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Navigating the Unknown: A Narrative Exploration of Career Pathways in Esports

Andres Ramos[1], Joar Svensson[2], and Natalia Stambulova[3]

[1]School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden, [2]School of Health Sciences, Örebro University, Örebro, Sweden, [3]School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University, Halmstad, Sweden.

Corresponding author: Joar Svensson
E-mail: Joar_19july@hotmail.com
Örebro University
Örebro, Sweden

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore career development narratives of esport players. Three Swedish professional Counter-Strike: Global Offensive players were interviewed about their careers. Two of the participants had retired and one was still active. Their competition level ranged from top 10 nationally to top-20 internationally. The interview transcripts were analyzed using a holistic-form structural analysis, which resulted in three overarching narratives (i.e. performance, relational and sink or swim complemented by multiple narrative threads (e.g., discovery, relational). Due to the multi-faceted nature of esports, it might be common for esport players to tell dialogical stories. The study highlighted challenges esport players face (e.g., balancing esports, work and social/academic life), which are exacerbated by the unstable structure of esports and a lack of cultural narrative templates helping esport players to make meaning of their careers. Social and professional support facilitating narrative flexibility and dual careers might help esport players cope with challenges and become successful in esports and upon retirement.

Keywords: CS:GO, Career development, Narrative flexibility, Narrative typology, Video games

Individuals who compete in esports (esport players) face many challenges that can threaten their prospective career timespan and present post-career difficulties (Meng-Lewis et al., 2020). Narrative inquiry enables an investigation of the complex interaction between culture, identity, and how individuals infer meaning of what they do from their surrounding environment (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Responding to the call for more research to capture the career aspects of esport players (e.g., Bányai et al., 2018) as well as their experiences and life stories (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021), we have undertaken a narrative study exploring the career development of three Swedish esport players.

Career Development Research and Career Pathways in Esports

In the career development literature athletes are considered as whole persons with several interrelated levels of development (athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic-vocational, financial and legal). Career transitions can be initiated at any level and produce changes at the other levels (Stambulova et al., 2021; Wylleman et al., 2020). Transitions are seen as processes of interplay between transition demands, resources, barriers, and coping strategies (Stambulova, 2003: 2023).

Coping efforts lead to successful transitions when the resources are sufficient to deal with the transition demands and barriers, or to a crisis-transition in the case of an athlete's low resourcefulness and need in intervention. Depending on the intervention, a crisis-transition may result in a delayed successful transition or in unsuccessful transition outcomes often associated with premature dropout or mental ill-health.

Esport players start their careers as gamers who play esports as a leisure activity when they are between 6-14 years of age (Kim & Thomas, 2015; Wong et al., 2021). Gradually esports become a bigger part of their life and identity (Seo, 2016) and the gamers undertake a transition to purposeful practice to progress in their careers (Kim & Thomas, 2015). This transition can be difficult as it usually requires the gamer to balance the increased focus on esport with academic pursuits (Seo, 2016; Ken & Thomas, 2015). The difficulty is exacerbated as parents seem unlikely to support their children's esport participation due to concerns that esports can lead to negative outcomes like worsened health and academic performance (Svensson et al., 2024). Without parental support, esport will likely be an unstructured activity lacking many essential components of organized sports activities like supervision and guidance from adult leaders (e.g., Larson, 2000), which has been

associated with negative outcomes like worsened academic achievement (Badura et al., 2018). To become an esport player the gamer must start competing in tournaments, which usually occurs at around age 14 (Wong et al., 2021) to 24 (Ward & Harmon, 2019).

To complete the transition to an esport player gamers must continue to improve their skill level. As several esports are team sports, many gamers should also find a team to play with, which can be difficult as it is influenced by chance events (Meng-Lewis et al., 2020). A common route for gamers is to form teams with friends, expand their network and gain a reputation, which can help them to get recruited (Taylor, 2012). The gamer must also balance academic or working life with esports (Seo, 2016), which seems to be difficult for many gamers (Wong et al., 2021). Only some of the esport players who reach this stage manage to progress their careers to becoming an elite player (Ward & Harmon, 2019).

