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Indie Sports Games: Performance and Performativity

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Abstract

The indie videogame scene is playing host to a new trend – competitive multiplayer sports themed games. Titles like *Hokra*, *BaraBariBall*, *Tennnes*, and *GIRP*, among others, have been challenging traditional notions of what constitutes a sports themed videogame. The emergence and popularity of these games raises questions about how the culture of traditional sports relates to the still developing community of independent developers, journalists, scholars, and enthusiasts that comprise the nascent indie scene. Looking through the lens of performance and performativity, this paper unpacks this new sports game trend, examining design, spectatorship, and group identity by way of interviews with key members of the indie game scene.

Author Keywords

Indie Games, Sports, Sports Videogames

Beginnings

A series of three individual, yet interconnected events in the winter of 2012 lead to the writing of this paper on sports performance in the indie videogame scene. These events quite naturally arose out of an emerging, sports related trajectory to my game studies work. In reflecting on the genesis of this particular study, I couldn't help but think about how each of these three isolated circumstances added to my contemplation of the relationship between the nascent, yet growing indie videogame scene, and the sports related discourse that I discovered therein.

In January, after a month of discussions, my first in a series of columns on sports videogames was posted to the online videogame journal *Kill Screen*. Starting life as a print magazine, *Kill Screen* positions itself in opposition to popular perceptions of mainstream videogame news and review sources. In the "About" section of the website, they write, "*Kill Screen* is a videogame arts and culture company" (*Kill Screen*).

Kill Screen has grown to become directly associated with the indie videogame scene, especially in New York City where the company is located. Both the print and online editions of the journal are peppered with stories about indie developers, reviews of indie games, and perspectives on the indie scene. The company sponsors and hosts many events where indie games are showcased connecting the magazine to the nascent indie game community. *Kill Screen* has also hosted parties at the New York City indie arcade Babycastles, further cementing the image of the company as supportive of the independent game scene, and of independent developers.

As a result of my regular writing for *Kill Screen*, I found myself incorporated into an emerging indie games community, and I discovered that the column provided access to games and developers that I would otherwise not have. This barrier of exclusion that I transgressed by writing for *Kill Screen* has a direct relationship to the sports-like discourse and performances I have encountered in the indie game scene, and to the development of cultural boundaries not unlike those common to sports fan culture.

Shortly after I began writing for *Kill Screen* I attended a PhD Workshop at the IT University of Copenhagen entitled "Beyond Sports vs. Games." Organized by faculty and doctoral candidates at the school, the workshop was created to provide a roundtable discussion for exploring topics regarding the relationship between sports and digital games, with attendees presenting papers in-progress, or developing abstracts. The goal of the workshop, according to organizers, was to "embrace interdisciplinary perspectives on sports and computer games, prompting a richer conversation about the nature of digital play by bringing to the foreground a sports orientation," (Taylor et al., 2011). Presentations ranged from discussion of gender and e-sports, to a look at competitive programming. The one presentation most relevant to this paper was by Douglas Wilson, presenting on artistic expression, personal style, and the "Indie Arcade." Wilson's presentation provided a launching point for my own investigation into the relationship between sports and indie videogames of the moment. While Wilson's thoughts inspired this work, I approach the topic from a different angle, exploring performance in the indie videogame scene, rather than looking closely at design.

Predating the two aforementioned events, and perhaps inspiring and informing both, I received a copy of the as yet unreleased indie sports game *Hokra*. The game has garnered much attention inside the indie scene since its debut at the No Quarter exhibition at New York University's Game Center in the spring of 2011. My first experience of the game was at our research lab at MIT later that year. The raucous, jubilant, and surprisingly spectated play session that ensued struck a familiar chord with me, and resonated with similar experiences I have had at sporting events. To the game, I was hooked, but I was also curious about what allowed for such a sport-like experience to develop, and how certain language and behavior associated with sports fandom manifests in the unlikeliest of scenarios. It is with this play session of *Hokra,* and the questions it inspired, that my investigation into the discourse and performance of sport in the indie videogame scene began.

Introduction

In contrast to the stereotypical image of the immersed gamer, with a forward lean, jaw agape, and eyes wide, I stood in front of the television with my teeth clenched, and my eyes squinted in focus on the screen. The noise in the room grew as people watching began to clap and shout, and as the last point scored for my team, the room exploded, I pumped my fist into the air, controller in hand, and turned to high-five my teammate with the other. We had just won a close game of *Hokra*, and we were elated.

Hokra, by all accounts, is a sports videogame. Teams of two players compete to score points in goals positioned at the corner of the screen, passing, carrying, dribbling, and shooting the puck into the scoring zones. *Kill Screen*, a popular independent videogame journal, compares *Hokra* to

another popular sports videogame series, calling it "*NBA Jam* for minimalist junkies." (Sanders, 2011) Designed by Ramiro Corbetta, the game is like *NBA Jam* in that it is a competitive, four player game, pitting teams of two against each other, though in this case, the videogame is more abstract soccer than ostentatious basketball. The game itself was inspired by the passing mechanics in the wildly popular EA soccer simulation *FIFA*. The relationship does not go unnoticed, as *Hokra* inspires sport-like performance and discourse wherever it gets played.

