video game arcades as field sites, and participated in playing fighting games at these arcades on a weekly basis. Each arcade was occupied by its own regular group of customers, who we came in contact with frequently. After becoming acquainted with several members of the fighting game community at these arcades, we began attending local fighting game gatherings which met regularly, usually also on a weekly basis, throughout southern California. These gatherings, referred to by community members as “casual sessions”, were usually attended by anywhere from 6 to 30 individuals at each site and were hosted at private residences and businesses belonging to community members. These casual sessions comprise the bulk of the regular offline social activity of the fighting game community, and for the most part were attended by the same individuals over the course of our study. There was also a significant degree of intermingling among individuals who played fighting games at certain arcades and casual sessions, so that interactions and relationships among them comprised an extended social network. Just by attending arcades and casual sessions alone, we became acquainted with several hundred community members over the course of 15 months. In addition to attending casual sessions, we also competed in fighting game tournaments and attended special events such as game release parties.

Competing in tournaments is a primary concern to a large portion of fighting game community members, and success in these tournaments is admired even by those
who do not compete. Tournaments are organized by community members, and range in size from small local tournaments to large scale major tournaments attracting thousands of participants. Tournament players compete amongst themselves regularly for recreational purposes, as well as to gain social status by winning. In order to fully understand the relevance of these experiences within this social context, we actively trained and prepared for tournaments along with other competitive players. Throughout this process we became fully incorporated as members of the fighting game community, and as a result, were able to comprehend the first-hand lived experiences of competitive fighting game community members.

To supplement our participant observations we conducted 9 in depth interviews with respondents who were chosen based on their experiences within the community. We contacted these respondents either in person at fighting game events, or online through shoryuken.com user profiles. We conducted interviews both in person and online over Skype, which we recorded and transcribed. In two instances, due to time and location logistical constraints, we conducted written text interviews. The respondents we chose were individuals who either played leadership roles in the community which hold relevance to other community members, or individuals who have experiences which we viewed to be representative of a specific demographic or subgroup of the community. By capturing individual as well as representative perspectives, we were able analyze the nuanced nature of social interactions that occur within this hierarchical social structure.

The individuals we interviewed came from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite the varied roles which these individuals occupied, every person we interviewed played fighting games to some substantial degree, whether they competed in
tournaments or not. They include a former competitive player who now works as a community manager and special advisor to a fighting game development company, a fighting game event photographer, website administrators and content providers for fighting game related websites, and fighting game tournament players, commentators, and organizers. Some of these individuals occupied multiple roles. For instance, a tournament match commentator was also an online content provider, and a website administrator was also a tournament player. Also, some roles were more socially nuanced and specifically defined than others. The category of tournament player, for example, can be further divided into “top players”, “average players”, and “scrubs”, with each category bringing along varying degrees of social status within the community.

Our interview design included questions which were intentionally open ended, and focused on the individual experiences of respondents. Examples of questions that we asked to each respondent included “How did you first become involved with the fighting game community?”, “What do you do as part of the fighting game community?” and “What part does the fighting game community play in your social life as a whole?” As respondents would provide more specific answers, we would delve further into the topics they would bring up. For example, if a respondent were to bring up original video content they had made for community websites, we would ask questions specifically geared towards that content (what motivated you to make the video?, etc.). The purpose of this format was so that we could give respondents the opportunity to describe the significance of their own experiences using their own terms.

The interview data we collected helped us to fully grasp the significance of community as it applied to each respondent individually. The diverse perspectives
provided by respondents coupled with our extensive participant observation reveal a robust social network with a distinctive competitive culture centered on fighting video games, where individuals feel connected to one another through a shared sense of community identity.
Findings

4. Social Interaction

Playing fighting games competitively facilitates the acquisition of social capital and the development of social networks and community identity. In this section, we analyze the structures of social interaction among competitive fighting game players, how these interactions lead to close knit, long term social relationships, and how these relationships functionalize themselves through social capital.

Competition as a Facilitator of Social Interaction

Initially, the concept of a community centered on competitive video games seems counterintuitive. In popular media, video gamers are usually portrayed as violent or antisocial. Every year, there are numerous publicized incidents which link violent crimes and child neglect to playing video games (see references). However, our data refutes this popular image of the antisocial gamer, and shows that there are two primary processes by which individuals are able to use the competitive aspect of fighting games to achieve and maintain positive social relationships.

First, the desire to become competitive at a fighting game stems from enjoyment of the game itself. Individuals who play fighting games competitively all have the common interests of playing the game and analyzing its mechanics. Competition allows players to share these interests with others. As one respondent explains:

Respondent: “I think a lot of people in non-gaming communities don’t understand the competitive side…how we can compete with people that are our friends. But anyone who’s played competitive games, even board games, would understand immediately. That when you’re really into a game, you want to dissect it, and the only people that you can do that with are other people that play the game and share that passion. To speak about what move beats what move, and how many frames a move is with a friend, and then to turn that friend into an enemy for a few minutes and try to beat the living hell out of him in the game.”
Our respondent implies that discussing and analyzing fighting games requires that individuals play and understand them. As a result, the only individuals that a competitive player can communicate with in this manner are other competitive players. In these instances, competition in fighting games can be viewed as a tangible manifestation of a shared interest in which individuals are actively engaged with each other. This type of competition in fighting games is an inherently social activity, and often leads to interactions outside the realm of the game. Another respondent explains:

**Respondent:** “Fighting games for me have always comprised a kind of second family. In addition to the people I met in the arcades, I also talked a lot with different players online. Of course we analyzed every part of the game systems and competed against each other, and eventually those connections developed into friendships and talk about personal lives, etc.”

