

ABSTRACT

STOUT, BRYCE THOMAS. Smashing Some Bros: A Feminist Analysis of Governance in *Super Smash Bros.* (Under the direction of Dr. Nicholas Thiel Taylor).

The modern esports landscape is dominated by platform-driven titles like Activision-Blizzard's *Overwatch*, Riot's *League of Legends*, and Valve's *CounterStrike: Global Offensive* and *Dota 2*.

In contrast, the grassroots scenes that have risen up around *Super Smash Bros.* offer a unique glimpse of organized competitive gaming carried out without the level of active, “platformized” involvement and infrastructural support typical of other developers. This thesis includes three chapters exploring symbiotic angles of approach to the intersecting socio-technical conditions constituting governance of competitive *Super Smash Bros.* scenes. Past feminist ethnographic fieldwork at public gaming events helped to inform my recruitment process for 18 semi-structured interviews conducted at *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* tournaments near Raleigh, NC. Particularly salient aspects of this include attempted reflexivity and consciousness of how my subject position influences my work both in the field and the academy; ethnographically and citationally. This work is mediated by my close involvement in competitive *Smash*, although active effort is made to transform my own investment in *Smash* into an opportunity for reflexivity, rather than a constraint. Although the third chapter involves the use of conventional ethnographic fieldwork, the paper as a whole is to be understood as a *connective ethnography* examining the connections and layers of cultural, technological, and economic factors at play in competitive *Smash*, and where the *Super Smash Bros.* series sits in relation to esports more generally. Rather than immersing myself only in physical sites in order to observe a singular *Smash* community,, I also looked to the formative documents and the sustained communicative practices carried out by networks of people across multiple offline and online sites, united by passion and dispersed in space, collectively constitute *Smash* “scenes.” This involves critical

analysis of the Super Smash Bros. Community Code of Conduct (CoC) primarily through the lens of hegemony, with a focus on case examples of “top players” accused of misconduct. The argument is that the CoC serves as a check for average players against “top player privilege.”

The second chapter explores the socio-technical intersections influencing Nintendo’s relationship with the competitive *Smash* scene, and the related practices of resistance and coexistence. A major takeaway from this is that Nintendo’s decisions to not actively support competitive *Smash* make sense and are in line with their pro-family brand. Despite this, the grassroots sustenance of *Smash* scenes, fueled by passionate, voluntary labor and networked internationally via fan-made communication channels like SmashBoards.com makes *Project M* a compelling area of study.

The third chapter, which draws on conventional ethnographic observation and participant interviews, offers a comparatively “on the ground” perspective of governance in Smash to compliment the critical analysis of the CoC and top player privilege, in the meritocratically driven spaces of *Smash* tournaments. As a whole, this connective ethnography offers a methodological foundation for future work on the complex relationships between fans and the creators (and controllers) of media. In this same vein, it offers a framework for future work on fervent networks of fans and the manifestations of governance of these groups and related spaces.

© Copyright 2020 by Bryce Stout

All Rights Reserved

Smashing Some Bros: A Feminist Analysis of Governance in *Super Smash Bros.*

by
Bryce Thomas Stout

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

Communication

Raleigh, North Carolina

2020

APPROVED BY:

Dr. Nicholas Thiel Taylor
Committee Chair

Dr. Grant Bollmer

Dr. Stephen Wiley

DEDICATION

For everyone who knew that I could.

BIOGRAPHY

Bryce Stout earned his Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from The University of Iowa in 2017. His research interests include intersections of race, gender, and power in the embodied experiences of people who play video games. This led to the pursuit of his Master of Science in Communication from North Carolina State University. He will continue to expand his scholarly toolkit this Fall at North Carolina State in the interdisciplinary Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media PhD program.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincerest thanks to Dr. Andrew Binder for fighting for my presence in this program. My complete gratitude to Dr. Nicholas Taylor for giving me every opportunity fathomable, as well as for believing in me and cultivating my scholarly talents. Thank you to Dr. Grant Bollmer, Dr. Stephen Wiley, and Dr. Sarah Stein for their direct and fundamental involvement in my academic success. Thank you to my parents, Lynnette and Bryan Stout for their continued support. Finally, thanks to Masahiro Sakurai for creating *Super Smash Bros.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
Introduction	1
Preface.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Why <i>Super Smash Bros.</i> ?.....	5
<i>Smash</i> as a conversation.....	9
Relevant Literature.....	9
Research Questions	12
Methodology	13
Theoretical Frameworks	14
Structure and Approaches	15
Ch. 1: Analysis of the Impacts of the <i>Super Smash Bros.</i> Community Code of Conduct ...	19
Introduction.....	20
Hegemony in <i>Smash</i> : what do players consent to?.....	21
Leffen's Story of Growth.....	23
Top Player Privilege: Not always bad	24
Milktea and Smash Sisters	26
Sponsorship in <i>Smash</i>	28
The Document Itself	30
SmashBoards.....	32
Paratexts and Presentation	34

Anticipated Effects.....	36
Tangible Impact Thus Far	38
Conclusion	42
Ch. 2: Project Melee	44
Introduction.....	45
Overview.....	46
What is <i>Project M</i> ?	46
Platform Studies.....	48
Expressive Inputs	52
Wavedashing.....	57
L-Cancelling and Teching.....	61
<i>Project M</i> 's Necessity	66
Casual versus Competitive Smash	68
Conclusion	71
Ch. 3: Everyone is Here? An Ethnographic Exploration of <i>Super Smash Bros. Ultimate</i> ..	72
Introduction.....	73
Methods Overview	74
Methodological Limitations.....	75
Participant Information	76
Setting the Scene: Where is "Here?"	78
A Place [on campus] to Belong	83
Pretending to Play <i>Ultimate</i> : Passing and Fieldwork Reflections	85
Framing in Connective Ethnography	87

Demonstrating what “community” means via practices	88
Hegemonic Gamer Governance: Skill over all, as a given	91
Privilege One: Owning a setup	91
Privilege Two: Autonomous Mobility	95
Privilege Three: it’s <i>Super Smash BROS.</i>	96
Privilege Four: Carryover Clout	98
A live game vs a zombie: <i>Ultimate</i> compared to <i>Melee</i>	102
Chapter Conclusion.....	103
Conclusion	105
Patching <i>Smash</i> : How to Fix the Imperfections.....	106
References	110
Figures	134
Venue Drawings.....	135
Photographs.....	140
Appendix	147
Interview Schedule.....	148

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Profiles of interview participants	75
---------	--	----

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure A	East Coast Gaming (Cary, NC)	135
Figure B	North Carolina State University (Daniels Hall Room 222)	136
Figure C	Gamers Geekery and Tavern (Cary, NC)	137
Figure D	North Carolina State University (Daniels Hall Room 353)	138
Figure E	North Carolina State University (Talley Student Union: Coastal Ballroom).....	139
Figure F	Smash Sans Frontières - Gamers Geekery and Tavern (Cary, NC)	140
Figure G	North Carolina State University, (Daniels Hall Room 353) - Smash @ State (Raleigh, NC)	141
Figure H	North Carolina State University, Talley Student Union, Coastal Ballroom – Just Roll With It! 11 (Raleigh, NC)	142
Figure I	North Carolina State University, Daniels Hall Rm. 353 - Zenith 5 (Raleigh, NC)	143
Figure J	North Carolina State University, Daniels Hall Rm. 370 - Zenith 5 (Raleigh, NC)	144
Figure K	Me at a tournament in “teacher” attire	145
Figure L	Jay’s CD and Hobby - Star KO 13 (Des Moines, IA)	146

Introduction

Preface

This paper includes three separate but cohesive chapters exploring different, symbiotic angles of approach to intersecting socio-technical conditions constituting governance of competitive *Super Smash Bros.* scenes. Although the third chapter involves the use of conventional ethnographic fieldwork, the paper as a whole is to be understood as a connective ethnography examining the connections and layers of socio-technical factors at play in competitive *Smash* and where the *Super Smash Bros.* series sits in relation to esports more generally. Rather than simply immersing myself in physical sites in order to observe and explore community formation, I also looked to formative documents and the sustained practices of cohesive action by networks of people, united by passion and dispersed in space, collectively constitute Smash “scenes.” This involves critical analysis of the Super Smash Bros. Community Code of Conduct (CoC) primarily through the lens of hegemony, with a focus on case examples of “top players” accused of misconduct. The argument is that the CoC serves as a check for average players to “top player privilege.” The second chapter explores the socio-technical intersections influencing Nintendo’s relationship with the competitive *Smash* scene, and the related practices of resistance and coexistence. A major takeaway from this is that Nintendo’s decisions to not actively support competitive *Smash* make sense and are in line with their pro-family brand. Despite this, the grassroots sustenance of *Smash* scenes, fueled by passionate, voluntary labor and networked internationally via fan-made communication channels like SmashBoards.com makes *Project M* a compelling area of study. The third chapter, that which draws on conventional ethnographic observation and participant interviews a comparatively “on the ground” perspective of governance in Smash to compliment the critical analysis of the CoC and hegemonically ingrained top player privilege, in the meritocratically driven spaces of *Smash*

tournaments. As a whole, this connective ethnography offers a methodological foundation for future work on the multitude of contingent factors involved in relationships between fans and the creators (and controllers) of media. In this same vein, it offers a framework for future work on fervent networks of fans and the manifestations of governance of these groups and related spaces. This work is mediated by my close involvement in competitive *Smash*, although active effort is made to transform my own investment in *Smash* into an opportunity for reflexivity, rather than a constraint.

Introduction

The modern esports landscape is dominated by platform-driven titles like Activision-Blizzard's *Overwatch*, Riot's *League of Legends*, and Valve's *CounterStrike: Global Offensive* (CSGO) and *Dota 2*. In contrast, grassroots competitive *Super Smash Bros.* scenes offer a unique glimpse of organized competitive gaming carried out without the level of active, "platformized" involvement and infrastructure typical of other developers. Competitive *Smash* has grown symbiotically with live-streaming platform Twitch, but unlike major esports like *League* and *Overwatch*, *Smash* tournaments and broadcasts are completely handled voluntarily by third parties rather than Nintendo. In lieu of support for competitive *Smash* from Nintendo, players have taken on the work of sustaining networks for elite-level play; work which is, in the modern esports landscape, typically undertaken by developers (Gillespie, 2010; 2017; Newell, 2013; Burk, 2014; Nieborg, 2015; Srnicek, 2017; Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Joseph, 2017; Feldman, 2018; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018; Nieborg, & Poell, 2018; Foxman, 2019; Partin, 2020). This work includes articulating and enforcing a code of conduct to govern player behavior in online and offline playspaces; running tournaments that operate across local, regional, and international scales; and even engineering and maintaining modifications to

particular iterations of the game that the competitive community values above other official titles in the franchise. By incorporating insights from critical/cultural studies, platform studies, science and technology studies, and ethnographic fieldwork at local and regional *Smash* tournaments, this thesis offers a comprehensive account of the constitution and governance of this long-standing esports subculture – one which continues to be sustained through player-driven modes of textual and technical governance, rather than through the dominant logics of esports platformization (Medler, 2011; Newell, 2013; Nieborg, 2015; 2016; Boluk, & Lemieux, 2017; Gillespie 2017; Joseph, 2017; Nieborg, & Poell, 2018; Foxman, 2019; Partin, 2020). *Smash* is a 20 year franchise spanning five titles, and those who play the various games as well as those players' individual experiences based around the series are far from homogenous. This study is underlyingly informed and mediated by my own long term involvement in competitive *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, both as a player, tournament organizer, and spectator. Taken together, this is a multi-faceted analysis of social, technical, and cultural conditions and practices that make grassroots governance in *Smash* both possible and necessary.

Esports exist at the intersection between competitive gaming and spectatorship, being defined not only by the games, but by the presence of an audience to watch the games be played, whether present physically or tuned in to a broadcast. Academic research on esports has strayed from its original concerns with equity and power relations (Taylor, 2009; Witkowski, 2013), and there has been a problematic homogenization of esports communities (see, for instance, Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), as well as the platforms, games, and organizations that constitute distinct esports. Given the proclivity in recent esports scholarship towards research that homogenizes the broad and diverse range of experiences and titles, this work applies appropriate granularity in examining a particular scene and series of contexts.

I am an advocate for explicitly acknowledging the heterogeneity and non-uniformity of the esports landscape. This includes the different audiences, platforms, infrastructures, titles, and organizations involved in the expansive sociotechnical assemblage that is esports. This, coupled with work written about evolving perceptions of who plays video games, in contrast to stereotypical “gamers” (Alexander, 2014; Condis, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2013; Williams, 2014), reinforces the need to acknowledge the uniqueness of each game, each public supported by a particular game, series, or genre, and each individual’s own experiences with the game and its various scenes. This leads to my overarching concern in this thesis:

"How do player communities become constituted through contingent relationships between games, platforms, developers, and sociotechnical practices?"

Why Super Smash Bros.?

I have chosen to focus on the *Super Smash Bros.* (“*Smash*”) series for several reasons. I am an active member of the competitive *Super Smash Bros. Melee* community, which I love, and my experiences as a member of the community have impacted my life positively and helped me grow as a person in several ways, including leading me to the academic track I am now following. Second, the *Smash* series has a unique position in the world of esports, with its competitive scenes being grassroots efforts by fans, rather than a platformized experience facilitated totally by the game’s developers, which is typical of most other esports (Partin, 2020). I am also interested in how the technical aspects of *Smash* play affect its player cultures. Most fighting games are played face-to-face due to every frame of network lag potentially inhibiting the kind of precise and fast movements constituting elite play, and this extends to *Smash* (Harper, 2014). Although more often seen as a constraint in efforts to grow fighting game-based esports more generally, this focus on embodied presence has potentially contributed to the *Melee*

and fighting game communities' historic reputation as relatively diverse compared to other esports, at least in terms of race, due to established norms of embodied copresence with a wide array of people, which was born out of the public, physical spaces of video arcades where fighting games were first played (Kocurek, 2015; Tobin, 2016).

Finally, despite *Melee* being the best-selling game on the GameCube, the competitive scene never received support from the publisher, Nintendo. This meant a strong network of grassroots leaders had to organize tournaments themselves to create and maintain a competitive scene. The *Super Smash Bros.* franchise has historically been a black sheep in esports, as Nintendo has always refused to acknowledge or cater to the competitive scene, sometimes even attempting to actively undermine and oppose it. Contrastingly, publishers of other esports titles such as Blizzard with *Overwatch*, Riot with *League of Legends*, and Valve with *Dota 2* and *Counter Strike*, put huge amounts of structural and financial support into nurturing the competitive scene for their games (ESPN 2018; Bennett 2019; Nordmark & Heath 2019; Partin 2020).

