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Heart of the Cards: The Underlying Social Framework of the *Yu-Gi-Oh* Community

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## HONORS CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

Trading card games (TCGs) are a significantly understudied side of gaming culture within sociology. Plenty of research exists on role playing games, and tabletop gaming in general, but little research exists on the sociological aspects of TCGs, particularly on the culture of players. The purpose of this study is to contribute to that knowledge gap through an ethnographic study of the *Yu-Gi-Oh* TCG community. Data collection consisted of a participant observation method, while analysis of the findings was informed by Goffman's Frame Analysis theory. The main finding of the study was that the culture around *Yu-Gi-Oh* is largely defined by two social frameworks, those being competition and recreation. The values, behaviors, and expectations of the community largely work in support of one or both of these frameworks, and at times work to achieve a balance between these two frameworks that sometimes conflict with each other.

## **Introduction**

Trading Card Games (TCGs) are one of the most popular forms of tabletop gaming today. Games like *Pokemon*, *Magic: the Gathering*, and *Yu-Gi-Oh* have massive followings and strong subcultures supporting them. Despite this, TCGs and their subcultures are greatly understudied within sociology. This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge gap in TCGs by analyzing the *Yu-Gi-Oh* subculture. Using participant observation methods, I collected data on *Yu-Gi-Oh* players over a period of two months. Observations revealed consistencies with existing literature while also identifying other patterns not covered very deeply by existing literature. Themes of recreation and competition emerged as the two dominant values of the *Yu-Gi-Oh* community. Analysis of these values through Goffman's lens of frame analysis provides a deeper understanding of how these two values shape the *Yu-Gi-Oh* community. Recreation and competition, while not inherently dichotomous, sometimes stand in opposition to each other. The expectations and values of the *Yu-Gi-Oh* community reflect and reconcile this dichotomy.

## **Background**

*Yu-Gi-Oh* is a TCG created by the Japanese game company Konami in 1999. The game was first localized to the United States in 2002. The game is part of a larger media franchise consisting of multiple television shows, manga, movies, and other toys. In the game each player builds their own deck of cards, each with different effects and abilities in the game. Each player has a total of eight thousand life points and the goal of the game is to deplete one's opponent's life points to zero. Players do this by attacking their opponent with their "monster cards," which are cards that depict some sort of monster. Monsters have different attack values, determining how many points they deplete from the opponent. In addition to monster cards, players also have access to spell cards and trap cards which allow players to use other abilities to help them in the

game. Abilities can range from things like searching one's own deck for a specific card to forcing one's opponent to discard a card. The effects or abilities of all cards can be activated at different times, and sometimes even during one's opponent's turn depending on the card. While an in depth knowledge of the game is not needed to understand this study, the most important fact to keep in mind is that players have access to countless abilities between the thousands of cards available and that these abilities can be applicable at virtually any time during the game depending on what the text on the card says.

### **Literature Review**

While an abundance of social research on gaming and play exists, there is a notable lack of research about TCGs in particular. Most scholarly work on trading card games tends to focus on the marketing and sales of such games. Social science research on trading card games focus largely on the motivations of TCG players, the capabilities of TCGs as learning tools, and the place of TCGs in media-centric socialization.

### **Why People Play**

Mortenson, Sixsmith, and Kaufman's (2017) article does not focus on TCGs specifically, but looks more broadly at nondigital gaming among older adults. Though the exact game and age of the subjects in this study is different than that of the Yu-Gi-Oh player base, their article provides some valuable insights on the reasons that people play games. According to Mortenson et al., the biggest benefit that people identify with nondigital gaming is the social interaction that comes with it, with the majority of respondents. They also note that "playing for escape from daily life was less frequently cited compared to enjoyment and mental stimulation. This suggests that respondents played non-digital games for the positive benefits they produced, rather than as

means of avoidance” (2017: 6). This was especially true of the younger adults in the study, and may prove relevant in understanding Yu-Gi-Oh players.