On a fundamental level, competitive players are all fans of fighting games, and competition is the main mechanism by which this interest is expressed.

Second, communication between players manifests itself within the context of the game itself. In the midst of competition, a player must make decisions to counter the decisions made by his opponent. These decisions lead to repeated situations in which the players must predict and react to each other, while recognizing tendencies and patterns. As a result of these decisions, a player can communicate apparent attitudes to his opponent within the game itself. Players are capable of showing “respect” or “disrespect” to their opponent directly through their in game decisions. Most fighting games even have a “taunt” function, in which the player’s in game character can insult the opponent instead of attacking. One respondent explains how decisions made while playing the game can communicate a player’s intelligence:

**Respondent:** “Yeah, I mean it’s a very testosterone filled game. It’s really like, in your face. And that’s interesting about the Street Fighter community, that you don’t really expect there to be a community in the first place because everyone is always fighting each other (laughs). We’re always battling it out. It’s kind of interesting for friendships to form off rivalries.”
Interviewer: “Yeah, let’s talk about that. How do those relationships form around the game?”
Respondent: “You know, it’s really funny. You’ll hate each other at first. Like me and my friend Moval for example…he would look at me and be like “Who’s this guy? He looks like a girl. This faggot” (laughs) or whatever and I’d be like, I’m just going body (beat) this guy. I’m going to make him waste his money playing me. The next thing you know, one of us does something really cool or really smart. And you know, you got to give it to the other guy sometimes. Like “Hey good game. That was really smart of you”. I guess that’s just how it starts, when you start respecting the other guy. Like maybe not just as a player but as a person.”

As the respondent describes, if a player “does something really cool or really smart” within the game, he can earn respect which is translated into other social contexts.

Through in game events, players are able to interpret, understand, and appreciate each other’s actions on an individual basis. In-game communication thus fosters mutual understanding between players and facilitates avenues for further social interaction based on past game experience.

Arcades and Casual Sessions

Video game arcades function as the primary public locations in which competitive fighting game players meet and interact on a regular basis. Playing games at one’s local arcade is a way for players to meet and compete against other players in a neutral public setting. As mentioned above, participation in competitive fighting games requires some form of social interaction, at least within the game itself. Although theoretically this in game interaction could occur through online play, arcades add the dimension of required face-to-face interaction while playing games. One respondent explains how playing fighting games at an arcade differs from playing at home:

Respondent: “At the arcade…you’re actually meeting other people whether you want to or not. In my case I didn’t really want to, I just ended up making a lot of friends anyway. Because yeah, at the arcade you’re not at home, you’re not all cooped up on online gaming, for example in front of your PC or in front of your Xbox Live. You actually are meeting people face to face. There’s another person on the other side of the cabinet that you’re playing on, and yeah, I think that’s kind of the beauty of it.”
Arcades are local establishments, and similar to neighborhood cafes or bars, have customers who visit regularly over long periods of time. For most competitive players, visiting arcades is usually not a special event, but rather is a routine component of a hobby and lifestyle. Players who frequent the same arcade interact with each other regularly over long periods of time, to the degree that part of the motivation to return to the arcade is simply to socialize with friends and acquaintances, rather than just to play games. One respondent explains how the arcade helped him develop close relationships:

**Interviewer:** “What kept you coming back and getting better and getting more involved in tournaments and things like that?”

**Respondent:** “I guess one reason to come back was probably just getting better at that game... And you know, there’s that competitive aspect to it that made me keep coming back, but the other half was meeting really cool people at the arcade who I really got along with. You know, there are just a lot of people at the arcade who I would now consider to be like family to me. I mean I don’t want to get too dramatic with it but personally I’ve never really been a guy with many friends. I’ve always been kind of a loner, coming out of high school. So when I went to the arcade for the first time I really didn’t expect to make friends at all. I was just keeping to myself, when next thing you know next month I’m talking to everyone.”

Long term participation in competitive fighting games within public settings facilitates constant face-to-face social interaction. In many cases, similar to the respondent above, the relationships that players form at arcades are very close knit, to the degree that they could become “like family” to them. The relationships that form at arcades in many cases carry over into other gaming contexts, such as tournaments and casual sessions.

Casual sessions are gatherings hosted by community members at private residences and businesses where individuals play games and socialize. Many individuals host and attend casual sessions on a regular (usually weekly or bi-weekly) basis, and invite friends that they have met at arcades, tournaments, and other casual sessions. Inviting other players into one’s private residence adds an additional personal dimension to the interactions that take place. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2001: 98) identifies the
frequency of “entertaining friends at home” as one of the informal social activities which has experienced dramatic rates of decline in the United States over the past several decades. Putnam argues that this type of informal social interaction contributes to higher levels of social capital. Casual sessions are a type of informal interaction in which friends are entertained at home, and provide an avenue for social capital acquisition.

The purposes of casual sessions vary, and might occasionally take the form of gaming combined with birthday celebrations, house warming parties, or summer cookouts. Many community members attend arcades, tournaments and casual sessions in multiple locations, and as a result are incorporated into an extended social network of fighting game players. One respondent describes his experience:

**Respondent:** “It has spawned from going to (the arcade) regularly, to going to tournaments, to going to sessions…knowing all kinds of people everywhere. I, personally, am from Orange County but I go to sessions out in Arcadia or Hollywood Park Casino and other stuff like that. I basically know everyone from everywhere.”