Corbetta's game is just one of a host of recently developed indie games that either draw inspiration from the domain of sports, or are received and performed inside the indie scene in sport-like ways. Inside the burgeoning independent game scene, as boundaries of distinction demarcating indie status are drawn around creators and consumers, encircling some and leaving others outside, language of sports and sports culture have wormed their way into the discourse inside the community. A few prominent independent games such as *Hokra, Nidhogg*, and *BaraBariBall*, have either been critiqued from inside the indie game community as having relation to sports, or, as in the case with *Hokra* and *BaraBariBall*, have been announced by the designers to have been developed with a sports influence.

At prominent gatherings for members of the indie community, competitive tournaments have become regular occurrences, with developers promoting their games as players line up for a chance to prove their skill. These tournaments at once invoke the spirit of competitive play from arcade culture, and also that from the broad domain of competitive sports organization. At so-called "New Arcade" exhibitions like NYU's No Quarter, or at the indie haven Babycastles, sport indie games have been shown with regularity. The indie scene has become, for lack of a better term and with all accompanied irony, sportified.

The assumption of sports-like discourse, and sport role performance inside of the indie game scene is surprising considering the seemingly disparate communities of sports fandom and indie gamers. As threads can easily be drawn to the "geek culture" of digital gaming that preceded the nascent indie scene, the roots of the sporting influences are less clear.

At the heart of this phenomenon is performance, as community members assume and enact roles that are similar to those found in the domain of sports. This paper explores two distinct yet related usages of the concept of performance. The first is likely the more familiar: that sports as activities are often performed by players before an audience of spectators. Many approaches to understanding sports factor in the role of the audience, whether they are watching a broadcast on television, or witnessing the event in person at a stadium, arena, or small gym.

The second usage builds on theories of performativity, which argue that identity is constructed through repeated social actions and practices. We are all always performing our identity, shaping a sense of self in society via roles that are diverse and nuanced. What I have discovered in the indie game scene is that members of the community are performing sports-like roles as a means of shaping identity and reinforcing cultural organization. This builds on theories of identity performance as a means for enculturation and group identification (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990: Harper, 2010) Performance and performativity are important concepts for understanding how the discourse and behaviors inside the indie game scene relate to the cultures of sports.

The invocation of Butler here is not accidental, as wrapped up in questions of sport identity performance in the indie scene are issues of gender. In what ways is the indie sport scene open or closed on the basis of gender? Gender identity performance in competitive digital gaming is a complicated terrain, and a topic on which some scholars have trained their focus (Witkowski, 2012; Witkowski, forthcoming; Taylor, 2009). During her fieldwork studying gaming competitions, Emma Witkowski frequently encountered gendered spaces, where "hegemonic sporting masculinities" were repeatedly enacted and culturally reinforced (2012). Perhaps more specific to this paper on event-driven indie sports games, Witkowski describes "diverse gender performances made in relation to the situated event space and event-goers" (Witkowski, forthcoming), which she calls "eventful masculinities". Her work invites us to ask how does the event-driven phenomena of indie sports games shape the way gender identities are performed at those events? While this paper does not investigate gender with any depth, it is important to consider how gender performance plays a role in the openness of highly competitive, often highly corporeal sports games emerging in the indie scene.

But what constitutes this "so-called" indie scene? While the moniker of "indie" ostensibly refers to the distribution and publication of a videogame, the usage also came to symbolize a community gathered around certain types of design, certain aesthetics, and a culture all its own. What may have started as a response to mainstream publication became festivals, awards, and a scene predicated on distinction, authority, and access. The community is far from centralized however, as Charles J. Pratt[1], a researcher at the NYU Game Center and curator of the annual No Quarter exhibitions points out, calling it a "loose connection of local scenes" centered in cities like Copenhagen, Austin, Montreal, and New York.

The trajectory of indie games resembles that of "indie" music, starting as a decentralized grassroots cultural movement, and advancing to a more codified and distinct style and stance. Not unlike indie music, games emerging from the indie scene are developed with characteristic style and design. Certain recurring aesthetic choices and mechanics, often nostalgically referencing the 8-bit console generation, have become a common marker of the games emerging from the community; many members share a generational connection by way of adolescent gaming in the 1980s. Despite aesthetic markers, and some homogeny to the community, the notion of the indie scene is hard to tie down in totality.

As difficult as it is to constrain notions of "indie-ness," it may be even harder to approach a definition of sports. Klaus Meier, working toward a sociological definition of sport that hinges on physical activity, felt that having multiple definitions for "sport" was inadequate for advancing study in the field. He writes, "…to investigate, clarify, and understand the nature and function of sport in society, and to develop basic theory concerned with the interrelationships present, it is necessary, as a prerequisite, to define and to operationally limit the field of inquiry" (Meier, 1981, p. 89). After ruling out institutionalization as a producing factor for sport, and working his way through Bernard Suits' definition for a "game," Meier arrives at his own definition, "…that all sports possess the four essential characteristics of a game, with the addition of one significant distinguishing feature which differentiates them from other games; namely, sport requires physical skill to be demonstrated and the outcome is largely dependent upon the degree of physical prowess exhibited by the participants" (Meier, 1981, p. 94).