The players who complete the transition to an elite esport player must cope with career turbulence, psychological distress, (Salo, 2017) and practice up to 12 hours a day (Lin & Zhao, 2020). Elite esport players also face challenges related to earning enough money to make a living (Wong et al., 2021), resulting in many elite esport players choosing to maintain unrelated day jobs during their careers (Taylor, 2012). Although it might be difficult to balance an additional job or an academic career with esports (i.e., having a dual career), it has several benefits like an easier transition to retirement (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Due to the many challenges, only 20% of professional esport players have careers that are longer than two years and many retire around age 23 (Ward & Harmon, 2019). The transition to retirement seems to be difficult as many esport players struggle to find jobs (Lin & Zhao, 2020), possibly due to their limited career options (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021).

Narratives in Esports

Narrative research is an approach that seeks to describe and interpret how people perceive reality and make sense of their experiences (Griffin and Phoenix, 2016). The term narrative is used to describe "the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories" (Frank, 2013, p. 75). It is important to note that "People tell stories, not narratives" (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 2). Narratives are used as templates by individuals to compose unique and individual stories (Monforte & Smith, 2023) and make sense of their experiences (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Salo (2017) proposed three narratives that could be relevant in esports: relational, discovery and performance. The *relational narrative* where athletes' primary focus is their relationships with others, is likely relevant in esports (Salo, 2017) as many esports are team sports, and it is important for esport players to get along with their teammates (Meng-Lewis et al., 2020). As for the *discovery narrative*, it centers around exploration and enjoyment (Salo, 2017) where sport is seen as one part of a rich and exciting life, which supports personal development (Carless & Douglas, 2012). Successful esport players have a chance to become famous, travel the world to compete (Meng-Lewis et al., 2020) meet new people and have an exciting lifestyle (Salo, 2017). As such, the discovery narrative might be relevant in esports.

The *performance narrative* is the most common narrative in traditional sports and is characterized by athletes' dominant focus on sport and winning while paying less attention to other aspects of their lives (Book et al., 2024). Athletes are often encouraged to exclusively adhere to the performance narrative by the elite sports culture including coaches, media, and fans (Carless & Douglas, 2009). Exclusively adhering to a narrative has drawbacks as it can exclude alternative narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2013) and lead to significant emotional and psychological trauma if the narrative becomes incongruent with the individual's experience (Carless & Douglas, 2009). In contrast, telling dialogical stories allows individuals to have more available narratives and helps them develop identities that are not tied to their sport (Busanich et al., 2012). As such, it could be beneficial for esport players to be able to change from one narrative to another throughout their careers (Salo, 2017).

In addition to the narratives proposed by Salo (2017) *sink or swim* narratives might also be relevant in esport. Sink or swim narratives are characterized by highly challenging situations that are eventually surmounted resulting in meteoric progress (Lieblich et al., 1998). Esport players face many challenges including financial issues, not having access to a team, and balancing school, work, and their sport (Meng-Lewis et al., 2020). Due to the many challenges, sink or swim narratives might be common in esports.

To summarize, esport players face many challenges that can threaten their careers and present post-career difficulties, but research is limited. Narrative inquiry has been widely used to understand athletes' career paths in traditional sports. Following this line of research, the purpose of this study was to explore the career development narratives of esport players.

Methodology

The study was based on the first author's master's thesis and approved by the ethical board of the first author's university. The study was philosophically underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological social constructionism which is characteristic of narrative inquiry (Papathomas, 2016). With these standpoints, the authors were interested in studying "personal truth" about the participants' careers, not "objective truth".

Participants

A purposive sample was used for this study. The participants were recruited from CS:GO related Facebook and Discord (an online communication software) groups. The following inclusion criteria were used. Participants had to be above the age of 18, have played esports for five years (as a minimum) and competed in esport for at least two years. Three candidates met the inclusion criteria and were recruited. The participants were all Swedish and were given the pseudonyms Alexander, Ernest, and Pablo. Alexander was a retired esport player in his mid-twenties, who worked as a coach for an internationally top-ranked team. Ernest was a retired esport player in his mid-thirties, who worked for an esport federation. Pablo was in his mid-twenties and played in one of Sweden's top-ranked teams.