We found during our participant observations that the practice of going to arcades and/or sessions, meeting other players, and becoming incorporated into a social network of local community members was universal among competitive fighting game players. The following respondent describes the process as a structured lifestyle and an avenue for meaningful social interaction:

**Respondent:** “As far as when I say it’s a lifestyle, you know, you would go to the arcades and you would have to interact with people directly. And after the matches were done, you would start to talk to people and meet new friends. You find that they have similar interests and that you could go out and get drinks or food or whatever… So for some people it’s a definite lifestyle. It’s something they look forward to and how they make their friends.”

The face to face interaction that is required by attending arcades and casual sessions greatly facilitates close social relationships, and are the main processes by which competitive players are able to form community bonds and acquire social capital.
Competitive Fighting Games and the Function of Social Capital

The close knit network of relationships that fighting game players form with each other translates into social capital. As Coleman (1988: 98) describes, “social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. It is not lodged either in the actors themselves or in physical implements of production.” Coleman also claims that social capital “is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible”. In accordance with Coleman, we found that within the context of the fighting game community, social capital allows players to have robust social lives by granting access to an extended network of personal and professional contacts. In addition, fighting game community members commonly exhibit pro-social helping behavior. One respondent explains:

**Respondent:** “Everyone’s always coming together and helping each other out. Things both inside and outside of the game.”

**Interviewer:** “Can you give me some examples of that? Like, outside of the game?”

**Respondent:** “Let’s say, someone’s car breaks down at the arcade. And they don’t have a way home or something blah blah blah. And then, you know, maybe the other guy will help fix the car or lend him a ride home. You know, just that kind of thing. You play with these people for so long at the arcade they become your friends in all of it. It becomes more than just “that guy at the arcade”, but a close friend of yours.”

As our respondent implies, friendships formed through playing fighting games provide helpful resources to individuals that would not have access to them otherwise. Examples of helping behavior which we encountered during our participant observations include individuals helping an unemployed community member find a new job, donating money to a well known commentator who lost his home in a fire, providing transportation to fighting game events and social gatherings, and donating money out of pocket to make a tournament more successful.
Within the fighting game community, the benefits of social capital rooted in friendships are accessible to all members, regardless of race/ethnicity or socioeconomic background. The interactional components of playing fighting games facilitate social capital formation among individuals from diverse backgrounds, and enable pro-social behavior that penetrates both race and class boundaries. The following two respondents remark on diversity in the fighting game community:

**Respondent:** “With the caveat that everyone at gatherings is trying to beat the snot out of each other, it’s also an incredibly accepting group. The FGC is by far more diverse, tolerant and open-minded than anything I’ve ever seen. I’ve met a ton of amazing people through the FGC that I would never have met otherwise, and I wouldn't trade it for the world.”

**Respondent:** “No ones really singled out in the fighting game community. For example, there are all kinds of people, people ranging from like 15 to their 40’s or something. All kinds of different nationalities, backgrounds, jobs, you name it. You might have like, a bum like me who’s still a student, or you might have some guy who’s already an established family man.”

Competitive fighting games are able to facilitate social capital acquisition for individuals from diverse backgrounds because they provide a context for friendships to exist where factors such as race and class are not immediately relevant. One component of diversity, however, is severely lacking in the fighting game community, in the sense that the vast majority of competitive fighting game players are male. Based on tournament enrollment data, currently less than 5% of competitive players are female. However, the number of female players is gradually increasing as time goes on, and existing female players have access to the same benefits of social capital as other community members.

Very similar to Wilkinson’s (2010) description of personal communities, being a part of the fighting game community is voluntary. In support of Wilkinson’s analysis, we found that the voluntary nature of membership did not pose any deterrent to a sense of personal obligation or commitment to others, and that relationships to other community members were highly valued. For many competitive players, interacting with other
members of the fighting game community is a significant component of their overall social lives. The relationships that are formed from playing games are incorporated into the day-to-day lives of individuals, so that they form a dense, multi-stranded social network. One respondent describes the significance of the fighting game community to his social life as a whole:

**Interviewer:** “How big of a part do fighting games play in your social life in general?”

**Respondent:** “It’s pretty much a huge part. Virtually everyone I hang around plays fighting games to some degree. Pretty much everyone I’m involved with, even if they don’t play themselves, they know it’s a big part of what I do. They know I have been playing these games for a while and that it’s something important to us…a lot of it is sometimes we’re not even going out to play fighting games, we’re just meeting up with other people who happen to play fighting games…it’s just like all things in life. Once you get around people with a similar interest, you’ll find they will have similar interests outside that one topic. You’ll also have differences which you’ll find interesting just as well.”

As the respondent describes, friendships formed with individuals from fighting games become incorporated into broader social networks involving others who are not necessarily part of the fighting game community. This observation is in line with Graham Allan’s analysis of friendship and social structure:

“All friendships are…inevitably bound to the social and economic environment in which they are being enacted. Within this environment, modes of ‘doing’ friendship- and sociability more generally- emerge that are consonant with the other sets of relationships in which the individuals in question are embedded.”

(Allan, 1998: 687)

Friendships formed within the fighting game community are not necessarily restrained to social contexts that involve gaming. Community members often engage in social activities that do not involve games at all. The following respondent discusses how competitive fighting game players frequently socialize, and how this contradicts the popular perception of video game players as antisocial.