Billicent (2014), similar to Mortenson et al. focuses on the reasons people play, but his study is focused on adolescents playing TCGs, with an emphasis on Yu-Gi-Oh in particular. Some parallels exist in the reasons adolescents play games and the reasons older adults play games, with the social interaction and mental stimulation being major factors. The use of TCGs as a form of escape also comes up in Billicent’s interviews with players and seems to be a more significant factor in adolescents’ gaming than in adults’. Factors unique to TCGs that Billicent finds are trading, investing, and personal expression. Trading and investment are aspects of the game that are intertwined with each other. The players Billicent interviews all mention trading as an important aspect of the gaming community and express satisfaction in owning and trading valuable cards. In some cases people sell cards instead of simply trading for other cards. Billicent compares the investment aspect of TCGs to “playing the stock market for fun” (2014: 77). Ito (2005) also touches on the trading and selling of cards, noting that it forms an entire subculture within TCG communities. She also notes that the trading culture exists among child TCG players, though which cards are seen as valuable differs greatly from the adult community.

Personal expression is another unique aspect of TCGs that Billicent observes. This stems in part from the fact that players must build their own decks out of their own card collections. Some of the interviewees expressed a sense of personal attachment to their decks and a sense of identification with them. Billicent notes that players tended to identify with the playstyle or strategies involved in their decks more than the imagery of the cards.

Paiva et al.’s (2018) article is focused on players of multiple TCGs and looks at player identities and motivations. A significant finding of their study is that more casual players of card

games tend to gravitate towards the self-expressive aspects of the games, while more serious and competitive players tend to be more interested in collecting the best cards. The more serious players tend to put a greater financial investment into games, often at the expense of enjoyment. “Yu-Gi-Oh players who are involved in the competitive scenario tend to deprive themselves from having fun playing the game, since these players aim victory as their main goal” (2018: 7). Though playing for victory was a motivation cited in Billicent’s article, it was not at the cost of enjoyment as indicated by Paiva et al. This is a major contrast with Billicent and Mortenson et al.’s finding that enjoyment of the game is usually a factor in why people play, though neither of them cite enjoyment as the primary motivator.

Adinolf and Turkay’s (2011) study also analyzes the motivations of players. Like Paiva et al. and Billicent, researchers Adinolf and Turkay find card collection and social interactions as two major motivating factors for engagement with TCGs, but they also find a more performative aspect of engagement. Other authors mention self-expression as a major aspect of TCGs, but Adinolf and Turkay find that this extends beyond the creative act of deck construction and into the actual play itself. TCGs, being competitive games, place players at odds with each other, creating a socially acceptable opportunity for some antagonism between players. Adinolf and Turkay quote a player who says that she likes to play the game with her friends and not having to be nice all the time (2011: 6).

Gee (2014) does not explore the same motivations as other researchers but does make some general observations about the Yu-Gi-Oh community. Gee addresses the matter of expression in Yu-Gi-Oh and discusses how players will try to act in ways that will allow them to be seen as a ‘good player.’ He also notes that what exactly defines a good player is debatable. A

good player, according to Gee, is not just a player who wins, but a player whose play is also accepted by other players.

### **TCGs and Learning**

Adinolf and Turkey (2011) also emphasize the educational capabilities of card games. The social nature of TCGs allows them to be an avenue for teaching and developing particular social skills. The need to teach new players game mechanics is one way in which cooperative social skills are enhanced. Aspects like trading can help players to develop skills in persuasion and negotiation. Some TCGs can also help players develop skills like resource management. Adinolf and Turkey also speculate that TCGs may be helpful in improving their ability to commit information to memory. The deck construction aspect of the game also allows players to work on more creative skills involving the interplay between numerous variables.

Lenarcic (2005) also focuses on the educational capabilities of TCGs. Lenarcic analyzes the popular game, Magic: The Gathering, and finds that its players are able to learn complex systems of interaction with ease when they learn the game's rules. He also notes that this is true of digital versions of the game. Lenarcic argues that the mental stimulus provided by the contextualization of information as a game may facilitate learning. While recontextualizing information through games is already a common teaching method, Lenarcic's assertion is that analyzing TCGs may be helpful for using this game approach to teach complex systems of information with interacting pieces.

### **TCGs and Media**

Ito (2005) and Lemke (2004) both argue that TCGs are part of a greater fabric of mass media, though they draw different conclusions. Lemke asserts that TCGs, and games more



broadly, work in a way that make media franchises more pervasive in society and more appealing to people. According to Lemke, players can live the fantasy of existing in a virtual world by playing games. This is similar to the escapist motivation seen in other research, though Lemke ties it specifically to media franchises more than the games and gameplay.