Procedure and Data Collection

General information regarding the study was provided to the participants via an information letter. The participants then received a consent form, stating their right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. All participants signed the consent forms and interviews were then scheduled. The interviews were aimed at getting a deep understanding of the participants' careers. To gain this understanding an interview guide was created that consisted of a wide array of questions about the participants' careers and lives including questions about their initiation to esport,

challenges, academic pursuits, jobs, and retirement. The first author conducted the interviews which began with background questions, like, "Please, tell me about yourself as a person". The participants were asked to draw timelines to facilitate their career storytelling with different milestones like their initiation, breakthroughs, and discontinuation. The timelines were later reconstructed into individual career profiles (see Figures 1-3). The focus then shifted to more specific questions, for example, "How did you begin, and how did you feel during that time?" and "What was the first breakthrough you faced?". In addition to pre-decided questions, several follow-up questions were asked. Alexander's interview lasted 90 minutes, Ernest's interview lasted 80 minutes and Pablo's interview lasted 71 minutes.

Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry, researchers' biases are seen as an integral part of the co-constructed knowledge (Papathomas, 2016). It is therefore fitting to discuss the authors. The first author has extensive knowledge of CS:GO and its community due to him being an active esport player for over ten years, which included competitions at a high national level. Therefore, the first author had pre-established perceptions of the demands of professional esports careers. In regard to narrative research, this was the author's first study. The second author also had an extensive history in esport, playing multiple esports recreationally and is experienced in narrative research. The third author was a supervisor of the first author's thesis and helped with the study planning, feedback, data analysis and interpretation.

A holistic-form structural analysis (Smith, 2016) was used in this study. The analysis followed Smith's (2016) step-by-step guidelines and included: 1) transcription of the data, 2) identification of the narrative type(s), 3) typology building, and 4) representation of the findings. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by a narrative indwelling, where the first author listened to and read the interviews multiple times to get a deep understanding of the stories. Secondly, the narratives were identified by exploring the data for clues on how the stories were shaped. This was done by searching for and marking quotes that seemed significant to the story. Quotes were deemed significant if they alluded to or detailed the participants' motivation, intentions or feelings. For example, Pablo shared his ambition to become the best player in the world. At the third step, the quotes were compared to each other to gauge their importance and parse out the overarching structure of the stories. During this step, the individual career profiles were used to better understand the participants' career structures. Previous narratives were then explored to see if they fit the overarching structure of the stories. The stories were found to be dialogical as they had one overarching narrative with threads of other narratives (forthcoming). Finally, the participants' stories were arranged into cohesive tales.
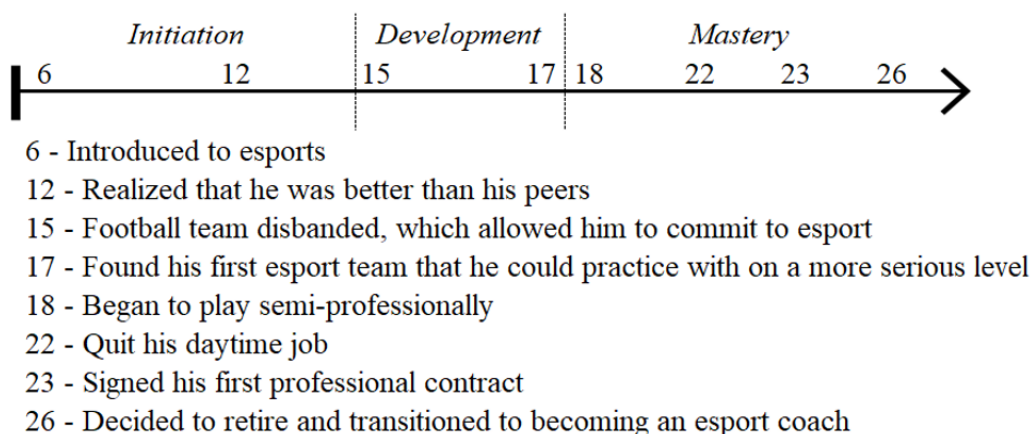
To ensure the rigor of the analysis, Smith and McGannon (2017) recommended using critical friends' feedback and participants' reflections. Critical friends were used in the form of the co-authors and one member of a student-peer group helped critically discuss and refine the data analysis. Then the participants were asked to read, and reflect on, the stories. All participants confirmed that they found the stories resonated with their experiences. It is important to note that narratives are not absolute. Parts of a story can be emphasized or downplayed to better fit certain narratives. It is not in the nature of narrative inquiry to say that one narrative is truer or more correct than another, they are simply different. The participants' careers spanned multiple years, and a lot of details were likely undiscovered. Although the authors used critical friends' feedback and the participants' reflections on the tales and narratives, it is still important to note that the narratives could have been different with another researcher conducting the interviews and analyzing the stories.