**Respondent:** “I think when you’re a video game fan, you definitely get that stigma, like you’re that introvert guy. Honestly, the hard part about it is that most of the media stories these days are about WoW (World of Warcraft) players. The people who lose their marriage because of WoW, the people who died in those Korean internet café’s because they didn’t eat and didn’t go the bathroom for three days straight and they die. So the problem with a lot of the video game...”
playing is that you have this thought that people just sit there and they don’t interact. So that is one of the most unique things about the fighting game community, is that, we’re interacting all the time. And it’s not just through playing, we’re always talking to each other, we’re always seeing each other, we hang out with each other. Because of Street Fighter 4, these past two years, my social life has been busier than ever. It’s funny, like every weekend, there will be one person who’s like hey, we’re all going to Korean barbeque, let’s go! And then we go to karaoke afterwards. Or someone will be like, hey want to come and go kart with us? Or like, hey someone’s having a birthday on the beach, we’re having a bonfire, so we all go to the beach.”

The above respondent remarks that members of the fighting game community differentiate themselves from other gamers through constant interaction. Competitive fighting game players like the one above are able to engage in active social lives as a result of the close knit social network that they become incorporated into. Our data shows that participation in competitive fighting games encourages and requires face-to-face interaction over long periods of time, and that these long term interactions facilitate the formation of friendships that comprise multi-stranded social networks in which individuals acquire social capital and community identity.
5 Mediums of Identity Expression

Fighting game community members actively express a shared cultural identity as a way of reaffirming a sense of belonging and commonality. Through the use of cultural symbols, language, fashion, and art, community members may present evidence of shared cultural knowledge or individualized personal expression within the specific cultural community context. In this section we analyze the various methods that competitive fighting game players employ to express cultural identity and community belonging.

Language

One avenue of expressing one’s identity as a member of the fighting game community is through the use of unique slang terms. The following is a list of widely used slang terms among members of the competitive fighting game community, with derived definitions and examples of their use that we encountered while conducting participant observation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Examples of Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salty</td>
<td>To be angry or upset after losing in a fighting game. A reference to an expression on one's face that resembles when one has eaten something extremely salty.</td>
<td>1. “I was so salty after that match.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blown Up/</td>
<td>When one loses in a fighting game in an extraordinarily dramatic or overwhelming fashion, especially when the loss puts emphasis on the weak points of the loser’s overall skill. Usually occurs in an overtly public setting.</td>
<td>1. “Wow he is getting blown up on the stream right now.” 2. “This guy doesn’t know how to block, he needs to put him on blast for that.” 3. “Ohhh! Exposed!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put On Blast/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/</td>
<td>Used to describe someone who lacks skill in fighting games, to the degree that beating them requires no effort. Sometimes, it is pronounced with exaggerated emphasis, usually in settings where the term is being directly used as an insult. Stay free is used usually to ridicule one’s apparent ignorance of game mechanics.</td>
<td>1. “He ain’t anybody, I won that shit free.” 2. “Whatever, stay free homie.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay Free</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Godlike</td>
<td>A general term meaning great, amazing, highly skilled, or of very high quality. Commonly used to describe a top player or a match between two players. When written down, usually abbreviated as “gdlk”</td>
<td>1. “That was so incredible! Just godlike!” 2. “Japanese players are too godlike.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scrub | A player who has a bad attitude, usually indicated by believing that he is more skilled in games than he actually is. Can also be used to describe someone who lacks skill and/or awareness, similar to free. | 1. “How did you lose to that scrub?”
2. “Shut the fuck up, scrub.”

In addition to the terms above, a plethora of less popular slang terms are used among sub sections of the community, varying among players of specific games or different geographical regions. For example, the term “pringles”, used to describe players with bad defense, is used commonly among Marvel Vs. Capcom players on the east coast, but is almost never used among players on the west coast. Although these terms originate from the specific context of competitive video game play, community members apply this cultural terminology to many aspects of daily life. As a result, fighting game slang is used ubiquitously in both competitive and informal social settings, and the original meanings of slang terms are generalized so that they are applicable to a wide variety of contexts. As one of our interview respondents explains:

**Respondent**: “…a lot of the terms that are used in the fighting game community, you use them on a daily basis to describe things that have nothing to do with fighting games.”

**Interviewer**: “Could you give us some examples?”

**Respondent**: “Well I mean it’s just like… you know, you’re in a car with a friend or something. He’s switching lanes to get ahead in traffic but gets blown up by some big mac truck and can’t get ahead and you tell them to stay free (laughs) … A lot of these terms you can give to describe anything. So, you know, if someone blows an interview and wonders why, it’s because they’re a scrub at interviews. You know, it’s just stuff like that. You use a lot of these terms and a lot of the ways you talk about fighting games and look at fighting games, a lot of us apply that mentality to how we look at other things in life.”

As our respondent implies, the meanings of slang terms are applied in informal settings differently from their original competitive gaming definitions. In the above example, being a “scrub at interviews” would simply mean that one lacks the skills necessary to conduct an interview successfully, and does not have any bearing on one’s skill in fighting games. This use of slang facilitates a way for community members to communicate in a multitude of social contexts while expressing an insider cultural
identity rooted in playing and competing in fighting games. During our participant observations, we encountered common use of slang in contextualized settings. Examples include a college student doing very well on an exam because it was “free”, a girlfriend being very “salty” because her boyfriend wanted to play Street Fighter instead of spending time with her, and a fast food restaurant that serves “godlike” hamburgers.

Using slang also has implications on how one is perceived in the community. Ignorance of slang terms indicates some level of ignorance regarding the competitive culture that spawned them. We asked one respondent about the significance of slang:

**Interviewer**: “If you were to encounter a player who was hearing these terms and had no idea of what they meant, would that signify anything about the player’s skill?”

