Analysing individual specialisation and flexibility in predator hunting mode and its effect on hunting success using an online multiplayer videogame

Maxime Fraser Franco1, Francesca Santostefano1, Clint D. Kelly1, Pierre-Olivier Montiglio1

###### Groupe de Recherche en Écologie Comportementale et Animale (GRECA), Département des Sciences Biologiques, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, QC, Canada

###### 1Correspondence: Pavillon des Sciences Biologiques (SB) SB-1805, 141 Avenue du Président-Kennedy, Montréal (Québec), Canada, H2X 1Y4

###### 1Corresponding author: maxime(dot)fraser(dot)franco(at)hotmail.com

# Abstract

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# Introduction

Predator hunting mode plays a crucial role in structuring ecological communities and ecosystems (Huey & Pianka 1981; Preisser *et al.* 2007; Schmitz 2008; Kersch‐Becker *et al.* 2018), and usually consists of three main classes: 1) active/cursioral hunters who search, follow, and chase prey for long distances, 2) sit-and-pursue hunters who remain motionless and pounce on prey that are within chasing distance, and 3) sit-and-wait/ambush hunters who wait for prey to be within immediate capture distance (McLaughlin 1989). Field studies show that predators with contrasting hunting modes (e.g. cursorial vs ambush) can cause opposing trophic cascades and act at different trophic levels (Schmitz 2008; Romero & Koricheva 2011). For instance, predators might differ in the number of individuals or species, or in the type of prey that they capture relative to their hunting mode (Miller *et al.* 2014; Donihue 2016; Glaudas *et al.* 2019). Such observations sparked a growing interest in investigating how ecological factors shape individual variation in hunting behaviour within populations, and its consequences for predator-prey interactions (Pettorelli *et al.* 2015; Toscano *et al.* 2016; Schmitz 2017). Indeed, studies report that individual predator behavioural type can mediate consumptive and nonconsumptive effects during trophic interactions (Smith & Blumstein 2010; Griffen *et al.* 2012; Toscano & Griffen 2014). However, predator species still tend to be classified either as active or sit-and-wait hunters based on their average behaviour (Lima 2002; Miles *et al.* 2007; Pettorelli *et al.* 2015; Schmitz 2017). It is therefore imperative that we account for individual variation in hunting mode during predator-prey interactions if we hope to understand community-level consequences of predation.

Individual variation in hunting mode can be driven by specialisation when predators in a given population display consistent differences in tactic use. Such differences are expected when individuals experience temporal and/or spatial fluctuations in the distribution, availability, or behaviour of their prey (Araújo *et al.* 2011; Carneiro *et al.* 2017; Phillips *et al.* 2017; Courbin *et al.* 2018). For example, predators specialise in specific tactics to meet the energy/time demands that are required to successfully capture the type of prey generally encountered (Bowen *et al.* 2002; Tinker *et al.* 2008; Arthur *et al.* 2016). Prey activity/mobility is an important trait influencing encounter rates with predators (Gerritsen & Strickler 1977; Huey & Pianka 1981; Scharf *et al.* 2006). Therefore, individual variation in encounter rates with prey activity-types may lead to nonrandom interactions between predator-prey behavioural types (Wolf & Weissing 2012). Such a mechanism in trophic interactions is described by the locomotor-crossover hypothesis (Huey & Pianka 1981), which predicts that ambush predators should be more successful when they hunt fast-moving prey, while cursorial predators should have greater success with sedentary prey (Scharf *et al.* 2006; Belgrad & Griffen 2016; Donihue 2016). If individual tactics allow predators to reach similar capture rates, then predators with contrasting hunting modes might coexist within a population (Kobler *et al.* 2009; Michel & Adams 2009; Chang *et al.* 2017). However, this hypothesis could be difficult to test at the individual level in wild populations of free-ranging predators.