Would that it were so easy. While Meier allows for institutional factors playing a role in shaping understanding of sport, he pushes for a formal definition to structure a far-reaching understanding of sport as such. But as we look into computer game play as sport, the traditional notions of "physical skill" are problematized. T.L. Taylor encountered similar challenges when trying to situate emergent e-sports in the context of traditionally accepted sports games like baseball, football, or nowadays, even poker (cf. Witkowski, 2009). She writes, "Athleticism is still primarily seen as overt demonstrations of physical activity and skill" (Talylor, 2012, p. 36). She also rightly points out that gender, class, and culture are wrapped up in hegemonic notions of sport. In working through notions of indie "sports" games, it is far more useful to open up the possibility of what could or could not be considered sport, as the question is continuously interrogated by members of the indie community. Just as with the e-sports communities Taylor looks at, active engagement with the question of what constitutes sport can be found inside the indie sports game scene.

One of the first questions I asked of many of the interviewees for this paper was how they conceive of what constitutes a sport. For some it was as simple an answer as deferring to common cultural norms; tennis is a sport because we commonly think of it as such. Others, like Bennett Foddy, invoke a more culturally situated position, arguing that sports are about performance, spectatorship, and even fandom.

The diverse and varied responses to "what is a sport?" from respondents mirror the theoretical discourse around the same question. To venture an attempt at an all-encompassing definition of sports for this paper would be folly. I believe that it is more useful to look at how members of the indie scene conceptualize of sports in relation to their activity, and use that as a guide for analyzing the relationship to mainstream, or traditional sports.

It is into this space of contested meaning about notions of "e-sport" and "sport" that I will situate this analysis of indie sports games. There has been some excellent work on e-sports emerging out of field of game studies: T.L. Taylor stands out at the forefront of this work with her text *Raising The Stakes* (2012). However many others have looked at e-sports from a variety of perspectives, focusing on gender (Witkoski, 2012, forthcoming; Taylor, N. 2009), identity performance (Harper, 2010), the aesthetics of play and replay (Lowood, 2008, Lowood, forthcoming), and conceptions of sport as media (Hutchins, 2010).[2] Most of these texts focus on established organized competitions like the World Cyber Games, or Major League Gaming, and do not focus on independent competitive games. While the work on e-sports is limited but growing, the scholarly research into notions of sports videogames is even more limited. Gerry Crawford did some pioneering work on theories of sports videogames (Crawford, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008, 2009), and a handful of others have also contributed thoughtful work on various aspects of sports videogames including: ideologies of posthumanism (Plymire, 2009), athletes and identity (Silberman, 2009), ethnicity and representation (Leonard, 2003), sports newsgames (Stein, 2012), and televisuality (Conway, 2010; Stein, forthcoming). The field of research into sports videogames is not as well trod as say, that of *World of Warcraft*; however it is expanding rapidly, as evidenced by the forthcoming volume of essays *Sports Videogames* (Consalvo et. al., forthcoming). To date, no work has been done looking specifically at how the independent videogame scene incorporates competitive sporty play.

This paper is not going to dissect the many uses of the term "indie," nor will it attempt to characterize in totality the so-called indie scene. As Pratt and others point out, it is not so centralized or monolithic anyway. Rather, I will look closely at identity performance with a particular eye toward how it relates to common behaviors and language found in the domain of sports. Also, I will explore how the role of the spectator factors in the growing popularity of co-located multiplayer competitive gaming in the indie scene, a trend that invokes both sports and arcade culture. At stake are questions of group identification, enculturation, and access – hugely important issues as a new community and culture takes form.

Method
This paper takes a qualitative approach to analyzing the sports-like discourse and performance inside the indie games scene. Formal interviews were conducted with independent game developers, publishers, journalists, and critics. As the list of independent developers working on sports games remains relatively small, they were sought out and represent many of the developer voices in this work. Journalists interviewed were chosen because of their roles in the burgeoning indie scene, as critics and organizers of events. Interviewees were contacted via email and, upon consent, sent a series of brief questions to answer in text. These answers were used as a foundation for continuing the conversation by phone, and these discussions were recorded when possible. Both the written and verbal interview responses are reported on in this paper.

A qualitative, interview based method was chosen to allow for a more accurate representation of the voices and opinions of members of the independent game scene. I wanted to avoid the mischaracterization of a community to which I am only tangentially associated, and to allow for voices inside the scene to be heard. While questions were designed in preparation for the interview, most often the direction of the conversation followed the topics and opinions expressed by the interviewee, as is often the case in qualitative interviews.