**Respondent**: “Yeah, I guess it would signify a little bit about the players experience within the scene. It would make them seem less experienced. With them being less experienced I would assume that they are less skilled, for sure.”

Because experience is associated with skill level, newer players sometimes make efforts to mask their inexperience through use of slang terms. However, overuse of slang terms by newer players is also common, and ironically is also an indicator of apparent inexperience or an attempt to seem more knowledgeable than one actually is. Another respondent explains:

**Respondent**: “I think it's fine to use fighting game slang whenever just as long it doesn't get done to the point where you start sounding like a parrot. It seems a lot of people try to look the role of the fighting game player by using the slang excessively.”

As is the case in almost all sub cultural social settings, the correct use of insider language sets a boundary for membership by indicating to others that one comprehends the cultural context that necessitates its use.

**Arcade Sticks and Main Characters**

One of the most unique cultural components of competitive fighting games is the use of highly specialized game controllers, known as arcade sticks. Rooted in their arcade
origins, most competitive fighting games are designed to be played with their original arcade control scheme, consisting of a joystick with large and highly sensitive buttons, as opposed to the directional pad with smaller buttons, typical of regular game console controllers. The most commonly used competitive arcade stick is the MadCatz Tournament Edition Fight Stick, commonly referred to by community members as the TE. Arcade sticks range in price, from around one hundred to four hundred dollars depending on the quality, and are sometimes modified with both custom parts and artwork for better performance and individualized aesthetic preferences.

Interviewer: “Can you talk about the significance of owning a joystick and its significance to competitive game play?”
Respondent: “It’s definitely important. For one, it’s what you play on and each person needs to know whether their joystick will work for them. Some people like Japanese style sticks, while others like the American… There is also the other side where players are trying to look fancy. Some players have custom sticks where they have fancy artwork on it, or the box is made real nicely, they try to make a statement with it.”

Examples of customized arcade sticks.
Although the majority of competitive fighting game players use standard unmodified arcade sticks, the smaller subgroup of players that customize arcade sticks use them as a method of individualized self expression. As one respondent describes:

**Respondent**: “I have 5 different TE’s, one of them is being done right now.”

**Interviewer**: “So why do you, or players in general, put the effort into customizing arcade sticks? What is the significance of that?”

**Respondent**: “Just having one name tag on your TE stick that just looks the same as everyone else’s, it doesn’t speak for who you are. The community definitely has people from all walks of life that all come to play, and they all want to represent something. As for me, all my TE sticks have (custom) artwork on them, and that just kind of goes to tell you that it’s where I came from, it’s where I’ll always be, and this is where I am right now.”

Customizing one’s arcade stick serves the purpose of differentiating oneself while at the same time framing one’s individuality within the cultural context of competitive fighting games. Exactly as Cohen (1985:109) describes, “the gloss of commonality which (community) paints over its diverse components gives to each of them an additional referent for their identities”. Customizing arcade sticks is an avenue of identity expression, allowing individuals to express diverse interests through a common medium.

Another major component of identity expression in competitive fighting games is the choice of a “main character”. In all fighting games, there is a cast of characters from which the player must choose in order to compete. Over time, the vast majority of competitive players settle on one single character, known as their “main”. Many players take pride in their main character, and express their enthusiasm by having artwork of that character on online forum avatars or customized arcade sticks (see the above images for an example). Because of the intricacies that arise during competitive game play, characters become associated with certain “play styles”, which consist of tactics that must be used to succeed in competition. Through this process, characters embody different attitudes towards competitive play. Characters can be designated as “lame” (defensive),
“cheap” (easy to use), “complicated”, or “rush down” (aggressive), among other categories. Character attributes reflect upon the style of the player, becoming one of the main ways in which individuals identify themselves in the competitive context. Playing as a certain character can therefore affect others’ perception of one’s personality as a whole. Different players may also choose the same main character, but create their own unique play styles which they identify with. We asked one respondent to describe why he uses his main character:

**Respondent**: “Personally, I play Vega in Street Fighter 4 because I’m a purist. Like, just that one character. And I think that’s because he kind of defines me as a person almost. You know, I relate most to that character when it comes down to playing for real. And I’ll always pick him in a tournament... it’s almost like he’s an extension of my own brain.”

![The character select screens in Super Street Fighter 4 and Mortal Kombat](image)

Character selection is a universal requirement of playing fighting games, as well as a common cultural symbol that is used to express individualized identity within a group context. In addition, because character playing styles can only be experienced through competitive game play, the nuanced cultural significance of identifying with a main character can only be fully understood by competitive players. Players are therefore able to communicate this aspect of their identities with each other, but anyone lacking the necessary first hand experience would not grasp the full meaning. The “main” character is another example of a symbol that defines the boundaries of community, requiring insider knowledge to understand its significance (Cohen, 1985).
Fashion

Competitive fighting game culture is also expressed through clothing and fashion. There are several online retailers of fighting game themed clothing ran by community members, selling apparel with specific references to competitive gaming culture. The community members who make and sell this merchandise also may attend, sponsor or organize tournaments, so that fighting game fashion is highly visible at most large scale fighting game events. Fighting game fashion is used to display a combination of different and nuanced cultural references which allow individuals to add further dimensions to their identity as fighting game community members. In the examples below, shirts are made to imitate established street fashion brands *Supreme* and *OBEY.*
In the above example, the brand name *Supreme* is replaced with “Shoryuken”, which is the name of a special move of characters in the *Street Fighter* series of games. Similarly, the *OBEY* brand logo and text is replaced with a picture of Cable, a character in *Marvel Vs. Capcom 2*. The abbreviation AHVB stands for “Air Hyper Viper Beam”, which is the name of one of Cable’s special moves. These shirts make overt references to fashion brands as a way of aligning fighting game culture with the urban street culture that these brands represent, while at the same time expressing specific and individualized identity. Similar to the cultural symbols which we have already described, understanding the references made in fighting game fashion requires prior specialized knowledge or experience, and is a method of identity expression that falls within the boundary of community inclusion.
6 Community and Social Status

The fighting game community has an inherently hierarchical social structure which organizes and differentiates between individuals and sub groups based on various aspects of skill in games, experience, and involvement. Community members possess varying degrees of social status based on their individual accomplishments and contributions. In this section, we analyze the specific processes through which social status is obtained and how status affects motivations for communal participation and contribution. In addition, we also analyze the role of new players and tournament spectators within the communal context.