The lack of support or acknowledgement from Nintendo is not for lack of trying on the part of players. There is a crowd funded, invitational *Melee* tournament series called Smash Summit. This event is highly prestigious and features prize pools that dwarf those of any other *Melee* tournament due to the funding system emulating *Dota 2*'s International, albeit at a much smaller scale, in which players crowdsource the winning purse. Smash Summit 9, the most recent iteration, featured a prize pool upwards of \$69,000 (Tate, 2020). After winning the event, Juan "Hungrybox" DeBiedma immediately walked downstairs to the commentary area and gave a speech directed mostly at Nintendo. He opened his appeal to them by saying:

I know this is a shot in the dark, but I'm going to do this anyway because I know a lot of people are watching. If anyone from Nintendo corporate is watching this right now, if anyone's seeing the amount of excitement these sets can get, and everything that goes with it, just give *Melee* a chance. Even if it's just *Ultimate*, support the *Ultimate* scene. Support *Smash* in general. You have people day in and day out streaming, making content, competing, and going to tournaments, and we do it all grassroots. We have this, like, Beyond the Summit they raised money and that's great but, Nintendo, I need to say, I love you guys, but you are the only one not putting in resources into the scene. Look at Capcom Cup, look at that celebration. Look at every other game, look at *Fortnite*. This is the step that you're missing, and if you did that the culture and the appreciation you would receive would be, bar none, unlike anything you've ever received. So, I hope you're listening, it's probably a shot in the dark but: *please*, support *Smash* tournaments. (Hungrybox, 2020)

At the time of writing, this call to action is too recent to feel the effects of, but Hungrybox's attempt to send a message to Nintendo is symbolic of Smashers' efforts for recognition by the company. Hungrybox has been ranked #1 in the world for three consecutive years and was also featured on the 2017 Forbes 30-under-30: Games list (Nestico, 2020b; 2020; Ewalt, D., & Perez, M, 2018). He has more recently appeared in both Honda and Campbell's soup commercials and had international sandwich chain Jersey Mike's offer buy-one-get-one-free subs in celebration of his Smash Summit 9 win (Honda, 2019; Hungrybox, 2019; 2020). He is effectively the most visible person in *Melee*, using his platform to beg Nintendo for a gesture of the kind of support extensively provided by game publishers to other esports communities. Nintendo's potential reasoning for their lack of investment in esports is explored in depth later in this paper, but the

lack of a platformized experience makes both actively-played *Smash* games, *Melee* and *Ultimate*, outliers in the modern esports world (Partin, 2020).

The many contingent factors surrounding the most recent game in the series, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, make its communities especially compelling candidates for study, so I will be examining the sociotechnical conditions pertaining to networked play of *Ultimate* in depth. With it being the newest title in the franchise, *Ultimate* has the potential to continue *Melee* and other more traditional fighting games' legacy of supporting (some forms of) player diversity. With an audience ranging from children who happen to have gotten the best-selling Nintendo game of 2018 for Christmas, to hardcore "gamers" who have been with the series since its inception on the Nintendo 64, I have, in my ethnographic fieldwork, encountered a striking heterogeneity in terms of experiences within the *Smash* community, which should be celebrated, documented, and learned from. I am a sociologist and an intersectional feminist and feel strongly about documenting and exploring different experiences, which compels me towards ethnographic and/or autoethnographic work. I have been trained to be attentive to the expansive multiplicity of contingent factors that weave together to constitute social realities, and I love noticing the layered connections between everything in the world, such as the intersections and symbiotic determinism of technologies, communities, and policies.

This case study of community formation, sustenance, and governance surrounding respective scenes for several *Super Smash Bros.* games, as well as the overarching *Smash* scene, provides a foundation for any future work dealing with grassroots collectives organized around intellectual property owned, and controllable in some ways by, a large corporation which is nonetheless out of touch with some of its most vibrant fanbases. This work may help with preemptively addressing future problems where ardent groups of players are or are not heeded or

paid attention to by publishers. Within the competitive *Super Smash Bros* scenes, self-governance, born out of necessity, coexists with policies of neglect by Nintendo, which ultimately makes the decisions about the future of the series.

***Smash* as a conversation**

Midwest *Melee* commentator Eric Baker is known for his catchphrase, “YO. *MELEE* is a CONVERSATION and right now, you gotta TALK TO HIM, BABY!” (Baker, 2017). What he is referring to is the notion that actions in fighting games are a conversation between the two players. The wide range of possible movements and attacks form an elaborate game of fluid rock, paper, scissors in which players try to predict each other’s choices while also mixing up their own attack and movement selections to try to trick the other player, keeping them confused and guessing. Both players understanding this balance and holding an embodied literacy which makes them able to pressure each other to act based solely on where they choose to position themselves in proximity to each other is part of the communicative dialogue that is a fighting game match. Competitive *Smash*, especially *Melee*, is known for its granular, precise, fluid move sets (Johnathan, 2018). Some techniques require extreme precision but, with practice, moving around in *Melee* is a ludic experience, akin to surfing or ice skating. For expert players, this constitutes a grammar for highly expressive “conversations.” These expressive interactions are what players and fans value most about competitive *Smash*.

Relevant Literature

As esports journalist Will Partin points out, a plethora of work exists on video games and esports. The breadth of disciplines interested in the topic has grown tremendously from the early 2010’s, when T.L. Taylor maintained a constantly-updated, live bibliography of all published esports related work, since the field used to be so niche that doing that was viable (Partin, 2019).

This work is inspired by and made possible only through the foundational work of these past scholars. Video games are not new to academia; they have been studied long before being deemed a “legitimate” area of inquiry, and the women and other scholars who built this foundation for me to stand on deserve to be celebrated. I point here to people like Kishonna Gray and her work on women’s contention with hegemonic male culture on Xbox Live due to their voices; to Jenny Sundén’s application of the concept of transgressive play to her ethnographic study of LGBT *World of Warcraft* guild; to Morgan Romine’s uniquely powerful recommendations for addressing women’s equity in esports given her status as both an accomplished esports scholar and player; to T.L. Taylor’s own ethnographic work on *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*; to Nick Taylor’s dissertation, the first published in North America on esports (Gray, 2013; Espen, 2007; Sundén, 2009; Romine 2019; T.L.Taylor, 2002; 2004; 2006; 2009; N. Taylor, 2009). Despite the diverse approaches being taken to studying esports-related topics, little work has been done on *Super Smash Bros.* specifically. I know of two articles directly related to *Smash*. One is about using Deep Reinforcement Learning, which is a name for a goal-oriented algorithm, to try to make an AI that can beat professionals in *Melee* (Firoiu, Whitney, Tenebaum, 2017), and the other is a textual analysis of threads on SmashBoards, a website devoted to *Smash Bros.* games that has been around since 1999, about perceptions of femininity in the *Smash* scene. This article is highly relevant to my work, because it asserts, in a peer-reviewed journal article, that *Smash* players are especially accepting (Adams, 2016). However, there is not yet work that takes an in-depth and comprehensive look at the *Smash* scene, as I aim for in this thesis.

When work is done on esports, the social, lived aspects involving human beings are studied less than the games themselves and the field’s economic impacts, with player-focused

work being rarer (Bowman, Weber, Tamborni, 2013). I am interested in the presence and agency of specific esports publics and how they factor into esports overall, which is a concept I touch on by questioning players about their regular play habits (online vs offline). There is a particularly unique array of different experiences within the *Ultimate* scene in this aspect, as some members come from an era where face-to-face play was the only option, while others are used to playing the game from the comfort and anonymity of their home (T.L. Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Lin & Sun, 2011; Kocurek, 2015; N. Taylor, 2016). Important sensitizing concepts for my work include hegemonic masculinity in gaming (Su, 2010; Gray 2013; Witkowski, 2013; Chess & Shaw, 2015, Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Paul 2018; Voorhees & Orlando, 2018) and its relationship to the embodied experience of being in a physical space with other people in order to compete or spectate. Specifically, Witkowski examines those normally pushed to the margins in esports scenes; those who do not fit the “archetype” of the esports athlete, namely: hyper competitive, heterosexual, and typically white. In this work I engage with traditionally marginalized people while being fully reflexive and attentive to the fact that, unlike Emma Witkowski, Shira Chess, or Adrienne Shaw, I embody the hegemonic masculine archetype in esports, so I attempt to fully embrace that and do the work of documenting others’ lived experiences from their own perspectives, mediated by a totally in-group member. Nick Taylor’s paper on how his identity has influenced his esports-related fieldwork initially drew my attention to the importance of being as reflexive as possible about my own subject-position, and the ways in which it mediates the responses of participants (Taylor, 2018). This reminds me to be attentive to visible factors of my social location including race, age, gender, and skill level. Further, it reminds me that fieldnotes describing ethnographic encounters are texts in themselves, and that knowledge is co-produced by the researcher and the participant, not extracted from the

participant by the researcher. Taylor also echoes the point that critical perspectives by male identified (in-group) members of digital game research are currently lacking, reinforcing the notion that my perspective has value precisely because it is so typical, within this population. More generally, T.L. Taylor's call for in-depth examination of player-produced cultures directly correlates to the rationale for this work, as the *Smash* scene is uniquely player-produced when compared to those of mainstream esports that have the luxury of direction and investment from the developers (Taylor, 2009). Past feminist ethnographic fieldwork at public gaming events helps to inform my recruitment process (Taylor, Jenson, de Castell, & Dilouya, 2014). These researchers experienced difficulties in recruiting participants due to the players being there to play, and, in a lot of cases, escape everyday life, and they had to factor that into their recruitment process. I saw these hardships firsthand in my own preliminary fieldwork, and my interview schedule was reshaped and modified accordingly out of respect for not wanting to intrude too much upon participants' time. Specifically, I removed questions that did not directly target my research questions or provide foundational background information about the person. This has proven successful at reducing interview times to what I see as a more appropriate, less intrusive length.

Research Questions

Player communities are constituted by intersecting, contingent elements of the games themselves, the platforms on which the games are played, the developers and publishers of the games, and established norms of "gamers," as well as other sociotechnical factors. Documenting and exploring the different experiences of individual players, specifically how they differ based on subject-position of the person, is valuable in this case study as well as generally. In this specific case, being attentive to the influence of Nintendo's distinct lack of support for the

competitive scenes born from their games is essential. Based on these considerations, my research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do player “communities” become constituted through contingent relationships between games, platforms, developers, and sociotechnical practices?

RQ2: How are individuals’ experiences within competitive *Super Smash Bros.* communities different from one another based on salient factors of identity (subject-position)?

RQ3: What is the role of platforms, explicit community-created policies, and Nintendo in constituting and sustaining the *Smash* community?

RQ4: What are some effects of Nintendo’s involvement (or lack thereof) on the competitive *Smash* Scene?

Methodology

This report is the result of a connective ethnography, which both describes the structure and inspiration of this work. Connective ethnography answers the call of integrating research across online and offline spaces by “tracing the flows of objects, texts, and bodies” and analyzing the construction of boundaries within and between virtual and physical spaces (Leander & McKim, 2003). It challenges traditional dichotomies of computer-mediated versus face-to-face, online versus offline, [and] virtual versus real (Leander, 2014). This involves granular examinations of specific aspects of competitive *Super Smash Bros.* in an attempt to situate these things in conversation with one another, as well as other salient sociotechnical factors. Drawing inspiration from Deborah Fields’ & Yasmin Kafai’s similar hybrid methodology, being connective means that, in addition to conventional ethnographic fieldwork, I was compelled to look at other sites where community is contested and formed: Reddit, Twitter, YouTube, Discord, Facebook, SmashBoards.com (Fields & Kafai, 2007; 2009; 2010). These

connective tissues intersect and interact to constitute *Smash* scenes, as well as shaping how “playing *Smash*” is understood and practiced. These networking tools provide the conditions and means of organizing for the local tournament scenes I did fieldwork with.

Theoretical Frameworks

For understandings of how the technical features of games shape the conditions of possibility around particular games and gaming communities, I am turning to platform studies. A major takeaway from Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort’s foundational conference paper, *Platform Studies: Frequently Asked Questions* is that that platform studies honors the contingent factors determining platforms’ histories, and is not rooted in technological determinism. They also assert the importance of both hardware and software (Bogost & Montfort, 2007). For example, work written about “strafe jumping” in *Quake* has useful parallels between strafe jumping and techniques in *Smash* such as “wavedashing,” which were included unintentionally but have become iconic to the series (Lederle-Ensign & Wardrip-Fruin, 2016). For studies of governance and gaming, including my central question of how player communities articulate and carry out their practices in relation to (and often in opposition of) game publishers, I draw on T.L. Taylor’s “Whose Game is This Anyway?” which focuses on MMOs but can be applied to esports as well in ways such as publishers policing what people do with their game/characters and trying to control the game’s image even outside of space controlled by the company (Taylor, 2002). A more recent account of how the Elder Scrolls modding scene and the publisher, Bethesda, have coexisted discusses “the way that authorship and ownership are narrated and performed by developers, modders and intellectual property holders, and to look at the values, assumptions and rhetorics that underpin practice and policy” (Gallagher, Jong, & Sinervo, 2017). I see each of these as related tools of inquiry within my broader connective ethnography; that is, I understand

connective ethnography as an approach that, in stitching together multiple sites of practice and communication, ought also to incorporate multiple theoretical tools.

Structure and Approaches

This is a case study of divergent sociotechnical conditions, connections, and practices which constitute governance in *Smash*. Below, I give a brief chapter overview, illustrating how I weave these various conceptual, methodological and theoretical approaches together into a multifaceted look governance via connective ethnographic examination. Topics include a critical analysis of the community created code of conduct, an analysis of a fan-made modified version of *Smash*, *Project M*, and a report based on field notes and interviews gathered at *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* tournaments.

1 - Code of Conduct

The first chapter is a critical analysis of the Super Smash Bros. Community Code of Conduct (CoC), a completely fan-driven effort to police player misconduct. This document, and the conditions surrounding its release, showcase the efforts of a group of players to counteract negative and toxic player behavior in the absence of guidance or support from the game's publisher, as well as serving as an example of the community's commitment to inclusivity. Historically, *Super Smash Bros.* tournaments have been organized by grassroots volunteers with no support or involvement from Nintendo. This has led to informal hierarchies of leadership based on haphazard configurations of merit and legacy. The "top players" -- those who are highly skilled at the game -- are looked to for guidance, which can become problematic if we consider that being good at a video game does not equate to having leadership skills fit to govern communities of people (Siitonen, 2009; Williams, Kirschner, & Suhaimi-Broder, 2014; Taylor et. al, 2018). That said, in addition to "top players," tournament organizers are also leaders

within the *Smash* community, although their authority may be grounded in their lengthy legacy in the scene, rather than their skill-level. Members of these communities, both new and old, are forced to contend with ingrained hierarchies of power in order to participate. The relatively new CoC serves as a channel for victims of abuse to have their voices heard. The document, and the committee of volunteers who maintain and enforce the report system, are a line of defense for average Smashers, and a check to “Top Player Privilege,” which manifests itself at varying levels of severity.