It is important to note that the subjects interviewed for this paper, and many of the indie games discussed were accessed by way of personal and professional networks. There is no doubt in my mind that my role as a writer for *Kill Screen* cleared the way for me to more easily access many of the respondents I interviewed. As I already mentioned, many of the indie games that are showcased and played in tournament and arcade settings are not yet released or published for a consumer audience, and therefore my access to playable versions of those games is no doubt subsequent to my role as a sports videogame critic. In a way, this privilege reflects notions of access addressed in this paper, which is one reason I feel it is important to be forthright about my method.

This privileged access, and the boundaries transgressed in the writing of this paper, reflect an important part of the argument of this work: that the indie game scene invokes sports-like discourse and performance as part of broader system of enculturation and social delimitation, phenomena not uncommon in sports fandom too. That my work on this paper, and specifically my research and data collection benefitted from a privileged position is no coincidence, and should be read as representative of the broader story.

Sports Game Design

The sport-like game design emerging inside the indie scene may draw more inspiration from the design of and culture around sports videogames than sports in general. In the case of *Hokra,* for example, the designer Ramiro Corbetta claims EA's *FIFA* soccer videogame franchise, and specifically the mechanic of passing, as an inspiration for design (Khaw, 2011). For Corbetta, a self-proclaimed sports fan, this created an interesting tension. He states, "I wish I could say the game was totally inspired by the beauty of the physical sport, but the core of *Hokra* came out of playing lots of *FIFA.*" As the game evolved throughout his design process, he would end up drawing more inspiration from sports specifically, but the fundamental gameplay of *Hokra* owes more to the videogame *FIFA* than to the physical manifestation of soccer.

Bennett Foddy, designer of indie sports games *QWOP, GIRP, Pole Riders,* and *Little Master Cricket*, also drew inspiration from sports videogames. He states that "many of the most important videogame experiences in my life – especially in my early life – were with games based on sports." For Foddy, it was not only the design of the games, but the experience of playing them in a public space, with spectators, that has inspired the design of some of his games. "They used to have a copy of Epyx Summer Games for the C64 at my public library and kids from the neighborhood would crowd around it and compete." He later would join crowds playing sports games like *Track 'n Field* or *Arch Rivals* in public arcades. Foddy laments the disappearance of simpler competitive gameplay at arcades, noting that complicated fighting games in public spaces and Internet multiplayer had eroded the arcade scene that he had grown to love. He notes that he is encouraged by the "promising signs in the emerging 'videogame event' scene, where people play *Joust* or *Nidhogg*, or *Pole Riders* at a party against strangers, in front of a crowd." Foddy emphasizes the importance of spectatorship, and as we will see, performance plays an important role in the shaping of sport-like indie game phenomena.

Doug Wilson, developer of *Johann Sebastian Joust* and *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now*, suggests an alternative source of inspiration for multiplayer independent competitive games: that many indie developers grew up playing collocated console games. "A lot of us grew up with *Goldeneye, Super Smash Brothers*... local multiplayer, especially the N64 which brought four controllers… to me those are the big inspiration points." For Wilson there is a technological history of local multiplayer that informs some of his design. Many of Wilson's games also draw inspiration from folk sports games in which spectatorship gets built into play. As an example he cites the game *Mafia*, a folk game where players who are eliminated become the active audience for the remainder of the game.

For other designers, a more tongue-in-cheek and ironic approach informed their design choices while making indie sports games, emphasizing the curious tension of sports themed games in an otherwise largely sports averse community. For Jan Willem Nijman, the designer of *Tennnes*, an abstract take on the popular sport tennis, his intent was more subversive, responding to a negative personal experience with tennis as a child. After a protracted two years wait, he was accepted to a youth tennis club with no prior experience playing the game, and in his own words "After 2 weeks I hated it and I still had to finish the year." *Tennnes* was designed, in part, as a response to his experiences with the tennis club. He states that "[*Tennnes*] is a big FUCK YOU to tennis in general. I think the most interesting parts in *Tennnes* are the parts where it doesn't

follow the horribly complicated rules tennis and humans have and just lets you do whatever."

For Nijman, the indie game *Tennnes*, though still a compelling multiplayer sports themed game, works also to push against the structures and standards of sports culture, highlighting the irony with which many in the indie scene approach sports-themed games. This resonates with what Jamin Warren, founder of *Kill Screen* points out when he says that with competitive multiplayer indie games "there is a note of irony in that the perception is indie developers are not very sporty people." There exists a tension in the indie scene between how serious, or how tongue-in-cheek the performance of sport-like competitive play manifests in different circumstances, a remnant of older cultural divides between videogame players and sports fans that may, at least in the indie scene, be starting to erode. Wilson reinforces this ironic performance, emphasizing the tension stating, "it's a little ironic, but I wouldn't say it's fully dismissive of sports." Bennett Foddy's games, which are often clumsy to perform and leverage awkward representations of real world physics, are both reverential of the skill required to perform athletic feats, while offering often comic scenarios that play out. The design of his games reflects the tension that exists in the indie scene between earnest enthusiasm for sport, and a mocking, ironic stance. That tension plays out as the indie sports games are performed in public spaces, often with a crowd of onlookers cheering on.