Findings

The analysis revealed that Alexander and Pablo's stories had progressive structures whilst Ernest had a pronounced regression until the midpoint of his career followed by a progression. All participants had one overarching narrative with influences of additional or supporting narratives (narrative threads). The overarching narrative can be seen as the central plot of the participant's story whereas the narrative threads were subplots. Alexander had an overarching sink or swim narrative with threads of performance, relational, and discovery narratives. Ernest had an overarching relational narrative with threads of sink or swim and discovery narratives. Pablo had an overarching performance narrative with threads of a relational narrative.

Alexander: Struggling to Find Balance

Figure 1. Alexander's individual career profile

6 - Introduced to esports
12 - Realized that he was better than his peers
15 - Football team disbanded, which allowed him to commit to esport
17 - Found his first esport team that he could practice with on a more serious level
18 - Began to play semi-professionally
22 - Quit his daytime job
23 - Signed his first professional contract
26 - Decided to retire and transitioned to becoming an esport coach

Note: The numbers represent the age of Alexander throughout his career.

Alexander's story began when he was six, observing his brothers playing video games; one of which being the esport Counter-Strike (CS; the predecessor of CS:GO). Alexander kept playing throughout his childhood and noticed that he was a lot better than his friends.

Not to sound arrogant or so but I noticed that I was at a level that they were not at. It did not matter what game we played either. I felt that if I wanted to continue to develop, I needed to break away from my friends, which was tough. And it took a little longer than it probably should have done.

When Alexander was 15, his football team disbanded, and he decided to commit to esports. At 17 he found a team and soon, they reached an intermediate European league. Alexander's team met every night to play official matches or practice. Outside the game, Alexander had lost interest in school and had stopped playing football. Instead, he solely focused on CS:GO:

One day, a former professional player told me that they were starting a new team and they wanted me to play with them. For the first time, in real-life, I could feel a sensation that I had increased my level. I started playing with better individuals and faced much better opposition.

Alexander was now 18 and had finished high school but did not graduate, as he had failed half of his courses. This did not concern Alexander as he managed to find a job. After two and a half years of working whilst trying to become a professional esport player, Alexander's motivation began to waver.

It was too time-consuming to play. I already had a full-time job... It took a lot. Sometimes, during rougher periods, when the team did not do well, I could think, "Why am I doing this?" … It was no longer easy to hang out with my friends. I had to say no to meeting others because I knew that I needed to go to the other job (esport)... This caused me to drift away from my real-life friends.

Alexander also entered a relationship.

Somehow, I succeeded, but this meant that my weekends were 100 percent dedicated to my partner... which meant that my friends drifted away even further. It became very difficult to balance time. But I wanted to turn my hobby into work. So, it was a sacrifice that I had to make...

Alexander wanted to commit more to esport and gain his high school diploma, so he took a chance and quit his job. After seven months of focusing on esport and school, Alexander got an offer to play in a tournament.