2 - Project M

This chapter uses platform studies, as articulated by Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost (2009), as a foundation for a critical analysis of the fan-made, fan-released, modified version of *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* called *Project M (PM)* which had a thriving community and a competitive scene akin to the “real” *Smash* games until they fell under threat of legal action in late 2015 (Bogost & Montfort, 2009). The social and economic conditions involved in governance of *PM* will be discussed, alongside and interwoven with a platform studies approach to the game and the Wii. This analysis highlights and explores the lackluster relationship between the competitive *Smash* scene and the publisher, Nintendo, which has persisted for most of competitive *Smash*’s lifespan. This allows me to segue into talking about *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, and the implications of Nintendo’s lack of active endorsement of the game’s competitive scene with this latest entry into the franchise, in a gaming landscape where esports are being pushed as full, platformized experiences by other developers, where they hold total control (Partin, 2020).

3 - Ethnography

The final core chapter is a multi-layered ethnographic account of the *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* scene via a combination of participant observation with extensive fieldnotes, and semi-structured interviews at 15 in-person tournaments in the North Carolina “Triangle” region between June and November 2019. Interviews feature co-produced accounts of the experiences of players, tournament organizers, and other attendees, such as moms. Past feminist ethnographers who have worked with video game scenes inform my approach to this study. In my fieldwork at tournaments, I present myself primarily as a player, no different than anyone else at the event, but I do not work to actively conceal my co-identity as a researcher as well. Prior to soliciting interviews from members of the *Ultimate* scene, I began entering local tournaments to establish myself in the scene, while keeping field notes on my experiences. My relationship and reputation in the scene evolved over time and this work includes an articulation of my reflexivity about this fluid identity, and how my subject-position in the *Ultimate* scene is influenced by many contingent sociotechnical factors. I combine extensive written and audio-recorded field notes about my observations, interviews, and an account of my own experiences from my perspective, and how those experiences affected me or who I am. The interview schedule was built from one I used to interview *Ultimate* players at the Playthrough Gaming Convention in Raleigh in March 2019. The interviews ranged from 10 to 20 minutes depending on individual responses to specific questions, so that they could be viably conducted between tournament rounds without players fearing it will negatively impact their tournament experience or performance. The questions, included in full in the appendices section, primarily seek to tease out the layers of intersecting life experiences and factors that influence people’s involvement in the competitive *Ultimate* scene. Some focused questions examine the stigma of general “gamer”

identity, while others are aimed more specifically at how comfortable people feel in the tournament space, as well as within the more abstract, imagined space of the (not necessarily physical) *Smash* community, and what constitutes the distinction between *Smash* scenes and “the *Smash* community.” I also draw on autoethnographic anecdotes from my experiences in the *Melee* scene. This is necessary in order to draw connections between the personal and the cultural, social, and political (Ellis 2004). The world of esports and video games is increasingly lucrative, and there is an over-homogenized characterization of the people involved. My social location as someone in the historically dominant culture both mediates and justifies my work. *Super Smash Bros.* scenes are a vital but underexplored sub-group of esports enthusiasts, and there is value in documenting these people’s experiences in an academic setting for the first time. This chapter provides a window into the lived experience of *Ultimate* players and how these intersecting sociotechnical factors relate to governance within the competitive *Smash* scene.

Chapter 1: Analysis of the Impact of the *Super Smash Bros.* Community Code of Conduct

Introduction

Historically, *Super Smash Bros.* tournaments have been organized by grassroots volunteers with no support or involvement from Nintendo. This has led to informal hierarchies of leadership based on merit and legacy. The “top players”—those who are highly skilled at the game—are looked to for guidance, which can become problematic if we consider that being good at a video game does not equate to having leadership skills fit to govern groups of players (Siitonen, 2009; Williams, Kirschner, & Suhaimi-Broder, 2014). That said, tournament organizers are also leaders within the *Smash* scene, although their authority may be grounded in their lengthy legacy in the scene, rather than their skill-level. Members of these communities, both new and old, are forced to contend with ingrained hierarchies of power in order to participate. This chapter is part of a connective ethnography of what constitutes “community” in competitive *Super Smash Bros.* networks and analyzes several relevant case examples to provide an in-depth, critical analysis of the sociotechnical reality that warranted and made possible a fan-enforced code of ethics, as well as the life and effects of the document as it circulates.

On September 11, 2018 the Super Smash Bros. Community Code of Conduct (CoC) was released, a document the likes of which had not been seen in the 20 year history of the competitive *Super Smash Bros.* scene, which had lacked a unifying document meant to govern player behavior. I will be discussing the cultural climate that led to this text’s creation, the implications of the text itself, as well as the impacts of the document and its enforcement seen in the year after its release.

The CoC was initially drafted by a panel of nine loosely unified *Smash* scene leaders identifying as the Harassment Task Force, and was based on lengthy conversations with prominent players, other leaders, and professionals such as lawyers. Understanding the

sociotechnical landscape this document was released into is important for making sense of its implications. The CoC and the accompanying Task Force function as a check against the hegemonic power of a narrowly meritocratic code of 'top player privilege' and, as such, represents a kind of feminist intervention by a grassroots community into the co-construction of belonging, skill, and masculinity. This chapter begins by establishing the foundational concept of 'top player privilege' and its relationship to hegemonic cultural forms and then moves into discussion of relevant, specific cases.

Hegemony in *Smash*: what do players consent to?

“Top player privilege” is a term used widely in competitive *Smash* for the special treatment given to players because of their skill level or prominent social status. The existence of this visible form of advantage leads to a culture of privilege and a social hierarchy amongst players. This meritocratically driven social order is reflective of the “toxic meritocracy” of gaming culture as a whole (Paul, 2018). Even single-player, narrative driven games are often remediations of the archetypal, proven-to-sell story of starting at rock bottom but achieving demigod level power via “hard work” over time (Paul, 2018; Hanford, 2018). The anime-esque storylines of esports turn real-life players into god-like characters. Manifestation of top player privilege includes relatively benign things such as top players being able to show up late to matches without being disqualified, but as long-time *Melee* statistician Daniel “Tafokints” Lee puts it, “Unfortunately, you get the other end where we justify poor behavior, even when against other community members, because they are a good player” (D’Anastasio 2017).

The relationship between top players and average players is an uneven one, which is unfair and problematic in its own right, but issues arising from other forms of intersecting differences in player identity can be even harder to navigate. There is an issue in the esports

world in general: meritocracy. The most fundamental problem with meritocratic social orders is the active attempt at erasure of structural inequalities faced by players before they ever decide to pick up a controller (Paul, 2018). Veteran *Melee* players, even at the local level, sometimes give off an, “If you can’t even frame-perfect ledge-dash into pivot up-tilt why are you here, bro?” attitude, which can be off-putting to new players. (Cullen, 2018). This is especially prominent when women-identifying players try to enter the scene. Men, of all skill levels, are quick to be critical of women-identifying players. There is a long history of males questioning the intentions of women in the world of esports and gaming in general (Taylor, Jenson, de Castell, 2009; Kocurek, 2015; Paul, 2018). This is a directly hegemonic relationship between the dominant group in esports culture, cis-men, and the highly marginalized people with other gender identities. Since, with gender expression, the differentiating factor for in-group status to the dominant culture is thought-to-be visible to everyone, it is impossible to escape the constraints of the hegemonic hierarchy (Williams, 1977, p. 37). The dominant, popular culture in *Smash*, and esports in general, is a masculinist and male-dominated one, which has social implications that affects conditions for participation, as whose bodies constitute the popular culture within *Smash* influences would-be-Smashers willingness to consent to this dominant culture by diving into the scene (Bennet, 2006, p. 92). Top player privilege means different things at various levels of play and in different regions.

A lack of consistently enforced rules has been increasingly problematic as the size of the *Smash* scene has grown rapidly over the past five years — as of 2018 growing to 10 times the size it was in the summer of 2013 (Kessel, 2018a). While providing environments where all players feel safe physically and emotionally is unquestionably a positive aim, there remains the underlying question of what authority any given member(s) of a network centered around a video

game have to police peers' actions. The ambiguity and lack of precedent is even more prominent if the questionable behavior happens outside the spatial confines of a tournament setting. With issues like this in mind, the CoC was drafted in a way that made a conscious effort to address the historical absence of universal guidelines for behavior among *Smash* players. The Harassment Task Force reviewed prominent cases of past misconduct within the *Smash* scene, including that of top *Melee* players Leffen, DaShizWiz, and Mafia, in an attempt to see when things had been handled effectively, when they had not been, and the impact of each case on the social landscape of the scene. Here, the Task Force could draw from one notable case in particular when putting together the CoC (that of Swedish *Super Smash Bros Melee* player William "Leffen" Hjelte), to point to the potentially recuperative outcomes of taking strong action against toxic player behavior.

Leffen's Story of Growth

Although Leffen was banned long before the CoC's existence, he is one of the biggest name players to ever be banned from competing in a *Smash* game and an important case to analyze. Leffen is currently the second ranked *Melee* player in the world, according to the 2019 MPGR (Nestico, 2020b). The arc of Leffen's career suggests that reprimanding players for toxic behavior is not futile: banned after consistent toxic behavior, he has reformed his actions and is now one of the most visible faces in *Melee* via his sponsorship by the multi-esports organization, Team Solo Mid. In August 2012, he was issued a semi-official warning by Swedish tournament organizers, spearheaded by the best player in Europe, Adam "Armada" Lindgren. Leffen ignored the warning because, at the time, there was no precedent for any sort of banning of a player, and no one confronted him or delivered the warning to him in person (TheScore, 2018). His toxic behavior continued throughout 2012 both in person at events and online. As a result of this

continued (even increased) toxicity after being formally warned, on February 9, 2013 a thread was posted on SmashBoards announcing Leffen's ban from European tournaments. The thread included a folder containing screenshots of forum posts, messages, and accounts of interpersonal behavior collected by another top Swedish player and positive figurehead in the international *Smash* scene, Armada, entitled "evidence.zip" that highlighted explicitly and concretely the negative behaviors Leffen was being banned for (Lindgren, 2013; Lee, 2015).

There is a historic narrative in the competitive *Melee* scene's lore which is worth mentioning here: the "Five gods of *Melee*" who all earned that title because they did not lose to anyone other than each other for several years between 2008 and 2013. Leffen was a top 20 player prior to his ban, but since his return has earned the title of the "Godslayer" because he was the first to start dethroning these previously untouchable players. This story illustrates the power of punishment as a reformative experience, rather than lifetime bans for first offenses, which is something the Harassment Task Force likely took into account when creating the punishment system.

Top Player Privilege: Not always bad

Leffen's ban is also an example of top players using their privilege in a productive, positive manner, as the leader of the campaign to ban Leffen was Adam "Armada" Lindgren, also an internationally recognized top 5 player, and possibly even the best in the world. Leffen's ban is also important because Leffen is from Sweden. Armada is also Swedish, and Leffen was banned from tournaments throughout all of Europe because tournament organizers, although only loosely networked through informal, grassroots organizing, agreed to honor the ban. *Melee* is the best selling title released for the Nintendo GameCube, and the scene for it spans the entire globe, but the biggest tournaments are hosted in the United States. While Leffen was banned

throughout his home continent of Europe, he was still allowed to enter some U.S. tournaments where the organizers decided not to comply with the ban. Some prominent U.S. tournaments like The Big House 3 did honor the ban, but others, like Evolution 2013, the biggest *Melee* tournament to date at the time, did not. In this instance, tournament organizers had to rely on their own personal judgment when weighing the benefits and drawbacks of allowing a high-ranking but banned player participate in their event. The lack of consistency in the enforcement of this (or any) ban is a glaring example of the problem with a lack of centralized organization of banned individuals. This case of a top player who could be banned from one group of tournaments for his toxicity but still welcome at others helped galvanize efforts to produce a Code of Conduct that could be applied to all *Smash* tournaments regardless of location or iteration of the franchise. While the CoC is still technically optional at a local or regional level, all major tournaments, the equivalent of what may be called “nationals” in other sports, are subject to the CoC, because the organizers of major tournaments have all opted in on agreeing to enforce the CoC panel’s decisions.

Armada has also attempted to exercise his top player privilege as a force for positive change in other ways. Unrelated to the Code of Conduct, a committee of top players formed in 2017 to discuss an updated *Melee* ruleset of in-game settings. These revisions included: creation of a formal rule amendment process, a standardization of rulesets for major tournaments, and an examination of (at the time) newly developed technology such as the SmashBoxx and modified versions of *Melee* (MIOM, 2018). Armada publicly declared that he was going to step down from the panel and give his spot to EmilyWaves. With Armada’s status as arguably the best player in the world at the time, another player on the committee ended up giving up his spot instead, but the gesture still resulted in the exposure it was intended to (sheridactyls, 2017). This

may also be due in part to Armada's history of being a good moral leader in the international *Melee* scene. The player who gave up his spot, Jeffery "Axe" Williamson has also been a top 10 worldwide player for the past decade (Axe has since emerged as an even more dominant player, making a case for #1, this Summer, even). Additionally, both Armada and Axe were sure to very vocally highlight EmilyWaves' merits as a successful tournament organizer and to stress how she belonged as a legitimate member of the committee (Axe, 2017). Basically, there was a conscious effort to make clear that, although they acknowledged the social significance of having a visible, women-identifying leader, that EmilyWaves is a qualified committee member and not at all a token woman. Armada's efforts show that there is a driving force for positive social change in competitive *Smash*, even though that change has to work against a meritocratic order that has the force of hegemony, and even though it is often only hegemonically privileged players themselves whose progressive actions are heeded or legitimized.