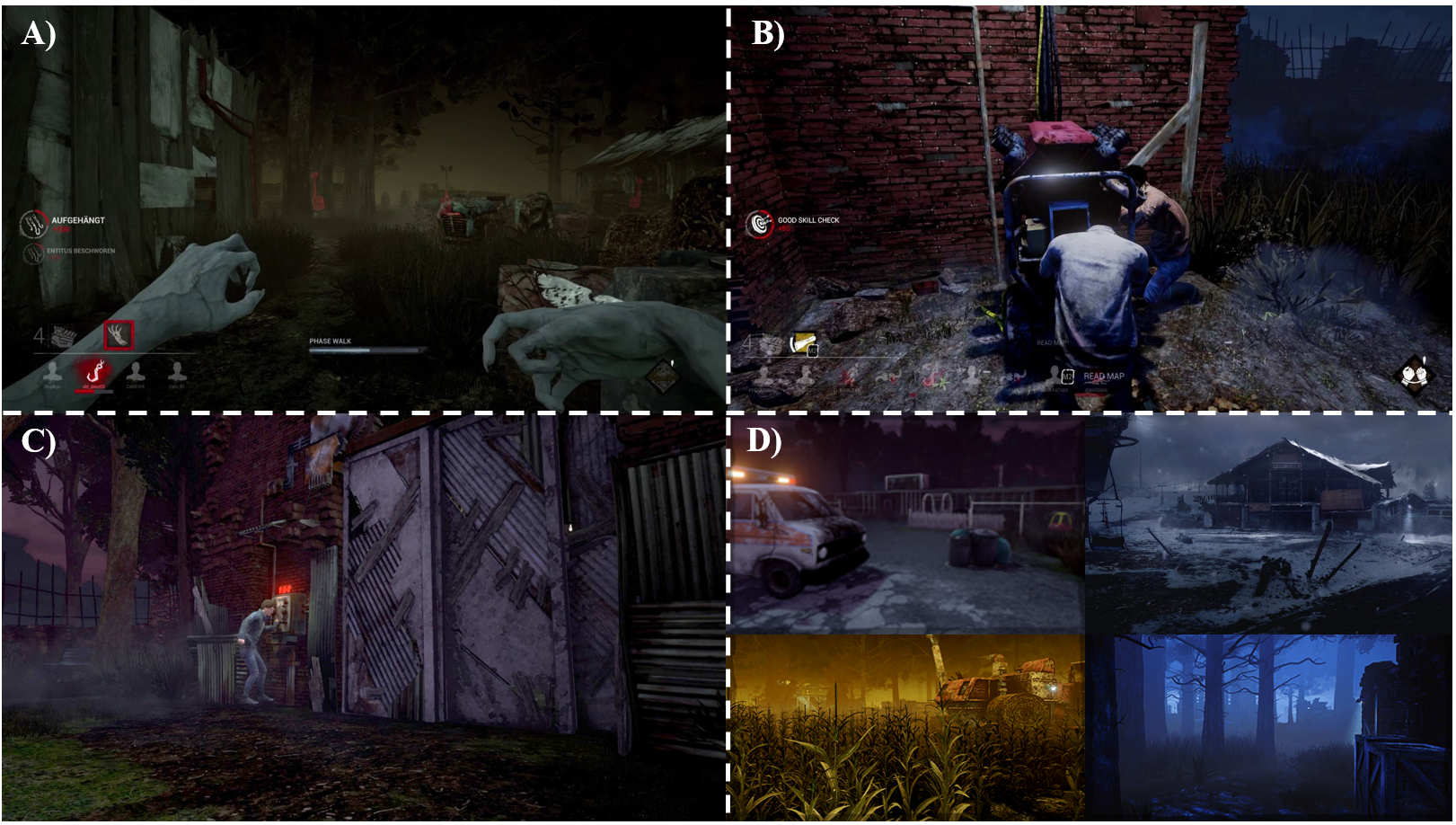
Habitat structure is a second important driver of individual differences in predator foraging mode, as it shapes opportunities for prey encounter and prey capture (Robinson & Holmes 1982; James & Heck Jr. 1994; Sargeant *et al.* 2007; Wasiolka *et al.* 2009; Donihue 2016). A growing body of evidence points to predators who hunt in open and homogeneous habitats adopting a cursorial strategy, contrary to those hunting in heterogeneous and closed habitats that typically ambush their prey (James & Heck Jr. 1994; Wasiolka *et al.* 2009; Donihue 2016). Hence, the habitat components of a predator’s hunting grounds can predict the tactic used. Heterogeneous habitats are expected to favor sit-and-wait/sit-and-pursue hunters as they offer perches and cover, which are useful for ambushes (James & Heck Jr. 1994; Laurel & Brown 2006). On the contrary, active hunters should benefit from higher encounter rates in open habitats as prey detection is easier, but at the expense of being themselves more easily detected (Michel & Adams 2009). This suggests that tradeoffs could mediate individual differences in hunting strategies as a function of habitat structure. In this sense, predators could benefit from adjusting their strategy in accordance with short-term prey and habitat changes.

A wide range of predator taxa display flexible hunting behaviour (Helfman 1990; Heithaus *et al.* 2018). Foraging mode-switching occurs when individual predators respond to prey or habitat changes within their lifetime to maintain optimal hunting success. Notably, foraging mode switching can be triggered as a function of prey density (Inoue & Marsura 1983), prey behavioural type (McGhee *et al.* 2013), prey condition (Wignall & Taylor 2008), seasonality (Miles *et al.* 2007; Phillips *et al.* 2017), or in response to changes in habitat structure (Wasiolka *et al.* 2009). Despite our improved knowledge of what triggers foraging mode-switching, most research is conducted under controlled laboratory conditions, which can fail to capture the nuances and complexities of predator species’ ecology in the wild (Carter *et al.* 2013; Niemelä & Dingemanse 2014). Understanding how and when predators balance specialisation vs switching in tactics, and how these changes affect hunting success would help scientists to predict more precisely the community consequences of predation.