Performance and Performativity

At the center of the emergence of indie sports games is the role of the crowd of spectators in shaping the experiences in the indie scene. At the moment indie sports games are primarily accessed through performance in public spaces. The games are played generally in front of small crowds, and the behavior and performance of the spectators helps to imbue the game with meaning. The performance of the game, and the performance of the crowd all factor into the sport-like experience of the videogames.

Both *Hokra* and *Tennne,* as well as Noah Sasso's *BaraBariBall* and Mark Essen's *Nidhogg* were all games commissioned by and exhibited at the No Quarter exhibition hosted annually at New York University's Game Center. Curated by NYU researcher Charles J. Pratt, the exhibition has become a showcase for independent competitive multiplayer games. Mark Essen's *Nidhogg* set an early precedent at the first No Quarter exhibition, and Pratt and executive director Frank Lantz have curated with a concerted effort to try and have at least one competitive multiplayer game at every exhibition. Charles Pratt suggests that this drive for competitive gaming at No Quarter arose naturally out of the fact that "quite a few people at the Game Center are into e-sports" such as competitive *Starcraft II* and fighting games.

Pratt also points out that part of the success of e-sport indie games at No Quarter stems from the fact that many of them are "easy to read" for an audience of spectators, which means the games "work great in a social space." What makes the games easy to read are often simple rule sets that appeal to a wide range of videogame literacy on the part of spectators. While someone who is well versed in the rules of *Starcraft II* might understand what is happening in a public match, the action may be confusing to the novice. Less so with games like *Hokra* and *Barabariball*, where direct feedback, simple rules, and a focal point like a ball or puck afford greater accessibility to a broader audience. What Pratt alludes to here, and what many interviewees mentioned, was the

importance of spectators to the emergence of sports-like games in the indie scene.

Foddy points out that the role of spectatorship is important to how we conceive of what constitutes a sports game in the first place. He states, "The difference between a game and an e-sport is that an e-sport has an aspect of *performance*." He emphasizes the two distinct notions of performance as well, saying, "Sports are performative - your actions within a sport convey some of your character or your feelings to onlookers. The onlookers, in turn, impart meaning on your sporting performance, and makes it matter." As Foddy reinforces, the role of the spectator watching the performance of *Hokra, Tennnes*, or any other competitive indie game played in a public space is fundamental to the characterization of the indie scene as sport-like.

Doug Wilson agrees with Bennett Foddy stating, "For me… spectatorship is a big thing… there's all these questions like 'is chess a sport?' and 'how physical does it have to be?'… the first thing that comes to my mind is spectatorship." He advances the idea as well, pointing out that the emphasis on spectatorship may build on popular conceptions of what constitutes sport. He points out, "We're drawing on one particular part of popular culture and sports." He also agrees with Charles J. Pratt in pointing out that the design of many indie sports games are easy for an audience to understand since the simple rules and interaction are reflective of similar ones found in common sports like soccer, hockey, or basketball.

Other scholars have pointed out the important role spectators have in the emergence of e-sports. T. L. Taylor argues that theories of spectatorship of computer games are contrary to traditional emphasis in game studies on the player as an agent interacting with the systems of the games. She writes, "Much of our current formulation of agency and action in computer game studies rests on the distinctly foregrounded hands-on-the-keyboard player" (Taylor, 2012). She lobbies for reconsidering the importance of the viewer, suggesting, "we can do a productive flip in game studies and ask what role spectatorship and audience have in constructing the play experience of gamer action" (2012) – and rightly so, as she observes in her comprehensive study of professional competitive gaming that the "games are objects of spectatorship, increasingly replete with fans who follow the every move of their favorite teams and players" (2012).

Both Taylor (2012) and Harper (2010) remind us that spectatorship and embodied play as performance were central to the cultures built around competitive play in videogame arcades. Despite the recent disappearance of gaming arcades in the United States, Harper discovered that "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."(Harper, 2010) Harper points out that despite advances in technology affording more distant online competitive play, the ideal of collocated competition persists in the fighting game communities, and that the premier fighting game tournament EVO, "attempts to capture the feel of the arcade…." (2010).

Harper connects the dots between arcade culture and performance of indie sports games when recounting an experience with watching *BaraBariBall* being played at the No Show Conference in 2012. He says "The most interesting thing… was how much resonance I saw with old school arcade memories…the players are all gathered around a lectern with the laptop running the game on it, holding controllers in their hands" (personal correspondence, August 9 2012). More

specifically, he noticed how the performance of the game was embodied, manifesting in movement of the players in the room, as if encouraging the movement of the players on the screen:

> "You could see peoples' entire bodies move when they wanted something to happen… All the reversals, lucky shots, dominating plays, mistakes… the players showed all of them with their bodies and voices, too. Each little thing got some sort of reaction out of not just the players, but the crowd too."