Milktea and Smash Sisters

Resisting, and ultimately changing, ingrained power structures requires sustained, focused efforts. Those answering this call include groups actively working to combat the negative aspects of the dominant *Smash*/esports culture, such as Smash Sisters, an organization that hosts side events at large *Smash* tournaments aimed specifically at women-identifying members of the community. Smash Sisters is an affiliate of the esports inclusivity organization founded by T.L. Taylor and Morgan Romine, AnyKey.org, and takes an actively feminist approach to changing the social climate in the *Smash* scene, primarily at tournaments, but within online spaces as well. Smash Sisters was co-founded by Lily "MilkTea" Chen, and Emily "Emilywaves" Sun. Emilywaves is one of the members of the Harassment Task Force responsible for creating the CoC. This means that there are direct links between the people

responsible for generating the CoC, those who are forming *Smash*-specific interventions into esports culture, and those who are working on systemic change across multiple esports communities and organizations. MilkTea's position as a leader in the *Smash* scene, still, after over a decade, is a testament to how women have always been present in the *Smash* community. She is featured in Travis Beauchamp's 2013 documentary *The Smash Brothers* which has been largely influential in popularizing *Melee*. Though her representation in the documentary has been critiqued for focusing too much on her romantic relationship with an old-school top player (Studios, 2015), her presence in the documentary, in a section specifically about the early years of *Melee*, shows that women were present in some capacity since the competitive scene's beginning. Chen also gave a Ted talk in 2015 entitled *How I responded to Sexism in Gaming with Empathy*, where she discusses her experiences in the *Melee* scene. She also talks about how the *Melee*'s player base is "incredibly diverse" in terms of race and national representation, and how *Smash* provided her a source of escapism from her everyday life as a teenager, but then shows an image of excited people at a tournament, who are all male, and asks, "What is missing from this picture?" She goes more in depth about how such a skewed imbalance in representation of gender affects the way that women are treated. At first she experienced a bunch of seemingly positive attention, but it quickly turned from random people she barely knew being in love with her to sexual harassment and attacks on the legitimacy of her interest. This story aligns with the common narratives of women in gaming during the late 2000s, and the constant need to try to legitimize their status as truly interested members of the community. A 2009 study entitled *Cheerleaders/booth babes/ Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys* highlights several narratives in the same vein, with the term "Halo Ho" being a derogatory term used by women within gaming to put down other women by accusing them of only being interested in

getting attention, or wanting to hook up with successful players (Taylor, 2009). Chen details the transition from her being a victim of harassment and having her identity constantly challenged to her becoming a perpetrator of the same toxic mentality about whether other women were “real gamers” and specifically being critical of women who displayed prominent femininity. These negative experiences led to her withdrawing from *Smash* for a while. Her return was sparked by another person’s post claiming the *Smash* scene was generally accepting of women, prompting her to start a blog about her experience, which got picked up by multiple news websites and ultimately led to her leading a panel at NYU in 2014 called *The Next Level* which was meant to highlight the sexism that women from various gaming scenes had experienced, but with a specific goal of being framed in a way that did not shame male players. This panel, and parts of this speech in general, highlight the problem of sexism from women towards other women within competitive gaming. A theme she touches on is how a lot of the perpetuation of the dominant, toxic culture occurs subconsciously, so she stresses the need to engage in dialogue; actual, back and forth conversation between two parties, rather than confronting problematic individuals with an accusatory tone, in a one-sided way. MilkTea’s existence as a prominent, outspoken, pro-woman figure in *Melee* is causally influential in the creation of the social climate the CoC was released into. Her first-hand experiences with sexism in *Smash* over the past two decades leave her uniquely well-positioned to be a member of the Harassment Task Force.

Sponsorship in *Smash*

It is important to contextualize sponsorship in competitive *Smash* and its relationship with top player privilege. There is a semi-annual ranking compiled by an international panel of top players and prominent tournament organizers called the MPGR, short for the “*Melee* Panda Global Ranking” (Nestico, 2020). In addition to the panel’s opinions, ranks are based on match

analytics data logged by esports organization Panda Global. With the release of *Ultimate*, there is a corresponding “PGRU” as well (Suarez, 2020). Being the most official rankings available, these ranks hold bearing on securing sponsorship. This system stands in contrast to those seen in larger esports like *League* and *Overwatch*. While the pipelines from amateur to professional play are not without their own problems, Riot and Activision-Blizzard offer official channels to be recognized for excelling at their games (Partin, 2019). The highest online ranking tiers, Challenger for *League* and simply “Top 500” for *Overwatch*, are recruitment-grounds for esports organizations, whereas the competitive *Smash* scene had to create ranking systems themselves. Further, sponsorship in *Smash* factors in both skill and persona. While top inter-game esports organizations such as Team Liquid, TSM, and Cloud 9 respectively sponsor the three highest-ranked *Melee* players, Hungrybox, Leffen, and Mang0, other players battle for sponsors with no consistent infrastructure in place. Players like Team Liquid’s Chillindude and Ken have been unranked since 2017 and 2016, yet they are still sponsored by a hugely-prominent esports team (Lee, 2016). This is due to Ken’s status as the “King of *Smash*” and Chillindude being featured heavily throughout Samox’s documentary *The Smash Brothers* (Samox, 2013). This YouTube documentary was causal in increasing the size of the competitive *Smash* scene tenfold, meaning it was many people’s first encounter with *Melee* in a competitive context, making Chillin one of the most recognizable faces of the game (Kessel, 2018a). The recognizability of these players takes precedence over evaluation based completely on skill. This is important when compared to Leffen and Mang0’s sponsorships; while the two are both ranked top 3 worldwide, their brands extend past their gameplay. Importantly, this manifests in Leffen’s “bad-boy” or “villain” image (Johnathan, 2019). Despite Leffen’s relative reformation after being banned, he is not exactly a positive role model, being infamous for his knee-jerk reactions and “tell it like it is” Twitter rants

(Hernandez, 2015; Womack 2015a; Slush 2018; Blanco, 2018). In a way, this means that perpetuating toxicity in esports culture is literally part of Leffen's job. Somewhat similarly, in addition to being a talented competitor, Mang0's brand is built around his personality. He exudes a no-holds-barred, pedal-to-the-metal, alcohol-fueled bravado of living and dying by flashy recklessness; Mang0 does not care, is cooler than you, but still manages to win, and with style (Smith, 2016; Gach, 2019). Although these players' contracts are not public, this behavior must be deemed acceptable by their sponsors as they have faced no repercussions from their teams, and the behavior is likely encouraged, as it boosts the visibility of the brand. Characterizing the landscape of sponsor-player relationships in *Smash* is important for understanding the CoC's impact.

The Document Itself

The Super Smash Bros Community Code of Conduct is the concrete manifestation of the Harassment Task Force's work. The document represents a type of organized, cohesive governance over a group of internationally dispersed, informally networked *Smash* scenes which had not existed prior to its drafting. It is a 12-page Google Doc file detailing the scope of the CoC and who it applies to, the various levels of offenses, how to report a violation and monitor the grievance status, the disciplinary procedure, and the standards of truth and evidence used. The CoC, understandably, applies to all attendees of tournaments, regardless of top-player status. More importantly, the rules for behavior imposed by the CoC explicitly supersede any regulations on behavior imposed by sponsorship organizations. While esports organizations should want their players to represent them positively anyway, this distinction addresses and acknowledges top player privilege in a concrete way. The first page also includes this important passage:

The Code of Conduct Investigations Panels are not bound by legal standards of proof and evidence, thus any decisions made by the Investigation Panel are not meant to replace, emulate, or be held equivalent to decisions of the law. If a person has been accused of a punishable offense within our system, that does not mean they have been accused of breaking the law. If the Investigations Panel find a person to have committed a punishable offense, the decision is not equivalent to a legal ruling (Code of Conduct, 2018).

The first sentence asserts an important point: The CoC is not a legal entity, which carries with it multiple implications. First, it means standards of evidence are not required to be on par with what is considered admissible in a courtroom. Past that, as detailed later in the document, urgent or severe cases that may be in violation of state or federal law will be referred to local law enforcement. Also, there is no statute of limitations on level four offenses, the most severe tier. What types of behavior constitute misconduct is detailed below.

Within the jurisdiction of the CoC, there are four levels of offenses. Although the types of unacceptable behaviors within each tier vary greatly and are hard to generalize, the first level of offense includes things like punching a TV after a loss, seriously offensive language, or openly supporting/encouraging others to commit acts which would be in violation of the CoC. This “accessory to the act” clause applies to all tiers of offenses, with it being a tier one, two, or three offense, respectively, based on the tier-level of negative behavior being supported. The second level of offense includes more serious acts such as making (un-carried-out) threats of violence, unwanted sexual advances, “soft doxing” (leaking personal information with the intent of target attacks, but that information being limited to publicly available things like a Twitch

channel or Twitter account name, or, unique to the CoC panel: leaking sensitive information about ongoing cases. The third level of offense includes things such as physical violence, sexual misconduct (such as groping), true doxing, and repeated, unwanted sexual advances. The highest tier of misconduct includes sexual assault, physical assault resulting in medical attention, stalking, and being an accomplice to any of those acts. The CoC also details specific factors that may cause a case to be seen as more egregious, such as if a minor is involved, if there is a notable power difference between victim and abuser (average attendee victimized by a tournament organizer, for example), or a history of misconduct. Additionally, this section includes clauses stating that these offenses need not occur within the spatial confines of a *Smash* tournament or venue. For level four offenses specifically, the offense only needs to be committed by a known *Smash* player to qualify as misconduct under the CoC; seriously problematic behavior like hospitalization-level violence does not need to have been committed against a *Smash* player specifically to warrant a ban. In addition to the contents of the CoC, its presentation, and the chosen platform for such, are important.

SmashBoards

The way that the CoC was presented is worth examining as it is fundamental to its impact and reception. While the full CoC itself could hypothetically be found and read on its own, it was originally posted in a forum thread on SmashBoards.com, and circulated via other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. SmashBoards, originally called Smash World Forums (SWF), is a long running hub for all *Smash* games dating back to the original *Super Smash Bros.* released in 1999 (Budding, 2019). Prior to the advent of social networking sites ranging from Reddit to Facebook where *Smash* scenes network nowadays, SmashBoards was the central location of *Smash* networking. Before Facebook events and the new dedicated tournament hosting site Smash.gg,

SmashBoards was where players discussed the game and shared upcoming tournaments. When streaming on Twitch became standard, commentators would encourage viewers to “find their local scene on SmashBoards.” The fan-made forums served as a space of connection and community formation, in the absence of any official space provided by Nintendo. This stands at odds with the historically symbiotic dialogue between other competitive, networked gaming scenes and those respective games’ publishers. The channels of communication used by a given esports publisher vary. Riot actively considers both player feedback on their official forums, the opinions of top-level competitive players, and match data analytics when releasing their bi-weekly balance patches for *League* (Shoujo, 2020). Other developers of games ranging from ArenaNet’s *Guild Wars 2* to Supercell’s *Clash of Clans*, *Clash Royale*, and *Brawl Stars* actively monitor and engage with the subreddits for their games and implement feedback-based changes, in addition to often running their own ‘official’ forums. In Supercell’s case, their relationship with players is so close that they have members of the development team appear as guests on popular YouTube channels related to their games, as a means of making official announcements, with links found directly within the apps (KairosTime, 2019; 2020). They also offer “content creator codes” for a select list of approved creators, which can be entered in the shop so that a portion of the money a player spends in the shop will go to the person of their choosing. Anyone with more than 5,000 followers on Twitch or 5,000 subscribers on YouTube can apply to Supercell’s Creator program (Supercell, 2020). Other developers, like *Runescape*’s Jagex, actively monitor both their games’ subreddits and official forums and consider feedback in updates. In the case of *Old School Runescape* specifically, the game is meant to replicate the nostalgic feel of playing *Runescape* around 2007. Accordingly, game content is balanced around preserving this feel and proposed updates are polled, open to all [premium] members, requiring

75% approval to pass and be implemented. These active channels of communication between players and developers provide case examples for how *Smash* could thrive with Nintendo's support, rather than having to rely on SmashBoards and other unofficial forms of networking.

These days, SmashBoards is past its prime as the main tool used to unite Smashers, but still serves as a central location for “official” announcements to be made. Having this junction is still a necessity despite the plethora of connective platforms available now versus 20+ years ago. This is because, while local and regional scenes organize themselves via Facebook groups and Discord servers nowadays, SmashBoards still offers the most cohesive international hub for *Smash*. With this status in mind, SmashBoards is where the CoC was officially posted.

Paratexts and Presentation

In addition to a link to the Google Doc file, the CoC thread contains many resources designed to make the text easier to interpret for the average reader. These “paratexts” found within the thread are especially unique because they were presented alongside the CoC at its original time of publication. This means there was never a time period when the text publicly existed without these additional resources displayed alongside it. This constrains the potential interpretations of the document in interesting ways. Notably, the inclusion of such resources acknowledges the potentially jargon-filled and inaccessible nature of an “official” document and highlights the Harassment Task Force's aim to make the CoC easily accessible and understandable to all players. This goal starkly contrasts other governance documents in gaming, such as end user license agreements or terms of service, which rely on deliberately obtuse language they expect—and want—no one to read (Chee, Taylor, & de Castell, 2012). The Task Forces' decision to actively promote accessibility of the CoC's content to all types of readers was a conscious, premeditated one. RoboticPhish, a *Melee* tournament organizer one of the

members of the Harassment Task Force, made a SmashBoards post on the group's behalf prior to the CoC's official release, providing updated information on the status of the Task Force, then called simply the "Harassment Committee" (RoboticPhish, 2018). As part of this post, he stated the panel was working on "creating a short-form of the code of conduct for easy digestion," which demonstrates these leaders' commitment to the CoC being successful and causing real impact. The paratexts include a two-page summary of the document that covers the key points (SSB, 2018), as well as a visual representation of the key points that is encouraged to be displayed at tournaments (Graphic, 2018). The desire for accessibility is seen explicitly in the fact the official CoC is a Google Doc (Code, 2018). Specifically, when I was viewing the text for this initial analysis, I could see that there were other people also reading the document at the same time as me. This shows that people were still actively engaging with this text, even a few months after its initial posting.

Documents like the CoC, those made available via unmodifiable formats such as PDF or read-only Google Doc, are a one way conversation of unidirectional power (Gitelman, 2014). These documents gain and maintain agency as they move through sociotechnical milieus (Brown, J., S., & Duguid, P., 1996). The text within the CoC certainly has meaning, and the existence of paratextual resources indicates that the Task Force wants those meanings to be understood in clear terms, but the very existence of the document holds power in itself. By virtue of existing and circulating, the CoC can be pointed to as justification for taking action against abuse; like other situations in which documents embody and enact institutional / organizational relations of power, a *Smash* tournament attendee need not be expected to have read the document, but is still responsible for knowing and abiding by its contents.