We won two three qualifiers and one additional in Madrid… I stayed there and signed a contract with my first professional team… I started to become more well known in Spain and Sweden… After that year, with that team, I got recruited by another team. I think I spent two months playing there without a contract or anything. I thought "Is this everything, won't I be able to play anymore?"…
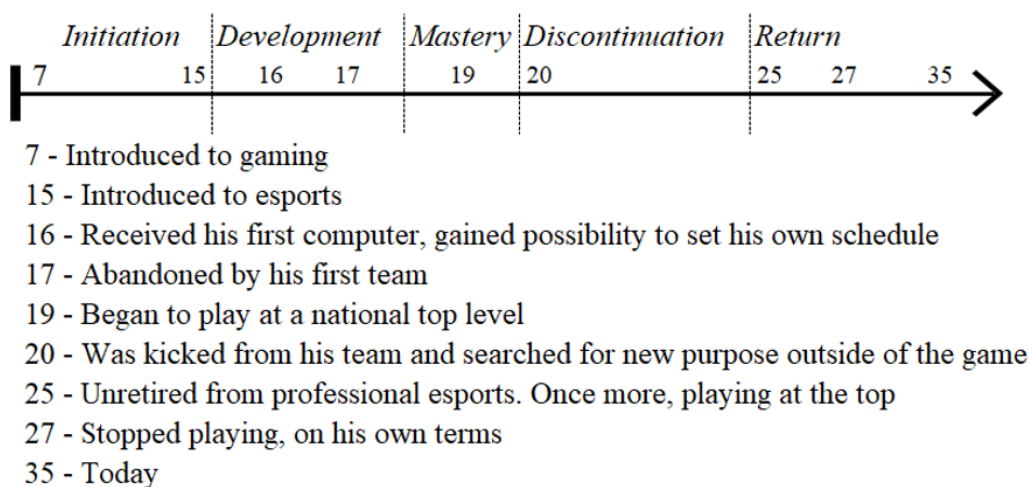
To improve his chances of being scouted he started playing with Swedish teams again. After a month, Alexander was recruited by a professional team. For three years, Alexander played at a top-20 level internationally whilst studying to get his high school diploma. Although Alexander was still improving, he lost interest in CS:GO and eventually retired.

I left CS:GO because I noticed that it wasn't as fun as it was before. I wanted to do something new. I could keep playing CS:GO, but I felt it was no longer worth it. I had begun to lose motivation because it was day in and day out. The idea of just playing to get better worked at the beginning, but it did not work for me in the end.

Alexander decided to take a break from playing professionally and found an opportunity to coach one of the premier teams in the world. A new challenge that he warmly welcomed.

Ernest: Looking for a Group

Figure 2. Ernest's individual career profile

7 - Introduced to gaming
15 - Introduced to esports
16 - Received his first computer, gained possibility to set his own schedule
17 - Abandoned by his first team
19 - Began to play at a national top level
20 - Was kicked from his team and searched for new purpose outside of the game
25 - Unretired from professional esports. Once more, playing at the top
27 - Stopped playing, on his own terms
35 - Today

Note: The numbers represent the age of Ernst throughout his career.
As Ernest took a five-year break from esports but returned, a return stage was added.

Ernest's story began when he was a young child and played video games for the first time. "It was incredible. It was like playing with Lego, but now I would be allowed to step into someone else's world…". At around 15 years old, he was introduced to CS. His family did not have the equipment required to play CS, so he was dependent on his friends to play. At around 16 years old, Ernest received a computer. "I could play all day and be up way past midnight. I stopped caring about school and my grades fell, hard". Ernest continued playing but struggled to find teammates. At 17 years old, he had still not found any stable teammates.

…It was difficult to fit in. Suddenly, the team I played with kicked me out, overnight. I could still see them play matches, but I wasn't allowed to join them… I was abandoned… It was because I was a strategist… They traded me for better players and did not think about the strategies…

Unfortunately, this was not the last time that Ernest was kicked out. So, when he managed to find a new team, he befriended his teammates' friends.

One friend would lead me to the other, so I would create new networks, all the time. When I was dumped by the first one, I would already have two, three new other team compositions ready to go. It was like this, all the time… I tried to get people that I knew from real-life to play, but as soon as I got better than my mates, they didn't want to be around me anymore.

As Ernest attempted to find stability online, his skills improved. He noticed that some of the teams that he played with were performing well. "I began to realize that I was probably pretty good and that I was dumped (by the teams) so they would gain a little edge. I just needed to find out what the last step was". Ernest was now 19 years old and devoted everything to CS. His efforts paid off as Ernest was recruited by a Swedish top team. But eventually, they stopped answering his messages.