Ito suggests that the multimedia nature of TCGs combined with changes in media due to technology allow people to engage with games in new ways. She notes that the existence of characters and a clear story in the Yu-Gi-Oh anime does not prevent players from engaging with the game in their own imaginative ways. This is especially evident in children, who are the target audience of the TV show. Children will develop their own rules for the game and systems of hierarchy for which cards are better than others.

### **Methods and Theory**

Data collection for this study consisted of participant observation, as this method allows for an immersive look into the patterns and values of a subculture. An ethnographic approach is the best way to uncover the social construction of meaning within a subculture, particularly under the framework of Goffman's Frame Analysis theory, a lens for understanding social constructions that is complemented by ethnographic methods (Goffman, 1974: 5-7). The primary setting for observation was the weekly meetup of *Yu-Gi-Oh* players at a local game shop. In addition to gathering data at locals, I also followed a player I know personally named Steve. Steve did not attend locals, but I was able to observe some of his games in a tournament he organized with his coworkers and was also able to follow him on a few shopping trips where he was buying cards.

*Yu-Gi-Oh* locals were held at the same location every week, with a loose start time of 1:00 PM until whenever the group of players felt like dispersing. I normally attended from about 3:00 PM until 5:00 PM. The group normally consisted of the same four to six players, though there were eight players present on the busiest day that I attended excluding myself. All of the players were men in their early twenties to mid-twenties. About half of the attendants were Latino and the other half were white.

Outside of locals I spent time with Steve during his *Yu-Gi-Oh* related activities. Some of my observations took place in his house where he would play a digital version of *Yu-Gi-Oh* online with his co-workers. Outside of his online games I was able to attend a few shopping trips with him where he would talk about the cards he was buying and the game in general.

While previous studies on TCGs and gaming form the background and knowledge base for this study, Goffman's theories on the social construction and understanding of reality will be integral to the analysis of the data collected. Goffman's book *Frame Analysis* (1974) is of particular importance, to this study, the core idea of the text being that people will construct different frames around events to give meaning to events and actions. Every person operates with multiple frameworks at any given time, but the one that defines their current actions and observations the most is referred to as the primary framework (1974: 26). While the act of framing is important for understanding how meaning is created, the act of keying is just as important, especially in the analysis of gaming. Keying differs from framing in that it is a transformation of the primary framework so that the already meaningful events in the framework now have a less literal or less real meaning (1974: 47). The most relevant example of this is the act of practice. While the act of playing *Yu-Gi-Oh* may exist in the primary framework, its keyed form would be the act of practicing *Yu-Gi-Oh*. When the primary framework of the game is

keyed this way the meanings of the game assigned in the framework still apply, but in a less literal sense because it is only practice. The stakes of winning and losing are removed through this key.

## **Observations and Analysis**

### **Player Etiquette**

One of the most immediately apparent patterns among *Yu-Gi-Oh* players is a set of behaviors that can best be described as the etiquette of the game. There are certain expectations that players tend to follow, both verbal and nonverbal, that create a sense of etiquette around the experience of playing *Yu-Gi-Oh*.

Starting with the verbal etiquette of the game, players would often narrate or explain their turns. They would announce which cards they were playing, what they were doing with these cards, and when they were moving on to the next phase of their turn or the end of their turn. Some players would add to this by always asking their opponent if what they did was acceptable after each card they used. Players do this because there are often ways for players to negate each other's actions with their own cards. Checking for permission from the opponent after each move works to remind the opponent that they may be able to negate the player. One player, Jacob, did not quite ask for permission when playing, but instead prefaced every choice he made with "I attempt," at one point going as far to say, 'I attempt to draw a card,' a statement which caused another player nearby to make fun of him for taking it too far. While not every player asked for permission after each move, every player still tended to narrate their moves out loud, explaining to their opponent what they were doing and how. The only exception I witnessed to this was when I played a game with a player named Aaron at locals. Aaron began each turn narrating and

explaining the cards he was using, but after it was clear that I was not going to negate any of his actions he spent less time announcing his plays, and instead just played his cards, only occasionally explaining what he was doing.