<div align="right">Harper (2012)</div>

Further connecting arcade culture and the indie scene, *BaraBariBall*, in fact, was played as an official game at the EVO 2012 tournament. Harper's description of the scene of players engaging with *BaraBariBall* reinforces the notion of the performance of the game, not just by the players involved in controlling the action on screen, but on the part of the spectators as well.

It is important to note as well that Harper is commenting on the way an embodied performance impacts the game as spectator sport. Charles J. Pratt acknowledges this as well when he commented that certain indie games like Wilson's *Johann Sebastian Joust* and *Mega GIRP*, a modification of one of Bennett Foddy's games, invite spectatorship by including an embodied performance in the spectacle of play. *Joust* has players competing in a screen-less game of tag with sensitive motion controllers, and *Mega GIRP* has players racing up a simulated mountain, grabbing foot- and arm-holds with a modified *Dance Dance Revolution* floor mat gamepads. When the gaze of the spectator can move from screen to body, the role of the player as performer can be magnified. In these cases, the public space as locus for play is an important factor.

The rise in popularity of collocated multiplayer competitive games in the indie scene may have as much inspiration from arcade culture as from sports. Pratt and others have coined the term "new arcade" to refer to many of the galleries and exhibitions popping up from within the indie game scene, wherein many indie sports games are often shown. Events like Wild Rumpus, and galleries like Babycastles have helped to drive the re-emergence of videogame play in public spaces, and most importantly, in front of a crowd of spectators. Often these events and locations become the only place where players can access some of these indie sports games, many of which have not yet been released for purchase.

Whether or not arcades are the fundamental origin of a renewed interest in performed competitive play in the indie scene, the language of sports is invoked with regard to these games. The developers themselves refer to their games as "sports" games, and as pointed out earlier, the inspiration for those games can be an earnest attempt to represent the mechanics and feeling of a sport or an ironic twist on one. Often it is both, as with Njiman's *Tennnes*.

The emphasis on spectatorship as a defining marker of the "sportiness" of a game needs to be looked at carefully, especially if comparisons are being drawn to so-called "traditional" sports. The very notion of a spectator assumes certain subjectivities, a stance of observation in contrast to the performing participant. Of course, the role of spectator is not an inactive one, as members of an audience assume and perform roles as well – cheering, jeering, clapping, and yelling. But what about sports activities where the audience is removed, such as ad-hoc casual competitions?

If the marker of sport activity is spectatorship, then these activities are necessarily left behind. An argument could be made that even in ad-hoc competitions like a pick-up game of basketball, participants assume dual roles as player and spectator continuously throughout play. With this in mind, the emphasis on spectatorship to notions of sport in the indie scene carries even more significance. Indie sports games are performed and witnessed, and this seems to be a central theoretical basis for conceptions of sports games inside the indie scene.

But these games are talked about like sports, and sports-like discourse is performed about and around the games. What constitutes sports-like discourse? Grant Farred defines "sports talk" as, among other things, vigorous debate about skill, relative athletic merit (my player is better than yours), the vicarious assertion of power (my team has, can, will beat yours), and the virtues of "team affiliation"(Farred, 2000). He also points out that sports talk is a discourse that "heightens when a major sports event is in progress or in the offing" (2000). As crowds congregate around the performances of indie sports games, similar discourse is espoused as strategies are discussed, and individual skills of players are lauded. In some instances, members of the audience will take on a rooting interest, and examples of Farred's ideas about sports talk as debate and affiliation emerge as well.

Consider Khaw's reporting for *Indiegames: The Weblog* on play of *Hokra* at No Quarter and you are not likely to miss the sports talk in the piece: "Watching a game of Hokra is like a trip to the stadium, one filled with rowdy fans and good-natured taunts, a boisterous affair often compounded by the shouting from the players themselves" (Khaw, 2011). For Khaw, the link between a crowd watching *Hokra* and a crowd watching a traditional sport is direct. My experiences with *Hokra* have been similar, indeed for me the very categorization as sport game, like Foddy articulated, depends on the spectators: "Shout, jeer, jostle, grimace, chant, cheer, root; these are the verbs that make *Hokra* a sports game—not pass, shoot, or score" (Stein, 2011).

The spectators are active performers, productive as Taylor states (2012), and as Foddy astutely pointed out, they imbue the games with meaning. Not unlike at any sporting event, when skillful play is performed, the crowd will acknowledge it with cheers and applause. And when the drama of a performance increases, often in closely contested matches, the crowd of spectators animate, responding to the action with body and voice. This intersection, of game play as performance, and of spectator as performer, highlights the dual notion of performance and performativity that marks the emergence of competitive, sport-like behavior inside the indie scene.

Group Identification

Sports performance in the indie scene, as we've already seen, is not just about the spectacle of competitive gaming and spectatorship, but also about identity roles and group identification. Todd Harper, in his look into the world of competitive fighting games, observed that the fighting game community has socially constructed an "ideal performance" of a fighting game player. He writes:

> "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."