Empirically investigating individual variation in hunting mode requires repeated measures of behaviour of numerous individuals under different environmental settings (sources?). Such an approach may impose considerable financial, technical, and ethical challenges when studying larger or elusive wildlife, such as apex predators (Hertel *et al.* 2020). An additional challenge in empirical studies of predator-prey interactions is identifying traits in predators and prey that are easily observable, but also ecologically relevant (sources?). For instance, foraging mode is expected to vary along a continuum of morphological, physiological, and behavioural traits (Perry *et al.* 1990; Perry 1999; Butler 2005; Cooper 2005; Miles *et al.* 2007), but few studies have investigated how habitat- and prey-specific caracteristics shape individual variation in correlated foraging traits.

Here, we propose a novel approach to combat the challenges of studying individual variation in predator behaviour that capitalizes on online multiplayer videogames (Balicer 2007; Lofgren & Fefferman 2007; Oultram 2013; Ahmad *et al.* 2014; Ross *et al.* 2015). Online multiplayer videogames could provide numerous opportunities for ecologists to study general ecological phenomena, including the mechanisms driving individual variation in behaviour (Barbe *et al.* 2020). First, online videogames provide innumerable repeated measurements from millions of individual players across temporal and environmental gradients, which would be impossible with traditional field studies. Second, environmental settings are known and can be manipulated by the observer, thus permitting experimental tests of how specific environmental components shape the behaviour of interest. Third, videogames can realistically reproduce ecological settings in which complex among-individual interactions occur. A classic example of this approach is the analysis of the “Corrupted Blood” epidemic in *World of Warcraft*, where precise epidemiological parameters, such as transmission rate, were used to predict the outbreaks (Balicer 2007; Lofgren & Fefferman 2007). In this sense, online multiplayer videogames potentially constitute a complement to traditional field studies. We suggest that they will permit ecologists (among other scientists) to bridge the gap between real-world ecological studies and large-scale computer simulations. Online videogames are of interest to social, economic, and epidemiological sciences (Ross *et al.* 2015), but to our knowledge, ours is the second study (see Cere et al., accepted) to use an online videogame to test ecological hypotheses.

We used the online multiplayer videogame *Dead by Daylight* (*DBD*) as our study system. This game pits a single player (predator) against a group of four players (prey), where the predator’s objective is to capture prey (Fig. 1). The predator’s main objective is to search for and consume prey, while the preys’ objective is to escape the predator. Prey can use a wide range of behaviours such as cooperation or hiding to successfully escape (Fig. 1 B and C). For example, they can cooperate to help conspecifics escape from capture (Cere et al., unpublished data), which predators may exploit to lure them in an ambush. These situations offer the possibility for predators to express different hunting tactics. Moreover, each match in *DBD* occurs within a specific game environment. The different game environments vary from forests, to farmlands, to urban areas. These environments differ in the heterogeneity and complexity of their structures (McCoy & Bell 1991), such as in the availability of perches and refugia, vegetation density, or surface area (Fig 1. D). Hence, predators may encounter prey that express different behaviours, and are expected to benefit from changing their behaviour accordingly to maximize hunting success.



**Figure 1. Images of the online videogame Dead by Daylight** **A)** The predator player’s first person vision. **B)** The prey (survivor) player’s third person vision. Prey can cooperate to repair generators. Once all generators are repaired, prey may activate one of the two **C)** doors in order to escape and win the match. **D)** Representative pictures of the different game environments where matches take place. The game environments settings vary between urban, farmland, and forest areas.