I was very determined that I would quit. I was so damn sad. I think I went downstairs and cried in the shower… I wanted to try to be more social. I remember calling a classmate. I went over to him, and there were a lot of people there. I remember the feeling of, "What the hell, is this what people do when I play games?"… It was a great feeling, to be with other people in a room. It had been a while…
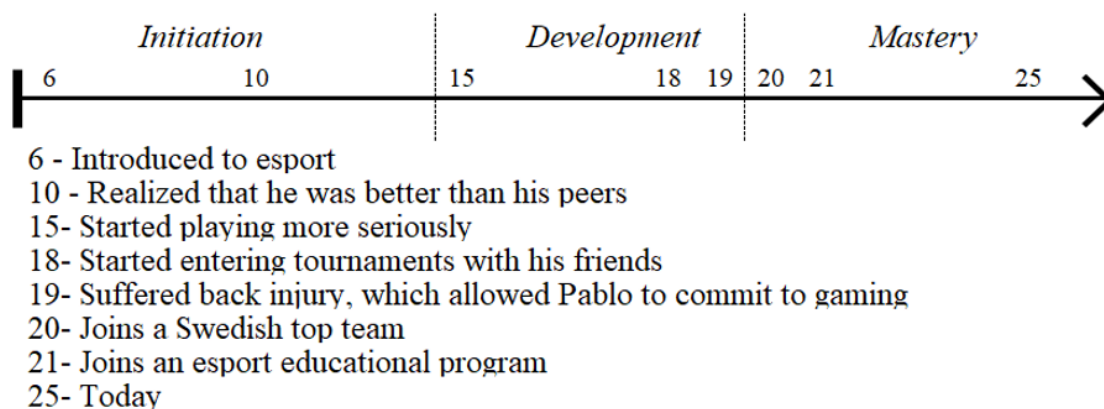
Ernest retired, focused on building relationships outside of esports and entered military conscription where he became good friends with a man from his platoon, a former CS player, who was once considered one of Sweden's best players. After Ernest completed his conscription, he got a job together with the former CS player from his platoon.

After the conscription, we began working together on my first job, and soon enough we found ourselves playing the game again and created a team. The team grew closer, and we would all play and then meet up to hang out…

Ernest kept working, socializing, and casually playing CS. After a couple of years, the team became more serious and started entering tournaments. Ernest was now 25, and his team quickly climbed the national ranks and reached a top-five ranking. After playing with the team for a couple of years Ernest's competitive career simply fizzled out when he was around 27. Looking back at his career, he stated "I'm pretty happy. It really was very fun times, and I got the chance to discover a world before many others".

Pablo: Grinding to Pop-Off[1]

Figure 3. Pablo's individual career profile

6 - Introduced to esport
10 - Realized that he was better than his peers
15- Started playing more seriously
18- Started entering tournaments with his friends
19- Suffered back injury, which allowed Pablo to commit to gaming
20- Joins a Swedish top team
21- Joins an esport educational program
25- Today

Note: The numbers represent the age of Pablo throughout his career.

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[1] *Grinding means giving a lot of effort to reach a goal for an extended period. Pop-off means performing very well.*

Pablo was introduced to video games when he was six years old. "Little by little, I started playing and I'd say that I was a quick learner… I found it fun to improve and perform, to be better than the others." When Pablo became a teenager he started taking esports more seriously and played around two to three hours per day. But he was not fully committed to esport as he focused on floorball but was still playing CS:GO and focused on improving. At 18 years old Pablo made a team with his friends and began entering tournaments. When Pablo was 19 years old, he had an injury. "I could no longer play floorball. I went from playing (CS:GO) for 25 hours a week, to playing 60-70 hours a week. It went from being something fun to committing fully. I invested all the time that I had." Although Pablo stopped exercising, became weaker and his agility worsened, he was encouraged by his family to pursue CS:GO. "I was supported. Especially by my big brother. He is the one who supported me the most when it comes to CS:GO. My parents were big supporters, too…" When Pablo was 20 years old, he got the chance to join a Swedish top-15, nationally ranked organization. But this meant that he had to stop playing with his brother.

It was very tough because we played with each other every day. Whatever we played, we played together… It was a bit hard at the beginning, but it passed pretty quickly because we had other games that we could play together.

