At an individual level, competitive athletes often construct highly salient sport identities whereby they define themselves largely through their sport participation (Leonard & Schmitt, 1987). However, from a systemic standpoint, the pyramid model of elite sport development is predicated on the pragmatic concept of an initially broad participation base providing the pool from which to identify and select only the few highest-performing athletes for elite teams (Green, 2005). Although such a philosophy tends to focus on those athletes who advance to the highest levels of competition, its corollary also merits examination. That is, as the relative few elite athletes advance to higher levels of competition, increasing numbers of athletes are discarded from the development pyramid. While historically an under-examined population, athletes who transition out of the sport development system (either due to retirement, injury, or comparative lack of talent) may struggle with the loss or diminishment of their sport identities. In fact, within the literature dedicated to the study of athlete transitions, a prominent subset of the research has demonstrated the attendant identity crises that often accompany an individual’s termination as a competitive athlete – be it at the interscholastic, professional, or international level (e.g., Messner, 1992; Stier, 2007).

A growing body of sport-related research has begun to consider the evolving role of technology in the lives of athletes and sport consumers. One often-overlooked aspect of technological innovation has occurred through sports video games. Although many emergent studies of sports video game focus on consumption-related impacts of, for example, in-game advertising, recent studies have expanded the theoretical treatment of sports video games to the realm of more psychosocial inquiry; for instance, exploring how playing sports video games facilitates the construction of player narratives (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). The implication that sports video games may provide a forum through which players interactively construct meaning suggests the potential for video games to serve a valuable function in players’ lives. One such function may lie in the supplemental capacity of sports video games to provide a space for former athletes to perpetuate or redefine their sport identities. If this is indeed the case, then the use of sports video games to ease an athlete’s transition out of competitive sport may be indicative of an unexplored, perhaps even subconscious, coping mechanism.

This study endeavors to begin the process of understanding sports video games, not as antithetical to health and physical activity, but as an emerging theoretical component of an evolving sport development system. Previous field observations and industry experience suggest that sports video games may provide a salient social psychological context for the enactment of behaviors and meanings associated with an individual’s overarching sport identity, particularly for those athletes who no longer have access to such competitive outlets. Sports video games, therefore, may facilitate the negotiation of one’s sport identity during the transition out of competitive sport participation. Given the relative nascentness of research into sports video games, a grounded theory approach utilizing constant comparative analysis is employed to investigate this proposition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Through theoretical sampling of recently graduated (i.e., within one to four years of loss of eligibility) former collegiate athletes who also characterize themselves as “gamers,” interviews are conducted to inform the theoretical development of this area of inquiry. In accordance with the methodology of grounded theory, interviews are initially open-ended in nature, but proceed to a semi-structured format as the theory becomes more refined. At present, the sample includes male, former football and basketball players across Division I, II, and III levels of play. The initial rationale behind this theoretical starting point was to begin the analysis by examining individuals with a more direct video game analog, or avatar. Given that football and men’s basketball video games have become an integral part of the contemporary popular culture milieu, the theory development has initially focused on these athletes who might have a more salient identity link to the games (cf. Crawford & Gosling, 2009). Although this characterizes the current state of the project, there is the potential that the scope of the sample between now and the conference will expand to include former male athletes in non-video game represented sports as well as former female athletes. However, this will be dependent on the analytic purview of the emergent theory, as is appropriate in a grounded theory approach.
approach. Although the total sample size will be determined by the quickness with which saturation is reached, for a relatively narrow domain such as this, 10-15 participants would likely be an appropriate sample size (Wuest, 2007).

Broadly speaking, the content of the interviews is largely driven by the respondents, but typically focuses on participants’ backgrounds as competitive athletes, their history playing sports video games (particularly since the cessation of elite sport participation), and the role/value of video games in their day-to-day lives. Analysis of the data begins with open coding of participant responses in an effort to inductively identify patterns in the data. Following the more descriptive consolidation of the data into abstract categories, the analysis shifts to theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978). This allows for the identification of the central issues and processes through the theoretical lens of the coding families. After unrelated categories are discarded from the analysis, theoretical sampling of the next participant is utilized to further clarify relationships and concepts, and this is supplemented through theoretical sampling of the literature in order to help account for the emerging theory. Throughout this process, theoretical memos are written to chart the analytic processes guiding the development of the theory. These memos ultimately provide the framework for the write-up of the report.

In summary, the present research aims to explore the role of playing sports video games as a means of redefining or perpetuating one’s sport identity among post-competitive adult athletes. The expected findings of this study have the potential to generate a more nuanced understanding of the manner in which individuals, in this case former competitive athletes, leverage the technological developments associated with new media such as sports video games to compensate for threats or changes to their sport identities. Given a systemic sport development model in which more competitive athletes are transitioned out of sport than advanced to elite status, it is important that sport managers begin to understand the processes that individuals undertake to accommodate such an affront to these meaningful identities. From an application standpoint, the results of this study may inform the development of athlete-centered programs related to transitioning out of elite sport programs. In addition, future studies may incorporate these results into investigations pertaining to sport participation habits throughout the lifespan, as well as the sociocultural role of consumption in attending to one’s sport identity.