Anticipated Effects

The desired impact of the CoC is to ensure that *Smash* tournaments are able to be attended without the need to worry about safety, based on subject-position or otherwise. This means not needing to worry about being harassed or attacked due to factors of any number of intersecting factors related to gender or identity expression. In the months since the formation of the Harassment Task Force, the effects of the impending document had already begun to be realized. Two prominent, top-100-ranked *Melee* players had allegations levied at them. The players are Ian “Eikermann” Mooney and Vikram “Nightmare” Bassi. Both accusations have resulted in disciplinary action and the issuing of bans, but the situations played out quite differently. Eikermann’s case actually surfaced a week before the Code of Conduct went into effect, on September 4, 2018. A post was made on Reddit announcing his ban from Colorado *Melee* tournaments (DaftMaetel15, 2018). Similar to when Leffen was banned, a large file of screenshots was released in tandem with Eikermann’s state ban from Colorado events (Eikermann.doc, 2018). As stated, these allegations reached prominence prior to the abuse report system and CoC went live, so this scenario does not necessarily serve as an example of the standard procedures of a CoC case, but it has since become standard that the panel details specifically what types of proof has been provided of the player’s misconduct, within the posts with their official recommendations for banning players (SSBConduct 2019; SSBConduct 2020). Given the evidence against him, Eikermann issued a public apology and withdrew from the scene (Lee, 2018). While the actions he was accused of included sexual harassment, sexual assault, physical assault, and threats of violence, across multiple cases, Eikermann’s exit from the competitive scene was relatively graceful compared to that of Nightmare.

When Nightmare was accused of sexual misconduct, particularly, child-grooming a 15-year-old girl who he had a questionably close relationship with, he actively resisted the accusations and continued to enter smaller, local tournaments in the Toronto, Ontario area under the tag “N” instead of Nightmare (Lee, July 2018). The name change suggests that he was aware of the discipline he faced. In addition to this, the organizers refused to allow him to play any of his matches on a livestream despite him being a prominent and highly skilled player, presumably because they did not want their event to be associated with him. He was only allowed to enter the event because he hired a lawyer and threatened legal action against the tournament organizers, which did cause them to back down due to the costs involved in fighting a legal battle even as the winning side. The Harassment Task Force explicitly sought to end this type of strong arming by giving tournament organizers of events both large and small an overarching organization to draw on for protection (Kessel, 2018a). Nightmare’s handling of his situation illustrates the way in which top players are used to being immune to punishment. Similar to Leffen, Nightmare trusted his ability to hide behind the lack of precedent for cases like his, in addition to structural privileges that allow him the position to afford a lawyer, and the claim that there are no written rules or central authority who has a say in who is allowed to attend tournaments. However, the situation is also a testament to the power of the Harassment Task Force. The Task Force released a statement levying allegations against an anonymous player. About a month later, Nightmare came out and stated that he was the person from the accusation (Walker, 2018). He was dismissive about the claims made against him, but his response to the accusations is an example of the power the Task Force does hold. Ultimately, the actions of the Task Force as well as its existence led to the removal of these highly visible, toxic individuals from the *Melee* scene. The Task Force’s impact began to be felt prior to the reporting system going live, and has continued

to be illustrated as the panel has taken on high-profile cases and began to rid the *Smash* community of known problematic individuals via bans from tournaments.

The feature of the CoC that allows victims to file grievances was not fully functional upon release of the document itself. The official reporting system went live via a Google Form on November 30th, 2018. However, in early November, between the introduction of the CoC document and the rollout of the report system, Las Vegas-based *Super Smash Bros for Wii U* (*Smash 4*) player Justin “JK” Johnson was re-banned for posting threats of violence at tournaments, some directed at specific others, which is, of course, not in line with the CoC. This re-ban comes after he had initially been banned for allegedly attempting to run other players over with his car in the parking lot (Lee, 2018). JK’s story is an example of the Harassment Task Force’s commitment to police conduct by competitive *Smash* players even outside the spatial confines of tournaments, if the safety of others is at risk. This case provides further evidence of the CoC working and producing tangible change even before the reporting system was available.

Tangible Impact Thus Far

In the time since this research began in Fall 2018, the CoC’s effects have continued to play out. There have been multiple cases of allegations levied at prominent players since the reporting system has gone live. These cases, and the resulting bans, are illustrative of the CoC’s tangible, enforceable power. The members of the Harassment Task Force have evolved over the course of handling their first few cases, including requiring the members to be involved in a sexual violence training (SSBConduct, 2019d). Additionally, the panel decided to increase the default sentence for sexually related violence to a lifetime ban (SSBConduct, 2020).

Prominent cases the Task Force dealt with in its first year of operation include those of Mafia, Ally/Captain Zack, and Mew2Queen. These are each completely unique scenarios unified

only by their status as violations of the CoC, and all warrant in-depth examination for their value as case studies of governance in *Smash*. Proceeding in chronological order, Mafia's case is unique in that he was technically banned prior to the CoC's existence, but his case has still been directly affected by the document and Task Force. The instance highlighted here is the reaction to the Task Force's decision to unban him in January 2019. It sparked a strong outcry including several dissenting responses on Twitter, as well as 23 separate tournament organizers from around the world formally appealing the decision (SSBConduct, 2019a). This prompted the Task Force to reflexively reevaluate their decision-making process and reconsider the appropriate consequences for misconduct, as well as to seek growth and improvement as an organization via mandatory training (SSBconduct, 2019b). The public's reaction to the unbanning of an abuser shows their desire for the Task Force to be an organization with teeth; people on Facebook and Twitter — both random Smashers and prominent figureheads — were outraged at the panel for essentially advocating for an abuser's return as their first public-facing move since establishment as an organization. This outcry shaped the ways in which the Harassment Task Force conducts itself, including leading to the aforementioned trainings on sexual violence.

The next case, involving Ally and Captain Zack, is complex, as there are multiple infractions of different natures: both sexual misconduct as well as in-game cheating. At the time of the case, Ally was 27 or 28 years old, while Captain Zack was only 16, but that's only part of the situation. Zack posted a statement on Twitter where he mentioned feeling uncomfortable throughout almost the entire relationship but that he was told not to tell anyone because it would negatively affect both of their careers (CaptainZack, 2019). Both players were highly accomplished competitively. Ally was ranked 5th on the PGR100, a longitudinal, cumulative ranking of players across the entire competitive life of *Smash 4*, while Captain Zack was ranked

15th (PGStats, 2018). Ally was also a top *Brawl* player and has been competing at a top level since 2009. Situating their competitive accolades is relevant because, within the same Twitter statement, Zack also disclosed that he had [successfully] encouraged Ally to throw important matches at multiple large tournaments. This means Zack was both a victim of sexual misconduct but had also seriously undermined the competitive integrity of tournament placings, meaning he, too, violated the code of conduct in his own way. Ally was issued a lifetime ban almost instantly and there was discussion of omitting him from the PGR rankings (Walker, 2019). Ally did publicly apologize in a now deleted tweet and willingly withdrew from the competitive *Ultimate* scene without argument, framing it as his “retirement” (Webb, 2019). Zack’s sponsor, Polar Ace, cut ties with him immediately, the same day he posted his statement on Twitter (Polar Ace, 2019). In order to discuss how Captain Zack’s offenses would be addressed, a panel of eight people, including four members of the Harassment Task Force and four national-level *Ultimate* tournament organizers, was formed. The group deliberated from August 2019 to January 2020 and could not reach a unanimous decision on punishment, so they opted for an indefinite ban with the option to appeal in five years. This sentence (recommendation, as the panel is not a legal entity) was explained in detail, highlighting the notable difference between an indefinite ban vs a lifetime ban, namely that Captain Zack can appeal the ban eventually, “after demonstrating sufficient growth” (SSBConduct, 2019c). They clarify that the deciding factor between him being banned forever, rather than only indefinitely, was the emotionally compromised state he was put in by the relationship with Ally. The panel recognized that his actions were not a calculated move to damage the integrity of competitive *Smash* but asserts that harm was still done and recommends a punishment be served. Simultaneously with the ban of Captain Zack

being announced, there was a recommendation for banning a totally unrelated player, mew2Queen, as well.

Mew2Queen has a longstanding reputation as one of the most skilled female *Melee* players and has even been hailed as a “beloved feminist icon” of *Smash* (D'Anastasio, 2018). However, in early 2019, multiple women came forward with allegations of abuse aimed at her. These alleged patterns of abuse and accusations led to mew2Queen posting her account of the situation, which included admitting that the accusers’ claims were true, and concluded with a declaration that she would willingly refrain from attending events while she made others uncomfortable, but detailed steps she had taken to become a better person (mew2queen, 2019). The timeline of this case differs from the others: the incidents occurred in 2017, while the accusations were levied in 2019. Noting this is important in understanding how she could possibly be claiming to have been reformed after the abusive actions. Four members of the code of conduct panel deliberated for almost a year before deciding to recommend an indefinite ban, with the option to appeal after 2.5 years. Additionally, they chose to honor the self-imposed ban she had been serving since February 2019 as part of her reparations, meaning she is eligible for appeal in June 2021. While the ban on general tournament attendance can be appealed at that time, the panel also stressed that mew2queen should never be allowed to enter events her victims are attending. This effectively means she is banned from majors for life, as her victims are relatively high-profile players themselves who are likely to attend big tournaments. This sentence sparked backlash in the Twitter replies for indirectly suggesting that match fixing in a video game is a problem on par with sexual violence. The outcry against this decision was strong enough that the panel reversed its decision and an amendment was made to the official CoC document to make the standard a lifetime ban in all cases of sexual violence (SSBConduct,

2020). This illustrates the fluidity of the CoC and the panel's willingness to incorporate public opinion in an attempt to act in a way reflective of the community's desires as a whole.

Conclusion

Essentially, the CoC is a concrete, visible representation of the shift of the “determining limits” of the *Smash* scene (Williams, 1980). People in positions of power within the scene have taken it upon themselves to use their privileged positions to seek a better social climate for all, even people not yet a part of the scene. The official document and the group in charge of enforcing it are still strikingly new compared to the *Smash* scene as a whole, and each high-profile case has resulted in noticeable growth for the Harassment Task Force and a refinement of the process. This has meant both concrete changes to the CoC itself, increased training for those involved in its enforcement, as well as a transparent acknowledgment of growing pains. The entire competitive *Smash* scene is a grassroots effort with little capital involved, and the Harassment Task Force is a small sub-group within a niche subculture that relies completely on voluntary labor and has no funding of any kind. This means there are too many grievances being filed for a group of already-busy volunteers to deal with, prompting multiple apologies from the panel about the seemingly-slow turnaround on abuse reports and the lack of resources causing the problem (SSBConduct 2019e; 2019f).

The constraints the Task Force faces around enforcing the CoC in a practical manner raise concerns of its true impact and effects. As the member responsible for running the CoC's twitter said herself in November 2019, “A case processed every 6 weeks is not enough, functionally, to protect our community. It's not anyone's fault. But it's not enough” (Nolla, 2019). She continues, later in the thread, to mention that the Task Force had processed a total of 8 cases/appeals up to that point, while 22 unique cases were waiting to be processed, some for

over 6 months. She acknowledges that means that known abusers may potentially still be freely attending events even after reports have been submitted and expresses her extreme frustration with the situation and shares how emotionally straining doing this free work is on her. Further, she notes explicitly that the emotional demands of this voluntary job are highly taxing, so burnout among staff has been common, yet the group has no financial or structural resources to draw on whatsoever. It cannot be stressed enough that this multitude of work is undertaken in addition to the panel's day jobs and other responsibilities. Kyle Nolla, the woman who runs the organization's social media accounts and effectively the most visible representative of the group, for example, is a PhD candidate who has to contend with her own research and obligations and still somehow find time to run an unregistered non-profit. Past that, the Harassment Task Force is a social justice organization within a gaming scene, so doing this work involves a ton of emotional labor in navigating "opinions" from Gamers, on top of the overloaded amount of free, affective labor involved in maintaining the CoC's general functionality and enforcement (Kerr & Keller, 2015; Kennedy, 2018).

Crippling problems arising from a lack of structural support from Nintendo damage the code of conduct's effectiveness. Unlike other esports, there is no formal infrastructure for *Smash* tournaments, thus no official reporting system. The CoC and Harassment Task Force are completely grassroots efforts that rely entirely on volunteers working for free in order to function. In the next chapter, I extend this analysis of community formation and governance to consider the relationship between another brand of devoted *Smash* fans, those who modify aspects of the game software. This examination considers intersecting sociotechnical aspects of hardware, software, fandom, and control, centered on the fan-made *Smash* game, *Project M*.

Chapter 2: Project *Melee*

Introduction

The examination of the Code of Conduct explored governance in *Smash* through the tension between top player privilege and a more inclusive governance. This chapter is about the tension between the desires and practices of a committed competitive scene vs the corporate dictates of the family-friendly company that produces the series. SmashBoards and modern social networking platforms provide channels for players and grassroots scenes to communicate amongst themselves, but corporate governance of *Smash* has largely been a matter of Nintendo refusing a conversation with the game's more ardent players. This directly, yet ironically, contrasts the notion that playing *Smash* is a conversation; this specific way of playing that involves expressive, communicative interaction between players is the style that has had its supports left effectively silent. *Project M (PM)* is an attempt by a neglected fanbase to play in a way other than what was intended (Sicart, 2017; Marcotte, 2017, 2018; Ruberg, 2019).

A thick web of contingent conditions coincided to result in *PM*. This “game” is a modified version of the best-selling game on the Nintendo Wii, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*. Both the necessity and the possibility for the creation of *PM* hang on intersecting factors of platform, international media ownership and brand identity, and fandoms (Keogh, 2015). This continues the multi-angled analysis of mechanisms through which the *Smash* community manages itself in the absence of the developer support and communication typical of successful esports like *League of Legends* or *Overwatch*. This chapter primarily makes use of Nick Monfort and Ian Bogost’s understanding of platform studies, rather than the understanding of platform used outside of gaming-focused work to describe the logics of companies like Facebook, Steam, and Uber who provide infrastructures for connection (Srnicek, 2016; Joseph, 2017).

It is especially important in this chapter that I reassert and make apparent my positionality as a disgruntled fan. My goal in this chapter is partially to work through and theorize this resentment. This is a history of contention based in differing techniques of the body and the divergent logics of how *Smash* ‘should’ be played (Mauss, 1973). I write from the perspective of someone enamored by the ludic possibilities afforded by particular socially and technologically contingent design decisions. With this tone noted, I present a multi-faceted historicization of *Project M*, grounded in technical aspects of the *Smash* series as well as a situating within grander, evolving social contexts.