Contributions and Social Hierarchy

Individuals in the fighting game community distinguish themselves through obtaining social status. Members who have made significant contributions are recognized and respected by other community members. The following respondent gives examples of how individuals may gain social status in the community:

Interviewer: “Is the community in any way hierarchical? Are certain members more valuable/active than others?”
Respondent: “It's very clearly hierarchical. It was hierarchical way before we even knew who the best players were. You can be at the top of the hierarchy with game skills, or some other contribution, or a combination of the two. Sometimes people that aren't very good at the games are some of the backbones of the community, and are still very highly valued. In many ways, it seems to work on scarcity-if you have something to offer that's valuable, and that nobody else has, you can be at the top of the pile. Sometimes that's skill at the game itself, sometimes it's a unique organizing ability, or maybe you just have a space that people can use to hold a tournament. Anyone can be valuable and active, it's just up to you to see how your offerings slot into the community's needs.”

As the respondent describes, community members are able to make contributions through the use of unique skills or resources. Valuable contributions are distinctive and individualized, and emphasize the special talents of the contributor. The most universally
recognized accomplishment in the community, however, is skill in fighting games, which is made apparent by competitive success in tournaments.

Players who win consistently and place high in large scale tournaments are known as “top players”. As the title implies, top players are near the top of the community hierarchy, and are widely recognized and admired. Top players take on the role of public figures in the fighting game community, and achieve celebrity status among tournament spectators. The following respondent discusses his experiences as a top player:

**Interviewer**: “What connotation does that have in the community, to be a top player?”

**Respondent**: “Well, I guess there’s certainly some fame that comes along with it. Some attention… some people are going to be like looking up to you as a person, or as a role model or something. Maybe people will idolize you, like in a fan of sort of way. And yeah, basically you just get a lot of attention, which can be good and bad.”

**Interviewer**: “Okay. So can you give some specific examples of some of the type of attention you’ve gotten?”

**Respondent**: “Well, the simple things are when you go to tournaments or go to arcades and basically, walking outside and just like, people walk up to you and ask to shake your hand or sign their arcade stick. Also things like just getting a bunch of friend requests on play station network, for example, which can be kind of overwhelming but flattering.”

Attending and winning in major tournaments gives top players exposure to the rest of the community on a regular basis, and is the reason why they are widely recognized. Because of their competitive success, top players are sometimes sponsored to travel to tournaments in different parts of the world. Many top players travel frequently to compete and network with top players from other regions. As a result, they form their own closely knit sub group within the community, and reinforce each others’ privileged social status through competition.

Top players are highly respected because their skill in fighting games sets examples for other players, which is considered a valuable contribution. The following respondent explains how the rest of the community benefits from top players:

**Interviewer**: “In your opinion, how is winning a tournament contributing to the community?”
Respondent: “People need champions, you know? You have to have someone to go to, to level yourself up. No question about it, being a guy like (the top player) Justin Wong is a huge contribution to the community just by being the champion that he is. He wins so much and so often that other players look up to him, and say they want to be that good. You have to have those people to set the example.”

Because they are regarded as authorities on game knowledge and strategy, footage of matches between top players is watched and analyzed by the rest of the community. Players try to imitate competitive tactics invented by top players in an effort to improve their own skill. Although all top players are respected, certain fighting games are less popular than others in the competitive community. Top players of less popular games such as *Tekken* and *Blazblue* receive less attention than those who play more prominent titles such as *Street Fighter* or *Marvel vs. Capcom*, so that hierarchy is also established between different games.

Throughout all fighting games, skill is correlated with social status in general, and all competitive players constantly strive to improve. Contributions to the community often take the form of original media that are aimed to help other players learn competitive strategies. Even if someone is not a top player, he may still have a deep understanding of a specific aspect of a particular game, and can make a tutorial video or written guide to present the information to other players on fighting game community websites. One respondent describes how posting original media online can help individuals gain recognition:

Interviewer: “Is there any other way to earn respect in this community besides being really good at a game?”
Respondent: “Oh, definitely. You don’t really have to be good at the game to get recognized in the community. I mean, there are plenty of things to do to help. There’s websites where you can post guides on, helping other players get better, video tutorials, and interviews with other players. I think the player base really appreciates when people do that kind of stuff.”

There are many individuals in the fighting game community who are widely recognized for various educational media that they produce. These community members often make
similar media for different games over the span of several years, and in some instances have been formally recognized at major fighting game events with awards. As Wellman et. al (1996) also found, the fact that recognition is given to creators of original online content is an example of how social interaction via digital mediums can be a supplement for offline relationships.