Harper (2010)

Harper's articulation of the fighting game ideal resonates with behavior found in the indie game scene. What Harper identifies in the notion of the "ideal performance" is a means by which the community can delimit itself, establishing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion based on the shared vision of an ideal fighting game player or fan. The community has developed values that are a means for enculturation, strengthening the bonds of collectivity. While the values in the indie scene are not necessarily the same as in the fighting game community – skill, and seriousness are certainly not essential – the unification around a shared set of values is similar.

This is not at all uncommon from sports fan behavior. Looking at hockey fan behavior, Jeremy Schneider identifies sports fan rhetoric as epideictic in nature, or as he puts it "expressions of praise and blame that help unify communities" (Schneider, 2010). He notes that, often unwittingly, epideictic rhetoric serves "to educate and unite diverse audiences behind a common set of values and ideas by using a community's established values to praise individuals for favored acts, and to blame others for undesirable acts" (2010). Schneider connects the dots to sports fan behavior, arguing that the behaviors of sports fans can transcend the domain of sports, extending the subsequent enculturation beyond the fields and arenas and into the broader public sphere. With both hockey fans in Schneider's piece, and with Harper's analysis of fighting game communities, the values developed inside the community are used to help fortify and coalesce a collective group identity.

Sports and sports fandom have long been linked to notions of identity generation and social group identity formation. In their exploratory survey of leisure bowlers, Steele and Zurcher (1973) note that "Identity generation, expression and reinforcement" and "affiliation" are some of the most cited functions of bowling as a leisure activity. This is not surprising, as sports provide collective experiences as well as structures around which a community can develop shared values, not unlike the ideal performance cited in Harper's work (Harper, 2010).

Competitive multiplayer games and the performance of them serve a similar function in the indie videogame scene. Whether harkening to the arcade culture that preceded it, or building on a merging of videogame and sports culture, the public performance of indie sports games become shared experiences around which collective cultural values can be formed. On the one hand, appreciation of player performance becomes a focal point for collective value creation. However, the tension between the irony of the spectated performance for an otherwise largely sport averse community, and the earnest competitive play creates a unique type of atmosphere for the indie scene to rally around.

The event driven nature of this aspect of the indie scene – that No Quarter or Babycastles exhibitions become sites for momentary performances of indie sports games – creates shared moments around which the indie scene can coalesce. People can form bonds recounting moments shared, and experience of an event can become social capital in the burgeoning indie scene. A

key concept here is access. As mentioned before, many of these indie sports games are not published and therefore are not available to a broader videogame playing public. This limited availability makes access to events, whether by way of proximity or awareness, an exclusive commonality that fortifies and delimits the indie culture or scene. To have played or seen *Hokra* or *Barabariball* is to have accrued social capital in the indie scene by way of shared experience that is not broadly available. There are those who have seen or played the games, and there are those who have not.

This is not to suggest that the indie scene is necessarily closed, or shut off to a broad demographic. By all accounts, indie events are ostensibly open to anyone who is interested, and of course, to those who can feasibly attend the performance. Leigh Alexander corroborates this when she says of the indie scene, "it is open, yeah, on one hand what they definitely very much want is for everyone to come and try certain things… " At the same time she points out that the community, especially in New York City, has a certain cohesiveness saying "but in this case, everyone is generally a certain type of person who lives here [New York City]." Attendees tend to be young creative professionals drawn to these types of events.

The exclusivity of event oriented performance of indie games may be driven more by locality, as many of the events take place in New York City, or by communication channels informing people about their occurrence. To access the events, one must know how to find out about them, regularly checking in with popular indie communication channels such as *Kill Screen* magazine, Twitter feeds, or through the personal networks comprising the indie videogame community. Despite the generally open nature of the indie scene, welcoming to newcomers wishing to incorporate into the nascent community, there are still important questions to ask about how, and perhaps more importantly who, can gain access to the growing indie community.

Conclusions

On the surface, the similarities between competitive multiplayer independent videogames and sports should come as no surprise. After all, at the core of a sport is the competitive *game* being played on the field, court, or chessboard. Digging a bit deeper though, we can look at the development of cultures around the games played to try to paint a more detailed landscape of the phenomena. With both sports and competitive multiplayer videogames in the indie scene, performance plays a central role in the development of the two cultures around the games.

Performance includes the actions of the players of the game, and of equal importance the behaviors of the people watching the contest. Two factors fundamentally impact the possibility for spectatorship with these new competitive indie games: accessible design and public space.

The generally accessible design of these games, whether leaning heavily on well known sports mechanics, or using the body of the player to focus the spectators gaze off the screen, plays an important role in making these indie games spectator friendly. In contrast to other genres of games that require a higher videogame literacy, whether multiplayer first-person shooters like a *Counterstrike*, or even the complicated systems of a real-time strategy game like *Starcraft II*, indie sports games like *Hokra, Nidhogg, GIRP*, and *Johann Sebastian Joust* are easy for an audience to understand quickly, provided focal points for comprehension like a single ball, an

easy goal, or even the physical bodies of the players. This accessibility to a broad range of spectators opens the community of the indie scene to the diverse collection of gallery attendees, partygoers, and even indie music fans who chance upon the games at a venue.