Besides the courtesy of allowing players an opportunity to negate actions in the game, another thing players would often asked for permission to do was to touch or look at each other's cards. Players would commonly ask to see their opponent's cards if their opponent used a card the player was not familiar with. This was especially common with cards that had a lot of text and more complicated abilities. While players would always ask for permission to view cards, I never witnessed a player deny their opponent the opportunity to view their cards.

Aside from the verbal etiquette of explaining one's actions and asking permission, there is also an element of nonverbal etiquette among players. Like any card game, the decks must be shuffled before the game begins. As a sign of trust between players, it is standard for players to cut each other's decks then tap them with their hand to signal that they approve of the shuffle. The act of tapping is a frequent act throughout the game, as *Yu-Gi-Oh* is a game where players are often allowed to search their deck for specific cards. Every time a player does this, they must shuffle their deck afterwards, so their opponent is once again allowed to cut and tap the deck, signaling they trust that the player has shuffled the deck appropriately. Typically, players will only cut each other's decks at the start of each game, but they will usually still tap after any shuffles during the game. The importance of tapping also tended to vary from player to player, with some players only tapping at the start of the game and not bothering to later, and other players foregoing the process entirely. While the process is standard in the more formal setting of competitive play, in more casual settings players do not always take it as seriously.

### **The Acceptable Play and Degenerate Play**

Gee's (2014) idea that a good player is more than a player who wins, but also a player whose play is accepted by others was an idea that was strongly reinforced by the observations in this study, though the terms "acceptable" and "unacceptable" are more fitting descriptors than either "good" or "bad." A common term used by players to describe less acceptable ways of play is the word "degenerate." Players would refer to certain cards or certain styles of play as degenerate. A notable feature of degenerate cards and playing is that it has little to do with how good the cards or play styles are in terms of ability to win, and more to do with the amount of skill required to use them. Leo, one of the players I met at locals, gave the best explanation of this aspect of respect in the game when describing two of the top decks in the game at the moment. Leo was using a dinosaur themed deck while his opponent was using another popular deck called "Tri-Brigade." I asked Leo about his dinosaur deck and he explained that it is currently the second-best deck in the game. I asked him what the best deck was, which he said was "Dragon Link." According to Leo, a skilled player can make Dragon Link work no matter what cards they have in their hand, but they need to be able to be creative. Conversely, he described the dinosaur deck as being easier to play, with a simpler strategy of just summoning the most powerful monster in the deck. In short, the Dragon deck has multiple paths to victory and numerous strategies to employ depending on how a player decides to use their cards, where the dinosaur deck has one goal and players should always play their cards towards the same eventual outcome with the dinosaur deck. Leo also said that the dinosaur deck is widely hated by competitive players because it requires so little skill. The value of creativity in playing and deckbuilding falls in line with Adinolf and Turkay's (2011) finding that the creative aspect of TCGs is often what players find most engaging. It would make sense that this aspect of the game is emphasized as a key feature of respectable play.

The level of skill required to play certain combinations of cards is a major factor in determining the respectability or acceptability of a playstyle, but it is by no means the only factor. During a game between Steve and one of his coworkers he used a card which he was able to bring back to his hand after playing. When returning the card to his hand Steve said it returned to his hand “because it’s a degenerate card.” The card he used was not a particularly powerful card, simply allowing a player to destroy one of their opponent’s monsters after two turns, however the card text specifies that it should return to the player’s hand rather than be discarded to the graveyard, making it a reusable card. Its reusability is what makes it a less respectable card, as it essentially allows a player to destroy their opponent’s monsters with virtually no consequence, as opposed to most similar cards that would at least be discarded after use. In this example the acceptability of the card has less to do with the skill or creativity required to use it, and more to do with the lack of consequences involved with the card, allowing the card’s owner to have a reusable advantage.

A third aspect of acceptability in play is what players refer to as “control,” a player’s ability to control their opponent or prevent their opponent from using certain actions. A “control deck” is a deck that is structured around controlling the opponent’s side of the field, often in a way that prevents the opponent from being able to use their own cards. According to Steve, even though some degree of control is essential to competitive play, too much of it is frowned upon because it removes any fun from the game for the player opposing the control deck. It is a style of play that at its most extreme essentially prevents the opponent from being able to play the game. This aspect of acceptability echoes Paiva et al.’s (2018) observation that players often put winning before the actual fun of the game, though the undesired nature of such a playstyle in *Yu-Gi-Oh* indicates that players see this level of competitive behavior as a problem. Although many

of the players at locals were active followers of competitive *Yu-Gi-Oh*, none of them were actively playing control decks during my observations, likely because of the more casual environment at locals.