Another way of contributing to the community is organizing fighting game tournaments and events. Fighting game tournaments range in size, from small local tournaments with less than a dozen participants to large scale tournaments, called “majors”, with thousands of entrants and spectators. Tournaments are the sole avenue by which players are able to seriously compete. Experienced tournament organizers are therefore seen as extremely valuable members of the fighting game community and in some cases are regarded as prominent community leaders who are at the very top of the social hierarchy. The following respondent describes his experience of organizing major tournaments:

**Interviewer:** “Could you go a little bit into what it takes to run a large tournament and what motivates you to dedicate the time and effort to do so?”

**Respondent:** “It’s insanely difficult. I think there’s probably a very small percentage of people within the community that possess the talents it takes to run a tournament of that size. And there’s an even smaller amount of people who actually have the capital in their bank account to do it. There might be guys that are perfectly capable, but they don’t have the thousands of dollars that they need to put up to even try to run a tournament like that. You got to get a venue, you got to get equipment, you got to provide a live stream now, you got to offer bonuses or nobody will come, it’s really expensive. The motivator for me in the past was just to get my friends together to play. Nobody else was going to organize something, so I took it upon myself.”

Tournament organizers gain social status by investing their own time and energy to organize events for other community members. The social status of tournament organizers is related to the size and prominence of the tournament they host, so that
organizers of major tournaments are more widely recognized than organizers of smaller, local tournaments.

Contribution is central for gaining social status in the fighting game community. The recognition individuals receive from other community members can function as motivation for one to make considerable investments of time, effort and other personal resources to benefit others. Furthermore, the investment of these personal resources indicates personal commitment to community goals and initiatives. The following respondent comments on why contributing is important for competition:

**Interviewer:** “I want to ask you about contributing to the community in general. Why is that important?”

**Respondent:** “Because it is a community. It’s not a business, it’s a community. We’re all here for the same reasons. If no one helps each other out, we all stagnate… most people are playing competitive games because they want to get better, because they enjoy competing. And, if no one shares information, then no one gets better. If none of us gets better, then it gets boring.”

Contributing serves the purpose of promoting individual status and at the same time provides valuable resources that community members utilize to strengthen an overall sense of community identity. The hierarchical structure of the fighting game community encourages members to constantly find new ways of helping others by rewarding individuals with respect and social status.

**New Players and Online Spectators**

Since the first fighting game tournaments in the mid 1990s, the fighting game community has organized itself using the hierarchical structure described above. The recent popularity of a new generation of fighting games, beginning with the console release of *Street Fighter 4* in 2009, has induced an influx of several thousand new competitive players who do not have any prior background in the fighting game community. Because of the sheer number of individuals entering the competitive
community at the same time, they are thought of collectively as a new generation of players. Distinctions are often made between players who are “new to the scene” and others who are “old school” and have several years’ worth of experience in the community. In general, older players are given more respect than younger players because of the contributions they have made and experience they have.

Many players in the “new generation” have received widespread criticism from older community members for being ignorant of traditional fighting game culture yet having an attitude of arrogance or entitlement. New players are sometimes referred to by the derogatory term “09’ers” (read: oh niners), a reference to the influx of individuals who entered the community in the year 2009. Newer players may not be familiar with respected community members or tournament etiquette, and have received harsh criticisms or flaming via online community forums. The following respondent explains how newer players are more passive than older community members:

**Interviewer:** “Do you notice any relevant differences in attitude or behavior between older members who have been in the community for several years vs. newer members who have joined since 2009?”

**Respondent:** “There are a lot of wallflower types who show up just to watch but want their opinion to mean something. That's two of the differences in attitude I've spotted between the "generations". That passiveness and sense of entitlement a lot of new people have. Too many people are okay with going 0-2 (losing in a tournament) and not doing anything about it. I'm fine with losing as long as some progress is made. Apparently everyone got the first part of that message and not the second.”

Newer players are generally considered less competitive than older players, and are perceived to have less drive to improve. This passive attitude toward competition is looked down upon because it represents disregard for the value of competitive skill. The following respondent explains how newer players are more likely to idolize top players instead of wanting to beat them, and less likely to be familiar with some respected members of the community:
Respondent: “I think top players should be respected and stuff but some people take it to another level. They idolize these players as if they were like, deities or something. And for us back in the day it wasn’t really like that. If you went to a tournament, the general mentality is that you should be able to beat anybody there regardless of who they are…Unfortunately with the rise of Street Fighter 4 we have a lot of kids come in who don’t have this background. They go to tournaments and look at these top players as celebrities, but they are just people like anybody else. They should be respected as people and respected as someone who puts a lot of work into what they do and a lot of time and effort into what they do, and that’s great. But at a certain point it gets a little embarrassing looking at some of the ways these people idolize other people in the scene. More than that, there are some unsung heroes in the scene that don’t really get their time in the spotlight, but they’re the ones who actually make things happen. Just for instance, Shin Blanka, the guy who got me into the scene. You know, he runs (the major tournament) Final Round every year… A lot of the newer kids don’t even know who he is.”

Many newer players are ignorant of competitive etiquette and older community members simply because they are new. As they gain more experience, many newer players embrace the traditional competitive culture, and are incorporated into the community as respected members. Some players from the new generation have even gained recognition as top players or respected contributors. Despite their criticisms, older community members mostly recognize the sudden entrance of this new generation of players as a very significant and gratifying development, since the new players now represent a very large proportion of the fighting game community and ensure a continuation of its existence and growth.