Pablo played with his team for one and a half years and improved a lot. When he turned 21 years old, he was accepted into a CS:GO focused folk high school program, which consisted of ordinary lessons and CS:GO focused lessons.

There was nothing but the game to think about… The day consisted of waking up, taking a short walk, and then CS:GO lessons began. After lunch, we had another esport lesson. When the day was over, it was often time to train again, or you went home. Then at 18, it was matches until 22…

The school had a CS:GO team which Pablo joined. Upon finishing his year at the folk high school, Pablo became the best player he had ever been. However, Pablo and his team decided to not extend their contract with the school for an additional year. Instead, the team continued to practice together but from their respective homes. This brings us to where Pablo is today, at 25.

I feel that I'm ready for the professional scene of CS:GO, in every way. I train almost every day… I devote the time that's needed to become better… Like I talked about before, I don't think I've ever been this good.

When asked about what he wanted to achieve during his career, Pablo answered:

…I want to play in the best team in the world. I'm always going to strive towards that. And as a bonus, I want to be the best player in the world too. I believe that with the right team and the right support I can get there. Only time will tell.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the career development narratives of esport players. The findings highlighted that the participants had three different overarching narratives (sink or swim, relational, and performance). Interestingly, the participants' narrative types have also been found in traditional sports (e.g. Book et al., 2024; Carless & Douglas, 2009, 2012). Although characteristics of the participants' careers differ from traditional sports careers, they share many similarities. For example, there is a strong focus on performance in traditional sports (Book et al., 2024) and esports (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021) and both can be vehicles for discovery as they allow athletes to travel, meet new people, and discover new places (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2012; Salo, 2017). Furthermore, researchers have found that relational aspects such as peer relationships and being part of a group can be perceived as a central component of traditional athletes' careers (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013). As many esports are team sports, relational aspects like finding teammates and building relationships, are also important in esports (Salo, 2017). Lastly, traditional sports athletes face a number of challenges throughout their careers, for example, balancing school with sports, entering a new team, or searching for financial support (Book et al., 2020). Similarly, researchers have found that esports players also face challenges like having to constantly outperform their competitors, balance other aspects of life including social life (Meng-Lewis et al. 2020) and school with esports and earn enough money to make a living (Wong et al., 2021). Due to the similarities between esports and traditional sports, the same narrative types might be relatable to both esport players and traditional athletes.

In addition to the overarching narratives, several narrative threads (i.e. discovery, performance, relational, and sink or swim narratives) were found in the participants' stories. This is dissimilar from studies in traditional sports which usually center around one narrative per athlete (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2012, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2006; Frank, 2013). According to McAdams (2006) stories that succumb to one narrative are too simplistic to be true. Furthermore, athletes are whole persons who develop at more levels (e.g., psychological, academic-vocational) than just the athletic level (Wylleman et al., 2020). When taking the entire person into account, athletes likely adopt multiple and meaningful narrative threads related to their other (than athletic) levels of development. Furthermore, the ability to incorporate several narratives and switch focus between them (i.e. *narrative flexibility)* may have meaningful implications for athletes storying their careers.

A novel aspect that was discovered in the participants' stories was the benefits of narrative flexibility. For example, when Alexander grew tired of esports, he was able to switch his focus to the discovery narrative which seems to have helped him be excited for a life outside of esports. Previous researchers have discussed the negative outcomes related to dominant narratives like a worsened ability to adopt alternative narratives (Carless & Douglas, 2013). However, dominant narratives are not necessarily negative in themselves. For example, Pablo had a dominant performance narrative but only temporarily experienced worsened strength and agility. Negative outcomes seem to appear when narratives become incongruent with the individual's experiences and the individual is unable to adopt a congruent narrative. For example, athletes with monological performance narratives can experience a collapse of their identity post-retirement as the performance narrative becomes incongruent with their experiences (Carless & Douglas, 2009). Narrative flexibility could help athletes avoid the negative outcomes related to dominant narratives and facilitate transitions, especially the transition to retirement. Alexander explored and

maintained a life outside of esports (relationships, work, academics) throughout his career. As such, engaging in aspects outside of sports may offer narrative resources which can facilitate narrative flexibility.