The last characteristic associated with player acceptability is a player's familiarity with their own cards. Players are generally expected to be familiar with the cards they are using and what they do, assuming the player is using a deck that they are familiar with. When players use decks they are not familiar with they tend to mention that before the game, explaining why they might be playing more slowly than normal because they need time to read and familiarize themselves with their cards. Brian, one of the players at locals, was often unfamiliar with the cards he used in the deck he used the most. During a game I played with Brian he was trying to use a combination of cards in a certain order but was struggling with it until Tom, another player next to us helped Brian with his combo and also teased 'read your cards before you play them,' afterwards. Brian responded by joking "I never read my cards. It's the *Yu-Gi-Oh* way." Though this was a joke, there was a little bit of truth in this, as Brian tended to refer to his cards by how they looked instead of the full name, referring to 'the red one' or 'the blue one' when explaining his turn. While Tom was friendly teasing Brian, Steve and his coworker Dan expressed more serious frustration at players who are not familiar with their cards. While observing a game between Dan and Steve the two of them began to complain about another one of their coworkers in their tournament. Steve explained to me that Collin, their coworker, is notorious among them for seeming to have no familiarity with his own cards no matter how many times he has used them. Their attitude when talking about Collin was a mixture of frustration and bewilderment at the fact that he had such a difficult time committing the abilities of his cards to memory.

## **Value and Nostalgia**

While much of the player community is oriented around gameplay, another important aspect to consider is the trading side of the trading card game. Previous researchers, particularly Ito (2005), have analyzed the trading aspect of the game. Ito's observation that the value of cards varies between child players and adult players indicates that the value of trading cards is not innate but is instead socially created. This is echoed in my own observations of both card trading and buying. During a trip to Meijer with Steve we ran into Brian who was also there to look for *Yu-Gi-Oh* cards. One of the subjects Brian and Steve discussed was the current trend of scalping *Pokemon* cards. *Pokemon* cards at the time of this study have been consistently out of stock at major retailers because people buy out entire stores' supplies and resell them at a higher price. While discussing this trend, Brian and Steve both agreed that scalping like that could never happen with *Yu-Gi-Oh* because of the way cards are valued. They both claimed that players primarily value cards that offer some type of competitive edge, so if a pack of cards without any strong competitive cards is released most *Yu-Gi-Oh* players will not bother to buy it. The unpredictability in the value of *Yu-Gi-Oh* sets makes them difficult to resell.

The competitive aspect of card value is consistent with Ito's (2005) observation that value is constructed, and I also found evidence to suggest that there is a multimedia aspect to value, again consistent with Ito's research. While Steve and Brian are correct in their assessment that competitive viability is a major aspect of determining card value, my own observations reveal that there are other factors that can sometimes outweigh competitive viability. The first and most predictable determiner of value is rarity. As is standard for a TCG, some cards are rarer than others, and naturally rarer cards tend to be more valuable. While rarer cards are often more valuable it is not always the primary determiner of value. Cards of the highest rarity levels will consistently be the most valuable, regardless of competitive viability, but cards of more middling



levels of rarity can often have their rarity outweighed by competitive viability. The value of rarity is more consistent with Billicent's (2014) analysis of card trading with his conclusion that players often simply like to own valuable cards.