In this study, we used an extensive and complete dataset on the hunting behaviour of predator players in *Dead by Daylight* to investigate environmental and individual variation in hunting mode, and how it affects hunting success. We used four hunting-related behaviours as proxies of hunting mode: travel speed, the rate of space covered in the environment, the proportion of time spent in an ambush position, and the time before first capture. We applied the conceptual framework of behavioural syndrome analysis, which provides a means to quantify variation in multiple behaviours and their correlations at different hierarchical levels (Dingemanse & Dochtermann 2013). Thus, we quantified population and within-population structure/variability of predator foraging mode along a continuum of hunting traits (Perry *et al.* 1990; Perry 1999; Butler 2005; Cooper 2005; Miles *et al.* 2007). Environmental variation at the population-level includes among-habitat differences in average hunting behaviour. Within-population variation includes a) the variation in tactic use arising when some individuals use one tactic more often than the others (i.e. individual specialisation) and b) the variation arising from individuals adjusting tactic use over time in response to changes in environmental conditions or prey behaviour (i.e. individual flexibility). First, we hypothesized that predators would use hunting tactics according to habitat-specific characteristics. Therefore, we expected correlated trait values associated with ambush tactics in smaller and heterogeneous environments, and correlated trait values associated with cursorial tactics in open/wider and homogeneous environments. Second, we hypothesized that individual predators would consistently differ in their hunting mode over time, with some specialising as cursorial hunters, and others as ambush hunters. Thus, we predicted that individual predators would differ in their average trait values along a continuum for all combinations of the four hunting traits (among-individual behavioural correlations). Following the locomotor-crossover hypothesis, we predicted that ambush and cursorial predator-types may coexist in the population, because both achieve similar hunting success by performing better against prey with the opposite locomotor tendency. Lastly, we hypothesized that individual predators would express flexible hunting behaviour, by switching from cursorial to ambush tactics between foraging bouts. We predicted that the individuals’ residual trait values in contrasting hunting behaviours (ambush vs cursorial) would be negatively correlated (within-individual behavioural correlations).

# Materials and methods

## (a) Study system

The datasets we used to test our hypotheses were provided by Behaviour Interactive Inc., the creator and administrator of *DBD*. The company records the behaviour of players in every match played online. During our study period, *DBD* offered 15 playable predator avatars. Players who incarnate the predator choose their avatar before a match takes place. Each predator avatar has unique abilities that may encourage different playstyles. Some have abilities than make them stealthier, while others can run faster, or have more powerful attacks. We thus controlled for the chosen avatar in our models since it may impact the playstyle of the predator player. In addition, the game environment where players compete is usually randomly assigned from a list of 27 maps differing in their physical components. For example, some maps have large playable surface areas with low vegetation density, which may favor the use of a cursorial strategy. Other maps have a smaller surface area with high vegetation density, which may impair visibility and alter prey detection, favoring the use of an ambush strategy.

(refer to <https://deadbydaylight.com/en>, <https://deadbydaylight.gamepedia.com/Dead_by_Daylight_Wiki> for additional details).

## (b) Data collection

The study period ranged from 20 March 2019 to 17 June 2019. Our population consisted of 2 171 new anonymous players who initiated their first match between March 20 and March 22, with a total record of 70 831 matches (average: 177 matches, range: 1 - 972 matches). Matches lasted for an average of 11 minutes (range: 5 - 58 minutes). For each match, we recorded the date (date-hour-minutes), the duration, the predator player’s anonymous ID, the prey players’ anonymous ID’s, the predator’s avatar, and the game environment where the match took place. We also recorded predator and prey behaviour (see next section ‘Behavioural traits’). We retained matches that lasted more than 5 minutes (short matches are usually interrupted because of technical issues). Players also score points during a match by performing different actions. To control for matches where players did not play or for errors in the data collection, we removed matches where predators earned less than 1 point.

## (c) Behavioural traits

### (i) Predator hunting behaviour

We selected three of eight behavioural variables that summarize most of the variation in predator hunting tactics based on a principal component analysis (see Fig. S1 and Table S1 in Supporting information for details on this analysis): travel speed (meter/sec.), the rate of space covered (square/sec), and the proportion of time spent guarding prey during the match (see section ‘Behavioural traits measurements’ in Supporting information for details on the measurements). Individual predators using an active-pursuit tactic should exhibit greater average travel speed and rate of space covered whereas those using a sit-and-pursue tactic should instead spend a greater average proportion of time guarding their captured prey.

### (ii) Prey behaviour

We quantified predator responses to the travel speed (meter/sec.) of prey and rate of space covered (square/sec.) by prey. These two traits were measured using the same method described for predators (see description in Supporting information). For both traits, we averaged the four individual prey values within each match since we were interested in the average effect of prey behaviour on the predator’s hunting behaviour. Thus, we used one average value per prey trait, for each match played.

## (d) Statistical analyses

We performed all statistical analyses using the R software (version 4.0.2, R Core Team, 2020) on Compute Canada’s computer cluster running on CentOS Linux 7.

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# Author contributions:

MFF and POM conceived the study. MFF collected the data, conducted the analyses, and led the writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed to revisions and gave their final approval for the present manuscript.

# Competing interests:

The authors declare no competing interests

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# Data availability statement:

We could not openly share the data on open science/data web platforms due to privacy restrictions. However, upon reasonable request, we can provide the data used to conduct our analyses. In addition, the project’s R scripts and results are available on this GitHub repository: <https://github.com/quantitative-ecologist/videogame_hunting_tactics-Rscripts>.

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