Careers in Esports

The findings revealed that the participants' esport careers were comparable to normative career development in traditional sports (i.e. initiation, development, mastery, discontinuation; Wylleman et al., 2020). The participants started playing esports as a leisure activity (initiation), transitioned to a purposeful practice (development) and later to an elite level (mastery), followed by a transition to retirement (discontinuation) for Alexander and Ernest. However, unlike normative athletic development, the participants played esports as an unstructured activity until their transition to the mastery stage. Simultaneous to their athletic development the participants progressed academically until high school when Alexander and Ernest began working in non-sport jobs. The participants' career development also resonates with previous research on esport careers (e.g. Kim & Thomas, 2015, Taylor, 2012) and might therefore be common in esports. Although the participants shared stage-to-stage career progression, their success in transitions' coping differed.

Pablo's transitions were successful whereas Alexander and Ernest had crisis transitions to the development stage followed by an unsuccessful transition to the mastery stage for Ernest. During the transition to the development stage, Alexander and Ernest devoted a lot of hours to esports. They struggled to balance esports with school which led to worsened academic performance resulting in Alexander failing to graduate from high school. Alexander also began exercising less and experienced worsened physical conditioning whereas Ernest started exhibiting symptoms of video game addiction. Similar to Alexander and Ernest, many esport players seem to play esports as an unstructured activity (Kim & Thomas, 2015), which lacks essential components of organized sports like supervision and guidance from adult leaders (e.g., Larson, 2000). Dual career athletes face several concurrent demands at different levels of development, especially during transitions (Stambulova et al., 2024), and require resources like a nurturing environment and support from their social networks (Wylleman et al., 2020). Parental support might be especially important for esport players as a good parent-child relationship can reduce the risk of developing symptoms of video game addiction (Choo et al., 2015).

To successfully make the transition to the mastery stage, esport players need to find a stable team to play with and improve their esport skills. These demands proved too difficult for Ernest who put a lot of effort into finding a team but failed, resulting in an unsuccessful transition and momentary retirement. Finding a stable team can be hard as esports are very competitive and have a high turnover (Meng-Lewis et al., 2020). As such, finding a stable team could be a common problem for esport players. Esport players might therefore benefit from career assistance to facilitate their transition to the mastery stage.

Lastly, Alexander and Ernest made successful transitions to the discontinuation stage whereas Pablo was still in the mastery stage at the time of the interviews. Researchers have found that the transition to discontinuation can be difficult for many esport players as they struggle to find jobs (Lin & Zhao, 2020), which can be exacerbated by their limited career options (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021). Both Alexander and Ernest had pursued dual careers and had non-sport related work experience. Although it might be difficult to balance an additional job or an academic career with esports (i.e., having a dual career), it has several benefits including an easier transition to retirement (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). Furthermore, none of the participants had a dominant performance narrative, which can be a barrier to the discontinuation transition (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009). As such, pursuing dual careers and adopting alternative (to the performance) narratives may help esport players transition to the discontinuation stage.

Practical Implications and Future Research

Esport players face several challenges during their careers including challenges related to income and school. By receiving aid and guidance, the participants might have had a less tumultuous career and been able to better balance esports with other aspects of their lives (e.g., academic life, social life and work). Research could therefore be aimed at exploring how to support esport players in balancing esports with other aspects of their lives. Furthermore, Salo (2017) and Carless and Douglas (2009; 2012) have suggested that being able to shift between different narratives might be beneficial for athletes. The authors add to the importance of narrative flexibility and how it could help esport players adapt and cope with challenges in and outside of esports. Narrative flexibility seems to be facilitated by having diverse narrative resources. This study offers several narrative templates that esport players can use to make sense of their esports career. Therefore, it might be beneficial for esport players to explore multiple aspects of esports like performance, relationships, discovery and more. However, more research is needed.

To conclude, esport players may have different overarching narratives with additional narrative threads. Career development in esports can be difficult due to the lack of structure and support networks, which can increase the risk of negative outcomes like worsened academic performance and video game addiction. Narrative flexibility, career assistance and support networks could help esport players better cope with their challenges and facilitate career development.

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