Overview

This chapter begins by establishing what *PM* is, in a literal sense, along with some contextualization of where it fits into the broader sociotechnical context of video game culture. Next is an overview of ‘platform studies,’ what I mean when using that term, and why this work belongs in that family. Then begins a granular examination of specific inputs, *Smash*’s salient changes over the course of the series, and why they are representative of relationships of control. Following that and interspersed throughout is analysis of Nintendo’s brand identity, as well as exploration of different publics of the series, those who adhere to notably different logics and body techniques when making sense of what “*Smash*” is (Warner, 2016; Mauss, 1973).

What is *Project M*?

PM is what is known within modding as a “soft mod” meaning that it runs on software alone and does not require hardware modifications. In order to play *PM*, the player downloads the files on their computer and transfers them to an SD card. When the mod was first released, a 2gb or smaller SD card was required, specifically, but later, more refined builds of *PM* now support any standard sized SD card. To load the game, the player inserts their copy of *Super*

Smash Bros. Brawl (known lovingly by some as simply “The *PM* startup disk”) and navigates to the stage builder feature. As a requirement, the player must have no custom stages saved to the SD card. If these conditions are met, the files on the SD card effectively exploit an insecurity in the stage builder to allow *PM* to boot. This process does not modify or damage the Wii or disk at all, nor does it affect the player’s actual *Brawl* save-data, aside from restricting their ability to create custom stages. More technical details of the mod’s effects on gameplay, as well as the reasoning for *PM*’s design decisions follow.

Next, we move to the description given by *PM*’s developers, the *Project M* Back Room (PMBR), of what the mod entails. This is provided in the trailer for the final fully-released patch, “What is *Project M*? *Project M* is the premier *Brawl* modification inspired by *Super Smash Bros. Melee*’s gameplay designed to add rich, technical gameplay to a balanced cast of characters while additionally enhancing the speed of play” (Project M, 2015). The “M” in the title stands for *Melee*, a nod to the *Super Smash Bros.* game released prior to *Brawl*, *Melee*. As a killer app for Nintendo’s GameCube, *Melee* was released in late 2001, prior to the advent of online gaming brought on by Xbox Live. This means *Melee*, unlike most other esports titles since, never received any updates or balance patches, aside from very minor bug fixes in later restocks of the game. Remaining reductive and general for this introduction, committed *Melee* players like myself love the way moving around feels in *Melee*. This is due in part to the immense number of movement options that exist relative to traditional fighting games, some due to contentious “exploits.”

The divide between the ways casual vs competitive players have interpreted what *Melee* is and what kind of gaming experience (and player) it best supports has led to the formation of separate publics for the *Smash* franchise (Warner, 2002). Committed *Melee* players appreciate

the fluidity, interoperability, and precision of the game's extensive move sets, while Nintendo—and the 'casual' players it both imagines and champions—emphasizes its kinetic, cartoonish, chaotic, 'party game' appeal. The changes between *Melee* and the subsequent entry *Brawl*, which were seen by the competitive scene as critical flaws, are differences casual players likely would not notice at all. The passion of the competitive *Melee* fan base for the features and feel of their game, when brought into tension with Nintendo's inattention towards them, drove an independent team of skilled programmers to create the game committed *Melee* players wanted as a follow-up on the Nintendo Wii console. *PM* was a modified version of *Brawl* typically loaded through the Wii's SD card slot, that still requires a copy of *Brawl* to be played. It exists at the intersection of the DIY, grassroots culture of competitive Super Smash Bros. scenes, the physical and technical abilities of the Nintendo Wii, and sociocultural conditions, norms, and practices between 2011 and 2015, which include an increased attention to (and in some cases, game publishers' reliance on) active communities of game modders. At its core, the efforts contributing to the development and maintenance of *PM* is a testament to the collective power of cooperative subcultures resisting governance from a worldwide game publisher that has historically viewed their mode of engaging with the game as an aberrant to their corporate image. This was an international collaboration of free laborers across more than 10 countries, many of whom were only teenagers at the time. (Osborn, 2015; Meehan, 2015).

Platform Studies

PM can be explained via the framework of platform studies given that the game's existence is the product of contingent relationships between software, hardware, and culture. Platform studies is not just about hardware; software is important too, but it is not technologically determinist, it considers cultural factors as well (Bogost & Montfort, 2009).

Platform in this context refers collectively to the Wii, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, and the coupling of the two, rather than to the platforms meant to connect users to content, such as Facebook, Uber, or Steam (Joseph, 2017). To reiterate and clarify, the analysis of *PM* which I offer here focuses on technical aspects of hardware and software as they relate to players' experiences and practices, more closely following Bogost and Montfort's notion of platform, as (in my reductive summation) anything programmable, not about the (albeit potentially more popular) theorization of platforms as, "digital infrastructures that allow interaction" as understood in Nick Srnicek's book *Platform Capitalism* (2016). That said, Srnicek's understanding of platforms warrants mention as well. The typical relationships of control between game developers and player groups that scholars of "platformization" attend to are an essential part of the history and growth of esports and gaming in general, and stands in stark contrast to the relationship I explore here between Nintendo and the efforts of committed *Melee* players to adapt Nintendo's platforms (specifically, the Wii and *Brawl*) to their own ends.

Given that some of *Melee*'s fundamental techniques rely on game mechanics that were not intended, they require inputs which were not designed to be performed consistently by humans. Some techniques that players have mastered to the point of consistency require an input in as little as a 2 frame window, in a game that runs at 30 frames per second. With this knowledge in hand, the group responsible for modifying *Brawl*, the PMBR, widened the timing windows on several techniques to make them more user friendly. In a way, *Project M* was the first game consciously developed with *Melee*'s mechanics in mind; the PMBR was able to view the mechanics of *Melee* with hindsight, whereas the original developers were truly creating something new and unique, with little to base decisions on other than *Super Smash Bros.* for the Nintendo 64 (*Smash 64*). Since the initial release of *PM*, other titles have emerged that draw on

Melee's mechanics as foundation as well, such as *Brawlhalla*, *Rivals of Aether*, and *Slap City*. This emergent genre has come to be called "Platform Fighters" although, to clarify, that has nothing to do with Platform Studies as a field. The name is derived from the platforms present for players to jump onto during matches in Platform Fighters, something normally absent in traditional fighting games which are typically played on flat stages where the terrain is a cosmetic nonfactor in the combat. Rather than simply trying to steal the "crossover of a bunch of famous characters" motif, these games seek to genuinely feel like *Melee*, in particular ways, such as a focus on movement as well as actual combat. They are far from "*Smash* clones" and make intentional use of techniques like wavedashing, while solidifying themselves as unique via design decisions, such as *Rivals* opting not to include a shield/block option, forcing players to defend themselves in other ways.

As touched on before, part of what makes *PM* unique is that it is a game modification (mod) actively, explicitly trying to recreate *the feeling* of another game, *Melee*. The goal is to emulate the affect generated by *Melee*'s precise and expressive grammar of move sets. Fans so desperately missed the feeling invoked by the old game that they took the new one and tried to make it feel the most like the predecessor as possible. This meant manipulating the code of an entirely different game, on a new console. Several hardware aspects of the Wii made this possible. Most importantly, the first model of the Wii came equipped with four GameCube controller ports. The console itself featured full backwards compatibility for GameCube titles, and that was their purpose from the release of the Wii in late 2006 to the release of *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* in early 2008. When *Brawl* came out, an option existed that would come to influence the future trajectory of both how *Smash* is "normally" played, and the life and purpose of GameCube controllers themselves. Due in part to the fact that the Wii already had GameCube

controller ports, the developers included the option to use a GameCube controller in *Brawl*, rather than the Wiimote and Nunchuck used by most Wii games (Sakurai, 2008). *Melee* was the best selling game on the GameCube, meaning people had played a lot of it and were used to the controller. So, given that using the same old controller was an option, people did that. Not only did it become the standard for competitive play, it was still beloved by casual players as well (Perlmutter, 2019). Casual players, the main fanbase Nintendo caters to, choosing to continue to play using the GameCube controller forced Nintendo to acknowledge that these controllers had a larger fanbase beyond only overly-passionate *Melee* zealots. That said, it is important to also acknowledge how controllers were marketed for the 3rd generation of *Super Smash Bros.* — particularly the fact that they were not. During the *Brawl* era, GameCube controllers were supported because people were assumed to already have them (Sakurai, 2008). It was not as if new controllers were being manufactured specifically to sell to people who wanted to use them to play *Brawl*; players had to either already own them, or purchase them second hand. The significance of people's widespread decision to continue using the old GameCube controllers for a Wii game played out in future *Smash* titles. The way GameCube controller support was implemented around *Smash 4* is especially interesting. Nintendo had a few big problems that time around: it was 2014, 13 years after the GameCube and *Melee* were released, and they could not expect everyone who wanted to play *Smash 4* to already own a GameCube controller. Aside from the problem of natural wear and tear on decade-old pieces of technology, there was an entirely new generation of players who may not have even been alive when the GameCube came out, let alone owned one. So, they manufactured an entirely new line of GameCube controllers just for *Smash 4*. Even with a new, steady supply of controllers on the market, there was another problem: the Wii U was not compatible with GameCube controllers in any way. This led to the

creation of a GameCube controller adapter for the Wii U, all because of *Smash*. Some of the controllers even had burning *Smash* logos in place of the standard Nintendo logo to serve as a direct reminder of why the controllers were made (Pictured in appendices). To reiterate, so high was the demand to play *Smash* with a GameCube controller that Nintendo had to create an accessory to allow a console never designed to support GameCube controllers to do so. It may also be worth noting that, at the time of release, these adapters were sold out everywhere, inflating the online resale price to nearly five times the MSRP, so even finding or owning one was a privilege in itself (Fahey, 2014). The same story is true for the release of *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* for the Nintendo Switch. Once again adapters had to be made for the console to interface with GameCube controllers, something it did not originally support, and another batch of controllers had to be physically produced and sold. These events exemplify the fact Nintendo does have a finger on the pulse of what its players want. This makes the active erasure of the voices of the competitive scene that much more apparent.

Expressive Inputs

“Old game good, new game bad” or, simply, “new game bad” is a stereotypical refrain from committed player communities that seems like it has been around as long as game sequels themselves. Allow me to distance competitive *Melee* players’ earnest grievances from this less nuanced articulation. The experience of movement, as well as the gameplay, were fast and fluid in *Melee* for a variety of concrete reasons. The first is a technique players call “L-cancelling”, named after one of the triggers which can be used to perform it, L and R. When players input an attack while airborne, the resulting attack is appropriately called an aerial. If an aerial is started too close to the ground and the player’s character lands before the attack is fully completed, the character goes into a specific animation as they regain composure, which lasts for a certain

number of frames, and therefore a certain amount of time. The time spent waiting for the character to regain their composure can be reduced by pressing L or R during a specific timing window. This means that, upon a successful L-cancel, the player is able to perform their next input that much sooner, which is important for efficiently following up attacks that land, but also for allowing players more time to evade their opponent when they miss with an aerial attack. In both regards, the removal of this feature skews optimal gameplay towards defensive playstyles. Its removal from *Brawl* intentionally slowed *Smash* down (Sakurai 2008), something in direct contention with the valorization of speed and precision enabled by *Melee*. This technique was possible in both previous titles, *Smash 64* and *Melee*, and was undeniably an intentional feature, although its existence is never made explicit through game tutorials or instructions. Although L-Cancelling, from *Melee*, is never explicitly mentioned, Z-Cancelling, its equivalent from *Smash 64*, is detailed on both the Japanese and the American official websites for *Smash 64*, although it is called “Smooth Landing” in these posts (SmashDojo, 1999; Smashbros.com, 1999). The technique was, importantly, not mentioned in any in-game tutorial, nor within the instruction manual, for either the Japanese or the U.S. version of the *Smash 64*. This hidden status of a nuanced but, in the hands of a skilled player, highly effective technique, meant that most casual players were not even aware of its existence. This makes *Smash Bros.* creator Masahiro Sakura’s justification for its removal all the more puzzling. After *Brawl* came out, and people were wondering why he gutted the game of many of the techniques from *Melee*, Sakurai was asked, “Why is it that L-cancelling*, which you could do in *Melee*, was removed in *Brawl*?” to which he responded:

It's the same reason as the reduction in game speed. First, doing all that on the Wii Remote would be close to impossible, and again it considerably increases the gap between beginners and high level players. But that method, of being able to do cancels with one button is fun on a game level, it's something that when you pull it off just feels very good...It is something I already introduced into the world, so I did feel some resistance to removing it, but more than that I wanted a game where everyone could have fun, and I thought directing the game towards not being a tiring game would be more important, so this time I've taken it out. (Nintendo Dream, 2008)

From a perspective that solely values Smash as a highly expressive world full of possibility, the decision to remove options for player expression and intentionally slow the game down makes little sense. Nintendo's decisions do make sense within a larger sociotechnical context and are in line with the company's historically family-friendly brand (Altice, 2015). When asked a similar question seven years later, after the release of *Smash 4* on the Wii U, Sakurai replied:

Pushing buttons with precision is undeniably fun, but if you keep adding mechanics that require skill, beginners can no longer play. If you make a game that's aimed at players who are good at competitive fighting games and go to tournaments, the game becomes more and more hardcore. *Smash* aims to be a game that anybody can play, so I don't think *Smash* should go down this more tapered path. (Dengeki, 2015).

In addition to commentary directly related to L-cancelling, these quotations are important for solidifying how *Melee*'s competitive mechanics, collectively, were viewed by the series' creator.