Another factor that seems to play into card value is nostalgia. This factor does not affect value to nearly the same degree as rarity or competition, but there is a definite trend of players valuing certain classic cards. One of the sets that Steve bought from Meijer was a set called Maximum Gold. Among the most valuable cards in the set were some moderately rare versions of some competitive staple cards, but also mixed into the most valuable cards from the set were reprints of certain classic cards. The most valuable card a player can potentially pull from a Maximum Gold box is the card "Blue Eyes White Dragon," a reprint of one of the original cards. The Blue Eyes White Dragon monster was featured heavily in the original *Yu-Gi-Oh* anime, making it a nostalgic card for many players. Being such a major card from the game's early years, it is actually quite a common card, usually worth less than a dollar, but with the Maximum Gold reprint being a new version of the card, it has value as a collector's item, especially for longtime fans. This is notably not the only valuable card from Maximum Gold to be a reprint from of an old card featured heavily in the anime, it is just distinct in that it is the most valuable card in the set. The nostalgic aspect of card value is in line with both Ito (2005) and Lemke's (2004) findings that the multimedia nature of TCGs is an important aspect of the game, though the prevalence of competitive viability over nostalgia and even sometimes rarity suggests something different from their findings. While Lemke and Ito view TCGs as more of a peripheral to larger media franchises, the emphasis on competition among the players observed in this study indicates that the anime and media outside of the game are peripheral to the TCG.

The nostalgic and multimedia aspect of value does extend beyond the game itself. During one trip to a game shop in Belvidere with Steve he found a statue of a character named Seto Kaiba, an antagonist from the original *Yu-Gi-Oh* anime. Steve ended up buying the statue which cost \$99. Steve, out of all the players I observed, seemed to have the strongest connection to *Yu-Gi-Oh* as a multimedia franchise, being the most enthusiastic about anime merchandise, but he was by no means the most nostalgic. One week while playing against Aaron, he asked me if I wanted to play a different format. In *Yu-Gi-Oh* a format refers to a particular iteration of the game. Every few years Konami will add a new type of card or change some rules about some type of card so the game works a bit differently. Aaron had brought some decks from previous iterations of the game. These decks included many cards that are now banned from official play. One of the formats we played was what players commonly refer to as GOAT, an acronym for “greatest of all time.” This format of the game existed in the mid-2000s. The name alone reveals how players often feel about this older format, showing a clear sense of nostalgia about it. I asked Steve about the GOAT format at one point, and he personally felt that it is very overrated. He much preferred the current iteration of the game. Between Steve and Aaron it is clear that nostalgia has a strong presence in the player base, but there are differences in what players actually feel nostalgia about.

### **Primary Frameworks in *Yu-Gi-Oh***

In Goffman’s own words, “the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture,” (1974: 27). The two primary frameworks that define the *Yu-Gi-Oh* community are the frameworks of recreation and competition. The first framework of recreation recognizes *Yu-Gi-Oh* as a form of entertainment. Within this framework players are gathered under the shared pretense of having fun by playing *Yu-Gi-Oh*. The second framework in

use is the framework of competition. Within the competitive framework players are gathered with the goal of winning.

The practices and beliefs of members in this community tend to work in ways that support or reflect the values created by these frames. The value of cards based on competitive viability is a clear reflection of the competition framework, but the value in nostalgia, and the exercises in nostalgia like playing GOAT format or buying anime merchandise reflect the recreational framework. Practices like players tapping each other's decks are part of the competitive framework, working to promote integrity in the competition in the game. Matters of etiquette like asking for permission when playing one's cards or narrating one's own moves work to support both frames. By asking for permission or narrating one's own turn, the player keeps their opponent actively engaged in the game and offers them the opportunity to interrupt if possible. By promoting participation from both players, this practice upholds the value of entertainment. By narrating their moves and allowing their opponents opportunity to interrupt players also ensure integrity and fairness in the competition.

While the player etiquette practices tend to support both frameworks, there are some instances where the two frames come into conflict with each other. This can be seen in the ideals of respectable play, particularly with the idea of control. With control decks working mainly to prevent other players from being able to actively participate in the game, the framework of entertainment is almost entirely eclipsed by the competitive frame. With such a playstyle so directly contradicting one of the primary frameworks of the community, it comes as no surprise that this playstyle would be labeled as undesirable, even if it is effective for winning games. Similarly, strong decks and cards that require little skill are also seen as less acceptable. These easier to play cards and decks fulfill the value of entertainment with their power and ease of use.

Even though these playstyles can be very successful in the competitive scene, such as with the dinosaur deck, the lack of skill needed to use them can be seen as a threat to the game's competitive integrity. While player etiquette standards demonstrate support for both primary frameworks, standards of acceptable play demonstrate the balancing act players perform to reconcile occasional conflict between the two frames.