Another recent development which resulted from the popularity of the Street Fighter 4 generation of games is the existence of live internet streaming for fighting game tournaments. Live streams are internet broadcasts ran by community members, and allow spectators to watch and chat about fighting game tournaments in real time from around the world. The following respondent discusses what his motivations were for organizing live streams:

Respondent: “Well a lot of people on the west coast or even in like New York are spoiled. They can go to these local sessions where they have all these tournaments; they have arcades out here, you can just play and be involved in the scene with a lot of high level players and a lot of cool people. But it’s not like that all over the world you know? And so I started to think about that and
I was like, okay, you know for people who don’t have access, I’m sure they would be really interested to see how things go down in these tournaments and local sessions… It’s just getting out the raw game play, the raw emotion, the raw scene and using the live stream as a platform for that, nothing beats it, as far as delivering that message and showing the world what the scene is all about. How it’s different from Star Craft, how it’s different from Quake. It’s just a completely different community. The live streaming is, again, pretty much the best platform for showing that to everybody.”

Individuals and groups who organize streams are also highly respected community members. They often travel to different locations to help tournament organizers stream their events, and take pride in the quality and level of professionalism of their broadcasts. Live streams of major tournaments are routinely watched by dozens of thousands of online spectators. Currently, it is normal and expected for major tournaments to have many times more stream spectators than actual entrants. For example, the major tournament *Evolution 2010* had over 2000 competitive players in attendance, but over 30,000 stream viewers who were watching from their homes.

Most spectators of live streams do not actually play competitively or enter tournaments, and therefore do not have any actual offline social contact with members of the fighting game community. In addition, many online spectators routinely make extremely rude, demeaning and vulgar comments on live stream chats directed towards both players and tournament organizers. Community members refer to rude spectators who are not actually community members as “stream monsters”. Nonetheless, having several thousand spectators for a live stream is a way for tournament organizers to get funding from sponsors, and as a result live streams are produced mainly to cater to online spectators.

Many spectators are casual fighting game players who are not involved in the competitive community, but may still have personal accounts on online community forums such as shoryuken.com. Spectators who have never gone to offline gatherings or
events generally have distorted perceptions of the fighting game community and its members. Spectators, like newer players, also regard top players as celebrities, but may be completely unaware that a close knit social network exists among community members. The following respondent explains how spectators may have perceptions or expectations of players without ever meeting them:

**Respondent**: “With streaming and Youtube, it’s so easy to know who a player is without ever having seen or met them, and they start to take on, kind of like a celebrity role. Like, (the top player) Mike Ross, for example. I’ve met people who’ve met Mike Ross for the first time and they’d say, “Wow, Mike Ross was shorter than I expected”. That’s an example of how some of these players take on a celebrity role and how people create these images and expectations in their heads on what some of these top players are like.”

Contrary to previous examples of online interactions in the fighting game community, spectators who solely interact within live stream chats or posts on community forums are not necessarily incorporated into any kind of real social network. These kinds of online interactions are in line with the kind described by Day (2006) and Freie (1998), and do not provide the necessary parameters for long term social interactions or meaningful relationships between individuals. As such, the spectators who are only engaged through live streams are only marginal to the fighting game community, and are not necessarily committed or personally invested. In line with Freie’s (1998) observations, these online spectators are free to remain anonymous, and the social interactions they take part in may be temporary and isolated from other contexts.
7 Conclusion

Our findings show that participation in competitive fighting games facilitates the acquisition of social capital and incorporates individuals into close-knit social networks with a shared community identity. Contrary to previous research done by Anderson and Bushman (2001), we found that exposure to violent media in fighting video games did not lead to a decline in pro-social behavior. Rather, consumption of this media within a competitive context actually encouraged communication, social interaction, and helping behavior. Instead of posing a threat to public health as Anderson and Bushman would claim, we found that specific video games, despite their overtly violent presentation, encourage sociability and grant participants access to the benefits of social capital. Our research findings suggest that violent video game media and its effects must be considered within the real-world contexts in which individuals consume it, rather than in isolated settings.

In regards to online interaction and social connectedness, our findings support the claim made by DiMaggio et al. that, “whether one views the Internet as corrosive to or supportive of community depends in part on how one evaluates the things people do with it.” Within the fighting game community, we found that online interaction supported community ties in certain instances but were detrimental in others. For community members who meet offline regularly, online communication serves as a useful tool for organizing and sharing information, and strengthens social connections. In the case of anonymous tournament spectators, online communication only functions as a means for isolated and temporary interaction, and contributes to their distorted and fragmented perception of reality. Our observations suggest that the internet can be regarded as a
communication tool that may have both positive and negative consequences for social connectedness and community formation, depending on the presence of other forms of concurrent social interaction.

Our analysis shows that the fighting game community is not a traditional form of community, in that it is not necessarily tied to a specific geographical location, nor does it define itself based on race or class distinctions, such as the “working class communities” discussed by Day (2006). The fighting game community represents a new frontier in community formation, based on the utilization and consumption of electronic entertainment media. It is also unique in the sense that the vast majority of other competitive video games do not foster these types of close knit relationships and communities. Further research is required to analyze to what degree (if any) other genres of popular competitive video games, such as real time strategy games like Starcraft or first person shooters like Halo, etc. encourage face-to-face interactions that lead to the formation of close knit social networks.

Our findings suggest that the inherent features in genre and design of entertainment media deeply affect the way individuals consume it, and have important implications for the structure of social interactions rooted in common interests and entertainment. Analysis of the mechanisms by which entertainment media such as video games, television, and music can facilitate social interaction could potentially lead to the creation of new forms of popular entertainment that help to connects us, rather than isolate us. As society continues to change at unprecedented rates, technological advancements in entertainment may be central to solving the issue of decreasing levels of social capital and represent a new frontier for community formation.
References

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