It is important that, in the preceding quote, Sakurai frames the decisions as his own, rather than a group decision by a team of developers. Still today, within official Nintendo Direct videos, Sakurai is framed as the one in control of the decisions (Nintendo 2019; 2020). The amount of creative control he has had over the direction of the franchise is a key element of the relationship between fan communities and frequently idiosyncratic commercial behemoth that is Nintendo. These design decisions show that Sakurai and Nintendo's goal is not to make the most balanced, competitive fighting game available. In fact, they actively want and strive towards the opposite: a game that can be picked up and enjoyed by anyone. The manifestation of this ideal of the company can be seen in their treatment of competitive Pokémon, compared to *Super Smash Bros.*

A striking difference between Pokémon battles and matches in *Smash* is that Pokémon uses a turn-based RPG-style, rather than allowing for movement around a virtual space. This means there is no mechanical barrier to entry for competitive Pokémon; anyone with the proper knowledge and understanding of how different Pokémon types interact can experience victory. This type of direction for game design creates conditions where young children can win an international championship, which recently happened. Simone Lin, a 7-year-old girl from Singapore, won the 2020 Oceania Pokémon VGC Junior Division championship, dethroning the reigning champion who was twice her age in order to do so despite this being her first season of competitive Pokémon (Knoop, 2020). This narrative of a little girl winning a championship in her "rookie season" and the ensuing group hug between her, her friend, and her Eevee plush are

the exact thing Nintendo wants as the face of their historically pro-family brand (Altice, 2015). To explain, VGC (short for Video Game Championship) is the official competitive format for the main-series Pokémon games. This means that, unlike *Smash*, Nintendo supports and coordinates tournaments for competitive Pokémon. It is no leap to assert this is due to Pokémon's turn-based gameplay significantly lowering the bar for entry versus the highly-taxing levels of mechanical skill necessary to play *Smash* competitively. While competitive Smashers value the wide skill gap between new and veteran players, that notion conflicts with Nintendo's mantra of their games being for everyone. These conflicting desires reached a head when *Brawl* was released.

Prior to the night and day differences between *Melee* and *Brawl*, the standard for fighting game scenes was to play the current iteration of the series. With this in mind, big tournaments like the Evolution Championship Series (EVO) which hosts brackets for several games like *Street Fighter*, *Guilty Gear*, and *Tekken* in addition to *Smash*, began running *Brawl* when it came out instead of *Melee*. The results solidified competitive *Melee* fans' disdain for *Brawl*. Ken Hoang was one of the most dominant *Melee* players in the world during the game's initial life, earning him the title of "King of *Smash*" (Womack, 2015b; Stenhouse, 2019). Ken's dominance of *Smash* held enough mainstream significance that he was invited to be a contestant on NBC's series *Survivor* (CBS, 2008). Establishing Ken's prowess is important for contextualizing what happened in EVO 2008's grand finals. He was defeated by a 14-year-old player who had never entered a tournament before (Cravens, 2008). This exemplifies exactly what *Melee* players disliked about *Brawl*: the game was so different than its predecessor that a complete unknown could defeat a world champion. Another key aspect of the controversy sparked by this set was the fact any randomly-spawning "items" were turned on at the tournament at all, rather than the competitive standard of no items (North, 2019). The items, especially the tide-turning "*Smash*

ball” were a deciding factor in the match, which led competitive fans to discredit the win (SmashBoards, 2008). On top of the controversial inclusion of items, the justification given for the chosen setting was that EVO’s tournament organizers thought *Brawl* was too slow without them (North, 2019). This serves as a concrete example of what competitive players disliked about the transition to *Brawl*, while also demonstrating that Nintendo succeeded in making it the more-easily-accessible game they desired. Making *Smash* accessible to the widest range of players possible is Nintendo and Sakurai’s goal, an aim that represents the company sticking true to its pro-family image (Sakurai, 2008; Altice, 2015).

Wavedashing

The rhetoric around a technique called “wavedashing” expands on these points. Wavedashing is fundamental to *Melee*’s competitive identity yet seen by some as exclusionary towards casual players (Sakurai, 2008). Like L-canceling, this technique also has to do with what happens when airborne characters make contact with the ground. In the simplest terms, wavedashing involves using *Melee*’s dodging feature as a method of movement. This can be applied both offensively or defensively and has become an integral component of elite *Melee* play, because it expands the number of movement options players have available to choose from. In *Melee*, when a player dodges while in the air, they have the option to add directionality to this dodge. If the player dodges diagonally downwards towards either the left or right while their character is too close to the ground to complete the full animation of the dodge, their character maintains the momentum of the dodge and slides along the ground. During this time period, the game recognizes the character as standing still on the ground, so players are able to input any command normally reserved for stationary characters. This significantly increases the number of options players have with which they can approach, evade, and interact with one another. These

possibilities are further expanded by the differences in the length of the slide based on how close to the ground the character is when the player inputs the airdodge. This is a reductive, general summation of the ways in which the ability to slide along the ground as a movement option expands the level of nuance at which the game can be played, or mastered. This technique is synonymous with *Melee*'s identity, blurring the line between feature and glitch. Players had argued for years over whether or not wavedashing was a glitch/cheating or an acceptable technique. However, this dispute was taking place amongst fans, with no channel of communication between them and Nintendo; SmashBoards served as a stand in for the lack of any active, official forums maintained by the company. Nearly seven years after *Melee* was released, in an interview from shortly after *Brawl*'s debut, Sakurai confirmed that the team were, indeed, aware of the ability to wavedash during *Melee*'s development by saying,

Of course, we noticed that you could do that during the development period. With *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, it wasn't a matter of, "OK, do we leave it in or do we take it out?" We really just wanted this game, again, to appeal to and be played by gamers of all different levels. We felt that there was a growing gap between beginners and advanced players, and taking that out helps to level the playing field. It wasn't a real big priority or anything, but when we were building the game around of the idea of making it fair for everybody, it just made sense to take it out. (Hoffman & Thomason, 2008)

To be fair, knowing something is possible within the game is different than intentionally including it as a feature. The rest of the language used carries important implications. Since wavedashing is arguably an exploitation of *Melee*'s physics, the time window in which the input

must be executed is inhumanely small; wavedashing is possible to do consistently with practice, but it was not designed to be done by humans. The way this problem was addressed is a key example of why *Project M* had to be created. *PM* is a proof of concept of the game Nintendo could have made if they wanted to. One of the few decisions the PMBR made that was not intended to directly mimic *Melee* as closely as possible was widening the window in which the command could be input. By increasing the number of frames during which the airdodge can be effectively used to perform a wavedash, they made the input more accessible to new players. This same decision, making the input easier in order to lessen the skill gap between new and veteran players, could have been implemented by *Brawl*'s developers themselves, but Sakurai did not want that. Sakurai's personal philosophy on what *Smash* "should" be is illustrated in detail by another quote from the Nintendo Power interview where he is asked about the biggest changes made between *Melee* and *Brawl*:

First of all, of course, is the inclusion of the Final *Smash*. If you look at the overall direction of *Smash Bros.*, players can go in and change the setup to match whatever game style they want. You can turn all items off, etc. But really, my vision of *Smash Bros.* is that it's a party game, really. You got four people battling it out and you're really not sure who's winning or losing. Or maybe that's not even the point. But I wanted to have something that could really surprise people and shake things up. Even though you're winning the entire match, maybe in the final moment I'm going to win via this new mechanic. (Hoffman & Thomason, 2008)

While the average *Smash* player — those who make up the majority of the games’ sales and overall fanbase — may be fine with it being a chaotic party game where anyone can win via random chance, some dedicated, competitively-minded players see that as a critical flaw. Sakurai explicitly dismisses the way in which competitive players approach the game and works to subtly invalidate it via pushing his vision of *Smash*. Ironically, as Sakurai notes, an important part of *Smash* is the ability to play with whatever ruleset the players want. In practice, this means anything from four-player matches with all the items allowed, on whatever chaos-filled map the players choose, to players systematically adjusting the settings to reduce randomness as much as possible; playing on only a handful of maps, with all items turned off. Under Sakurai’s own logic, both styles of play are valid. While decisions on *Smash* are framed as Sakurai’s own, both within the interview and in “Nintendo Direct” video announcements, with “Mr. Sakurai Presents” included explicitly in the titles of *Smash* related videos (Nintendo, 2019; 2020). In late March of 2020, a fan-translation of a post originating from a questionnaire section on Nintendo’s Japanese-only *Melee* website from a few months after the game originally debuted was publicized (AsumSaus, 2020). This post, by a Japanese middle school student with the username ‘Rocketman’ detailed a technique they had discovered with Luigi used to slide along the ground by air-dodging (Rocketman, 2002). This player was describing wavedashing prior to the coining of the term, and the post attracted the attention of Sakurai himself, prompting a response where he explained:

Airdodges are fast at first, but quickly slow you down. If you land while it is still fast (i.e. right as the air dodge happens), that speed will carry over to your character on the ground. That speed heavily affects Luigi because he has low friction, which is why he

slides so much. Using this will also allow you to do things like backdashing (putting aside what value that may have.). (Sakurai, 2002)

Within his response, Sakurai gives further credence to wavedashing as an intended mechanic. Though, while this forum was technically public, this response was not widespread knowledge during most of competitive *Smash*'s lifetime; Sakurai has been vilified by competitive *Melee* veterans since the release of *Brawl* but it is possible the decisions are less specifically his own than fans have been led to believe. Wavedashing's initial removal sent a clear, antagonistic message to competitive *Melee* players, although a similar technique returning nearly 20 years later in *Ultimate* may mean Sakurai was listening after all (Tate, 2018). With Sakurai's initial ambivalence in mind, if the reasoning for the removal of wavedashing was truly to make the game more accessible to new players, further support is seen for the idea that it could have been an adjustable setting, or the timing for the input could be made more lenient, making it easier with a goal of accessibility by a wider player-base specifically in mind, like the PMBR did for *PM*. The notion of foregrounding accessibility in the *Smash* series' design extends to other techniques as well.

L-Cancelling and Teching

Returning to a discussion of L-cancelling with the goal of accessibility in mind is valuable. This section is jargon-filled but the claims are straightforward. Needing to press a trigger every time you return to the ground with an attack still undeniably increases the learning curve of the game. However, unlike wavedashing, if this particular setting was adjustable, it may be odd. *Project M* implemented a setting where L-cancels were performed automatically, without the player needing to press them. This "shorter lag" condition can only really exist if there is a lengthier version of the landing lag; there can only be a "reduced" amount of landing lag if there

is a standard quantity to begin with. By having there still be a “normal” number of frames spent in landing lag more akin to *Melee* in the default *PM* settings, which can then be reduced by L-cancelling, that creates the possibility for an “always L-cancelled” option to exist in parallel. “Automatically” L-cancelling essentially means simply adjusting the amount of time spent in lag to one, consistent time. This means there is effectively no difference between removing the ability to L-cancel and making them happen automatically; either way the end result is a game with one immalleable amount of landing lag. Whether the removal of L-canceling is positive or negative for *Smash* is worthy of debate, but, either way, if a fighting game has only one, set amount of lag on attacks, it does make it easier to learn, and removes a concrete, arguably arbitrary barrier to entry and dividing line between new and veteran players. With this in mind, the removal of L-cancelling (or, the standardization of landing lag) is logically in line with Nintendo’s goal of making the game accessible, and the counterargument that it could have been changed to an adjustable setting instead would be hard to rationalize. Apart from this jargon-ridden point, the removal of L-cancelling is interesting when juxtaposed with another technique called “teching.”

In any of the five *Super Smash Bros.* titles, if a character is knocked down, the player has a specific timing window to click one of the triggers. If the input is executed within the proper window, the character “techs” which means they break the fall, regain their footing quicker, and are actionable sooner. Similar to L-cancelling, this requires an input within a specific time window, its purpose is to allow the player to perform the following action sooner, and it was fully intended to be a part of the game by the developers. That said, when considering that teching requires the same button to be pressed as L-Cancelling, also within a specific time window, why did Nintendo see L-cancelling as problematically alienating to beginners, while

leaving teching in all five iterations of the game? This highlights the inconsistent logic applied to the decisions on the series' direction, although the idea of removing a mechanical barrier to entry is in line with Nintendo's family-friendly brand overall. Competitive *Melee* fans have historically been outspoken against the direction Sakurai has steered the series. In response to the Nintendo Power interview where Sakurai discussed changes implemented in *Brawl*, one commenter wrote, "Oh. My. God. Why the hell did he get to make the ****ing game?" (Green'n'Clean, 2008). While this post represents the views of only one subset of players who have an invested enough relationship with *Smash* to have been members of Smashboards back in 2008, it provides concrete evidence for the broader disdain towards the removal of specific gameplay aspects amongst some *Smash* scene members.

One major reason Sakurai remained in control was that, from Nintendo's shareholders' perspective, he was doing a great job with the franchise. *Melee* had been the best-selling game on the GameCube, and *Brawl* sold almost twice as many copies as *Melee* did. This sent a message to Nintendo: keep going in this direction with the series. A huge part of why *Brawl* sold so well was the seemingly unprecedented level of hype surrounding its release, largely due to how beloved *Melee* had been. People were expecting *Melee 2*, but what they got was, in their eyes, a clunky, intentionally-slowed-down disappointment (Nintendo Power, 2008). Fans were very vocal about their distaste for the changes, but there was a problem: they were mad about a game they had already paid for; Nintendo already had their money and the sales numbers, along with much more from casual players. This is a flattened retelling of the story, but the financial success of *Brawl*, despite it being despised by the competitive *Melee* scene, meant the next game would reflect similar design choices. When *Smash 4* came out in 2014, it was *Brawl* but even slower. From dedicated *Melee* players' perspective, Nintendo took an already bad game and made it

even worse. This was reflected in *Smash 4*'s abysmal sales. The Wii U version of the game sold only 5.37 million copies, less than any game in the franchise, even the original *Smash 64* (Celine, 2017). This was due in part to intentionally slower game mechanics being carried over from *Brawl*, but some speculate it was due in part to the existence of *PM*. Albeit, the PMBR did all they could to distance themselves from being seen as “competitors” of Nintendo during the *Smash 4* era, detailing in a now-deleted, but archived post:

“First and foremost as a game mod, we are still under certain legal obligations and restrictions. To stay in Nintendo's good graces and to avoid attracting Cease & Desist letters from 3rd party companies, we are limiting our choice of new characters to those that Nintendo has already licensed for inclusion in *Brawl*. In other words, that restricts us to characters that already appear in the game in some way, such as trophies, assists, or stickers. Additionally, to avoid appearing as competition to *Smash U/3DS* sales in Nintendo's eyes, we do not have any plans to try to “back port” any new *Smash 4* characters to *Project M*” (PM Devs, 2013).

Since *Project M* did not come out until nearly 4 years after *Brawl*, it gave *Smash* fans, those of *Melee* and *Brawl* alike, a new game to play. According to archived versions of *PM*'s website, the mod amassed over 150,000 downloads on the official site, and an even greater number of downloads on the official-unofficial website now that hosts the link nowadays (projectmgame.com, 2015; pmunofficial, 2020). This success potentially caused some fans to be all the more uninterested in buying a completely new console to play *Brawl 2*. This could have been a factor in Nintendo's eventual warning to the *PMBR*.