On the other hand, the event driven nature of the performance of these games in public spaces, especially given the fact that so few of these games have been publicly released to consumers, serves to close off the indie scene to those who are unaware of where they could play these games, or who simply are not integrated into the communication channels whereby the can find out about performances. There is also a form of enculturation and delimitation that occurs when a smaller collection of people gain the cultural capital of being able to say that they experienced a game that is not widely available.

By all accounts, New York City seems to be the epicenter of this emerging trend in independent gaming. While some of the developers of these games hail from Europe, many of them are working in New York City. *Kill Screen* operates out of there, and many of the sites for the performance of competitive indie games like Babycastles and No Quarter are in New York City. Indeed, it would be hard to underestimate the role that Charles J. Pratt and Frank Lantz at NYU's Game Center, and Kunal Gupta and the principles at Babycastles have had in cultivating an independent game scene that embraces sport-like performance of competitive multiplayer videogames. Through curation of their exhibits, and by incorporating competitive multiplayer games in that curation repeatedly, they have helped foster an e-sport spirit that is growing in the indie scene.

That New York City plays host to much of the growth of sport-like games in the indie scene means that for those who do not live within a reasonable proximity of the city, or do not have the means to travel there regularly, they are somewhat removed and isolated from the competitive indie gaming scene. Some games have travelled to sites like EVO, or to festivals like IndieCade, but there still remains the challenge of increasing access to the games to reach a broader audience. It is not clear whether that is a goal for developers of indie sports games. While there are real financial challenges facing the developers, it remains to be seen whether the future of the genre will continue to hinge on revenues gleaned from curated performances of the games, or whether they will eventually become publicly distributed.

There also remains the question of gender, and how open this new competitive trend in indie games is to players of all genders. Each of the developers interviewed for this project were male; there are few independent female or transgendered developers working on competitive multiplayer independent sports games. Interviewees assured me that the scene certainly felt more open to all genders than mainstream videogame conferences, as many different people, especially in New York City, would frequent events like those at Babycastles or No Quarter where the games are performed. There persists an unfortunate gender imbalance even in the indie game scene, and it may be that the lack of female developers working on independent sports games simply reflects that imbalance. However, we must acknowledge that traditional, hegemonic sports culture does not afford women's athletics the same coverage and respect as men's sports. There are still many questions about the role gender plays in the indie scene at large, and in competitive multiplayer sports game phenomena popping up therein.

The most recent development in this emergent trend of indie sports games is that in December of 2012 a number of indie developers (many of whom were respondents in this study) collaborated to self-publish a set of games under the title "Sportsfriends." Using the crowd funding system Kickstarter, Doug Wilson, Bennett Foddy, Ramiro Corbetta, and Noah Sasso raised over $150,000 dollars to produce commercially available versions of their sports games. When and if the project is completed, a set of indie sports games including *Johann Sebastian Joust, Hokra, Super Pole Riders*, and *BraBariBall* will be released to a broader audience of home consumers. It is notable that the developers used the language of "sports" in their fundraiser. Indeed, on the fundraising website, the developers articulate their mission: "Sportsfriends takes some of our favorite aspects of popular sports – playful competition, performance, and spectatorship – and tries to make those elements more palatable to a broader game-loving audience" (Sportsfriends, 2012). Even with the statement of their inclusive goal, they acknowledge the cultural tension that exists, writing, "You don't have to be a sports fan or even a fan of sports games to enjoy Sportsfriends" (2012). Whether the distribution to a more open market will have an impact on how sports games are perceived inside the indie scene is yet to be seen. However, the successful fundraising for the project suggests that there may be an audience for these games that extends beyond the indie scene.

As mentioned before, there is a measure of curiosity about the emergence of sport themed, competitive multiplayer games in the indie scene. There may be direct reference to the nearly extinct competitive arcade culture that preceded it, but nonetheless there is a tension that arises from the inclusion of sports-like behavior and performance in a scene that is traditionally seen as sports-averse. Some of the performance is ironic, a play on the tension highlighting a more subversive appropriation of sports discourse and behavior as with the design of *Tennnes*. However, there is the intriguing merger of sports fandom and "gamer" culture that also predicates this trend. It may well be that this conflation of supposedly disparate cultures exemplifies a larger trend of collapsing cultural boundaries, especially in fringe or grassroots scenes. How this trend will help shape the burgeoning indie game scene as it grows will be fascinating to watch. However the scene develops, it is likely the tension between openness to grow a new culture, and the erection of structures to delimit a community will play out with a competitive sports trend pushing at both ends.

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[1] All quotations provided by Charles Pratt are taken from a personal interview conducted on August 3rd of 2012.

[2] T.L. Taylor maintains a useful aggregated list of references on e-sports at her website, http://tltaylor.com/.