### **Balancing Frameworks Through Keys**

Keying of a framework is the transformation of that framework into a nonliteral performance of the actions within the framework (Goffman, 1974). In *Yu-Gi-Oh* the unkeyed form of the frameworks would be a formal play setting where the outcome of a game is treated as an urgent matter with serious stakes. A formal tournament would be an example of such a setting. A keyed form of *Yu-Gi-Oh* would be something more akin to a practice setting. Goffman describes keyed settings as being practices, simulations, or rehearsals instead of 'the real thing.' The 'real thing' in *Yu-Gi-Oh* is difficult to define with any certainty but the tournament setting can certainly serve as a version of the real thing (though strictly defining it as tournament setting would be too limiting). *Yu-Gi-Oh* locals are not completely analogous with a practice setting, as they are not necessarily used as a preparation for some 'real thing' version of *Yu-Gi-Oh*. Locals for many players is simply a social occasion to meet with friends every week and socialize over a shared interest, very much in line with Mortenson et al.'s (2017) observation that social interaction is a major motivator in playing games.

With locals being a primarily social setting, it takes on many characteristics of a practice setting. While the values of the competitive framework still govern the etiquette and gameplay, the keying of the frame allows it to be a more cooperative environment. As mentioned earlier,

Tom helped Brian with a card combo during one of his games. This type of outside help would be unacceptable in a more formal environment, but in the low stakes environment of locals this is not only acceptable behavior, but in fact common behavior. Tom in particular had a habit of helping out other players when they were unsure of how their cards worked. Additionally, the fact that players so frequently used cards they were unfamiliar with at locals can be attributed to the more casual keying of the competitive frame. On my last day attending locals I played a game against Leo, who I knew tended to be one of the more competitive players at locals. When I played him, he told me that he was using a deck that he was very unfamiliar with. For Leo, locals did serve as a practice setting.

The only unkeyed version of the competitive framework I observed was Steve's tournament with his coworkers. Though there was nothing at stake in the tournament other than bragging rights for the winner, Steve and his coworkers treated these games very seriously. Part of their tournament's rules specified that each week one of the losing players would be allowed to ban a card from the game. The first game I observed between Steve and his friend Mark was played before Collin, who had lost a match earlier in the week, had announced the card he would ban. Steve and Mark were genuinely concerned that they would have to replay their game if Collin chose to ban a card that either of them had used that night. Even though there was nothing actually at stake beyond victory, Steve and Mark were treating the game with total seriousness. Their interactions would shift into a more casual key after their games ended, as they would always take some time to talk about their games and their strategies after each match. Steve, Mark, and Dan would share their cards with each other and how they used them and offer each other advice on their decks.

In both Steve's tournament and at locals the keying of the framework primarily serves to bring the competitive framework into cooperation with the entertainment framework. As Paiva et al. (2018) note, competition can often occur at the expense of fun. With the dissonance between competition and fun, it is natural that the two frameworks come into conflict with each other at times, but the keying of the competitive framework functions as a way for the two frameworks to exist in equilibrium.

### **Conclusions and Subjects for Future Research**

In sum, the primary frameworks of *Yu-Gi-Oh* are competition and recreation. These frameworks occasionally oppose each other, but through keying, and other sets of expectations players manage to balance these frameworks. Values about acceptable and respectable play reveal how these frames operate and are prioritize while behaviors like player etiquette work to reinforce these frames. The value of competitive cards reflects the competitive framework while displays of nostalgia reflect the recreational framework.

While frame analysis offers great insights into some of the cultural values of the *Yu-Gi-Oh* community, there are other aspects of the subculture still in need of a greater analysis. One immediate subject of interest is the role of gender in *Yu-Gi-Oh*, and perhaps even in TCGs in general. One of the most immediately apparent observations about the group of players observed in this study is that they are all men in their early to mid-twenties. Another subject that briefly came up during my observations was the existence of pornographic artwork of *Yu-Gi-Oh* characters. This type of material is so prevalent on the internet that Steve claimed that *Yu-Gi-Oh* players have a bad reputation. An analysis of gender in *Yu-Gi-Oh* is well beyond the scope of

this study, but it stands out as a potential topic for future discussion, especially as a relatively untouched area of TCG research.

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