Although the farewell post made by the PMDev team makes no mention, explicit or implicit, of impending legal action, it is widely known that the decision to cease work was tied to the threat of legal action (PMDev Team, 2015). While it is speculated it was owners of third

party intellectual property like Konami or Sega who were flexing their power, rather than Nintendo themselves (Kotaku, 2015), the treatment of *PM* by Nintendo is ironic given the origins of the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise. *Smash* first began as a fighting game Sakurai was developing in his free time, tentatively titled *Kakuto-Geemu Ryuoh* or “*Dragon King: The Fighting Game*” which featured generic, faceless character models battling on placeholder images for backgrounds. Sakurai recognized the necessity for the characters to have more personality, and had the idea of including recognizable Nintendo characters (Iwata, 2008). This request was denied by Shigeru Miyamoto, the famed creator of Mario and Zelda, but Sakurai proceeded with a prototype of the game with Nintendo characters included anyway, with the encouragement of Satoro Iwata, another beloved, renowned figure at Nintendo (Shea, 2019). Iwata then showed this demo to Miyamoto, who was impressed and then approved of the inclusion of his characters. To summarize this story, Sakurai was told he could not use Nintendo’s intellectual property, did it anyway, which was then determined to be acceptable because the game was good. The apex of irony is reached when the origin story of *Smash* is compared to the stories of *PM* and the platform fighter genre as a whole.

After the decision to halt development on *PM*, the PMDev team officially founded Wavedash Games and shifted focus to a new game called *Icons: Combat Arena*. This game was heavily influenced by *Smash* as well as *PM*, with character’s movesets essentially being combinations of attacks from multiple *Smash* characters. Kidd, for example, is a space-goat, inspired by *Star Fox*’s “space animals” Fox, Falco, and Wolf, who all appeared in *Brawl/PM*. Kidd’s name, and species, are also a reference to professional *Melee* player Mang0, who famously plays Fox/Falco, and is referred to by nicknames such as The GOAT, and The Kid. This is to say, *Icons* was directly inspired by the “*Melee* way” of playing *Smash*, the same

expressive capabilities and speed attempted to be captured by *PM* and missed by more-recent official *Smash* games. It is the closest in feel to *Melee* of any commercially released video game since *Melee* itself, and it received a tremendous amount of support from fans, amassing over \$6,000,000 on Kickstarter for the project (Shieber, 2017). However, the game was still a commercial failure and Wavedash was forced to lay off almost the entire staff prior to a full release of the game (Wawro, 2018). While the game drew directly on some attacks from *Smash*, and was developed by people personally invested in the “*Melee* way” of playing, it suffered from the same problem Sakurai foresaw with *Dragon King: The Fighting game*: lack of recognizable characters and environments (Iwata 2008). Nintendo holds a pseudo-monopoly on the platform fighter genre because no fledgling game can compete with the brand power of Nintendo’s famous characters, no matter how solid the gameplay. Even Sony’s *Playstation Allstars Battle Royale*, a direct attempt at a *Smash* clone, could not compete, selling barely a million copies and not warranting a sequel according to its own developers (Dunning, 2013).

Project M’s Necessity

Part of what defines *Melee* is the fact it was released prior to the advent of online gaming, meaning it has never received updates or balance patches. The *Smash* franchise may have evolved significantly differently if *Melee* could have been viably patched. Perhaps wavedashing would have been removed long before fans had a chance to master and fall in love with it. Or, maybe the timing window for the air dodge would have been widened to make wavedashing easier, similar to how a completely different movement technique called “wallbouncing” was embraced by *Gears of War* developers Epic Games, who recognized this exploit was something players enjoyed, prompting them to refine its workings rather than remove it. The idea that wavedashing is a “glitch” and those who used the techniques are “haxors” is decently

widespread, even amongst people who do not have first-hand experience with the competitive scene. Evidence for this is seen in this satirical article titled “Finally: Nintendo is Going Door to Door to Patch Wavedashing Out of *Melee*” (Kaplowitz, 2019). This is to say, the number of people who care (or at least know) about these issues surrounding niche aspects of a video game released in 2001 is high enough to warrant relatively-well-known satire outlets such as The Hard Times writing articles about it nearly 20 years later. Continuing the discussion of video game updates, we move from 2001’s *Melee* to analysis of more recent iterations of *Smash*.

While *Brawl* technically had online play, it was primitive by today’s standards and never included any sort of balance patches. *Smash 4*, released in late 2014, finally changed this and became the first *Smash* title to receive balance updates, but the way in which these updates were rolled out needs to be addressed. The updates to *Smash 4* came specifically and only when new downloadable characters were released for purchase. Once the final character, Bayonetta, was released in February 2016, the game stopped being updated; as soon as they had all their products on the virtual shelves, Nintendo saw no reason to continue balancing the game for competitive play. The balance patches *Smash 4* saw were a byproduct of the game being updated for a different primary purpose. The same cycle had been repeating itself for *Ultimate* as well, even following the same timeline with the game releasing in late 2018, and all additional characters slated to be released by February 2020. However, this time around, upon the release of the final downloadable character, Byleth, Nintendo announced a second batch of downloadable characters (Plante, 2020). These six additional characters are planned to be released periodically through December 31st, 2021, meaning an extended life of byproduct balance patches for *Ultimate* as well. It remains to be seen if updates will cease with the release of the final downloadable character once again. One important distinction between the updates for *Ultimate*

versus *Smash 4* is that *Ultimate*'s revisions are accompanied by patch notes. The changes made by patches for *Smash 4* were not explicitly presented by Nintendo to players in any way; fans had to manually find changes via exploration. Changes that could potentially alter professional players' livelihoods, say, by drastically altering a move set central to their playstyle, were slipped in without being concretely explained. This demonstrates Nintendo's attitude toward the competitive scene, especially when juxtaposed with the way other companies such as Riot Games or Activision-Blizzard handle their esports titles. The standard in esports is for the developer to be detailed and transparent about game balance changes, offering both specific, numerical data on adjustments when appropriate, as well as written explanations on the thought-process behind the changes, and additionally being attendant and responsive to feedback from fans throughout these processes (Riot 2019; Blizzard 2019). This allows players to make more informed strategic decisions, and demonstrates care and concern from these developers towards their esports scenes. While any level of concrete information on changes is an improvement from the *Smash 4* era, *Ultimate*'s "patch notes" are still notably lacking in comparison to other modern titles, offering simple, surface level explanations such as, "increased attack speed" or, "adjusted launch angle" (Nintendo, 2019). This historic lack of care is part of what caused the social landscape within *Smash* fandom leading to the creation of *Project M*.

Casual versus Competitive *Smash*

Competitive *Smash* is legitimized by casual *Smash*'s existence. It means something to be good at *Smash* partially because it is a game that a large amount of people have encountered. In this way, casual and competitive fans are contrasting "relevant social groups" in classical social construction of technology terms (Pinch & Bijker, 1987). Both the casual majority of players and the smaller, competitive fanbase have influenced the evolution of the *Super Smash Bros.* series

both in terms of the literal games themselves, as well as impacting what *Smash* is understood to be, culturally and socially. When I say casual *Smash* legitimizes competitive *Smash*, I am speaking of how the fundamental, most basic mechanics of the game are designed to be casually competitive. This can then lead to an increasingly structured refinement of rulesets using both in-game settings and out-of-game agreements and interactions by players. This progression happens at the micro level in the living room, as friends gain experience, start reducing allowed item and stage lists, and become more competitive. Other players may continue only playing under the default settings for their entire relationship with *Smash*. Regardless of how chaotic, random, and silly of a ruleset a group of young cousins come up with while playing *Smash Ultimate* at their grandmother's house, someone still wins; there is still a victor in the match, always. There being a winner is a fundamental part of playing *Super Smash Bros.* since it is a competitive game. These “party game” *Smash* sessions, with no goal other than fun, are what often leads to more refined, formal competitive play. The archetypal competitive *Smash* origin story is the player who was the best in their friend group, or the friend group that was the best in the school/neighborhood eventually deciding to enter a tournament. The story does not proceed this way in all cases — most players continue to only play *Smash* with their friends and the competition never leaves the couch — but the traditional *Smash* story begins with casual play. Under this logic, competitive *Smash* directly relies on casual *Smash* in order to exist at all; they are not mutually exclusive ways of experiencing the game. Competitive *Smash* was born as a refinement of the original, party-game style of play.

The design changes in key, niche, jargon-ridden aspects of *Smash* over the franchise's five games are a story of which social actors were deemed relevant by the developers. This can be framed as a simple economic choice where Nintendo catered to the much larger casual *Smash*

fandom, but that conceptualization ignores the unrecognizably different landscape of competitive gaming and esports in modern day versus two decades ago when *Super Smash Bros.* was released for the Nintendo 64, or even a decade later when *Brawl* was released in 2008. While grassroots *Street Fighter* tournaments had been commonplace for the better part of a decade when *Smash 64* came out, and *Starcraft* had a robust infrastructure for competitive play and spectatorship at the time, including South Korean TV channel OnGameNet, the role of multiplayer gaming in 1999 was still mainly to have fun with friends (Baker, 2017; Partin, 2018). With that in mind, it makes sense that *Smash* was not originally developed to be intentionally balanced for non-random, structured competitive play. With due respect to the first North American “pro gamer,” Thresh who amassed a small fortune dominating *Quake* tournaments, and the first World Cyber Games being held in 2000, in the late 1990s the idea of esports or professional gaming were still new and relatively unheard of (Baker, 2016; Stich 2016). At that time, outside of the booming South Korean *StarCraft* scenes, competitive gaming was still a niche, underground phenomenon (Partin, 2018). The state of competitive gaming at the turn of the 21st century, along with their general family-friendly brand, means Nintendo was likely not thinking of whether or not *Smash* would or should be an esports. Additionally, playing video games for money was highly illegal in Japan until 2018 as it qualified as gambling, meaning neither Nintendo nor independent groups of players could hold tournaments for cash prizes in its home country even if Nintendo actively wanted to support the competitive scene (Ashcraft, 2017; Nakamura & Furukawa, 2018). However, the option to customize whether or not items would appear, and thus the ability to limit the influence of random chance if players’ desired, was included in the game. While this was not a choice made with esports in mind specifically, it was an active acknowledgment, even before the series was ever released, of the fact that there

would be some level of a player-base that wanted to play the game with as little randomness as possible. This decision, although initially added simply to afford players the ability to select which items would appear in matches as a reward for playing 50 multiplayer matches, was one of the most integral design choices for the birth of competitive *Smash*.

Conclusion

The multitude of intersecting sociotechnical conditions and practices collectively constituting “*Project M*” are key elements of Nintendo’s relationship with competitive *Smash*. *PM* is a coming together of the immense popularity of *Smash* across multiple publics, the vision its creator and Nintendo have for the series, a lack of communication channels between developers and fans, a relatively small but vigorously devout group of fans who love the feel of *Melee*, historical relationships between game developers and modders, the fact the Nintendo Wii had an SD card slot, the rushed development of *Super Smash Bros. Melee* that caused iconic elements of its gameplay in the first place, a fan-made message board that facilitated international collaboration, the Wii having GameCube controller ports, a competitive scene used to a blind eye from their game’s creators, and the lack of a platformized esports experience. Exploring the connections and interactions between these many contingencies offers further insight on relationships of power and a clearer picture of *Smash*’s place in the grander arrays of esports and video games, both of which are increasingly salient areas of society. In the next chapter, I turn to an in-depth exploration of the local *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* scene via a combination of participant observation, interviews, critical analysis, and reflexivity on my own experiences in order to further explore governance in *Smash*. This conventional fieldwork builds on themes of power in *Smash* both at the interpersonal, player level, and in terms of governance of various scenes and the games themselves.

Chapter 3:

Everyone is Here? An Ethnographic Exploration of *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*

Introduction

The tagline for *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* is “Everyone is here” and this multi-sited, connective ethnography takes inspiration from that claim. Building on the analysis of the Code of Conduct and the sociotechnical conditions intersecting to constitute *Project M*, this chapter continues the exploration of what makes *Smash* unique within the landscape of esports. The fieldwork I conducted for this project is informed by feminist ethnography, and is therefore attentive to those present at the margins as well as those absent from spaces, physical or online (T.L. Taylor, 2006; 2009, N. Taylor; 2009b; Taylor, N. & Jenson, J. & de Castell, S., 2009; Sundén, J., 2009; Taylor, N., Jenson, J., de Castell, S. & Dilouya, B., 2014). Feminist ethnographic work involves situating one’s own subject position within structures of oppression and privilege as a step towards ending it (Visweswaran, 2003). The following combination of observations, interviews, personal experiences, and critical analysis ties together a discussion of governance in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* in various ways in which it manifests. Despite being relatively open, the culture is heavily meritocratic: skill is a ticket through the door; you must be this good to ride the ride. This privileges players who can afford both the time and equipment required to practice outside of tournament settings, as well as players able to travel for the game, whether for tournaments or “friendlies” (informal practice sessions). This chapter pays close attention to privilege in order to highlight the validity of the differing lived experiences of individuals in the *Ultimate* scene (Griffin, 1982). My social location as someone in the historically dominant culture both mediates and informs my work. *Super Smash Bros.* scenes are a vital but underexplored sub-group of esports enthusiasts, and there is value in documenting these people’s experiences in an academic setting for the first time. This chapter provides a window into the lived experience of *Ultimate* players and this work aims to address the question

of how player “communities” become constituted through contingent relationships between players, games, platforms, developers, and sociotechnical practices.

Methods Overview

I conducted fieldwork at over 14 *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* tournaments and friendly practice sessions around the Raleigh, NC metropolitan area. This report is based on field observations as well as my own experiences, blurring the lines between active and complete participant, a claim which I will qualify throughout the chapter. I am a long-term competitive player of *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, an earlier title in the franchise. With over five years of attending tournaments for a very similar game, I did not begin this fieldwork “from scratch,” but it is essential to stress that the *Melee* and *Ultimate* communities are distinct, unique, and mostly separate entities, aside from sometimes sharing venues for larger-scale events. That is to say, I was not a member of the Smash *Ultimate* community prior to this study, but I was a member of the loosely defined, greater “Smash community” via my involvement with *Melee*. These connections and tensions between and within the groups which collectively constitute the larger *Smash* scene are what drew me to this study and are one of my key concerns. My fieldwork included written notes as well as roughly three hours (176 minutes) of audio-recorded field notes. I took 27 photographs over the course of the study to supplement these notes. My work is additionally informed by 18 semi-structured interviews with other players or tournament attendees. Participants were offered the chance to use their real name, their gamertag, or a pseudonym. This, and other background information about participants, is found in a table below (Table 1). Observations and interviews took place between May 20 and October 8, 2019. The interview schedule evolved over the course of the study due to problems recruiting participants for lengthy interviews in the middle of a tournament they paid to enter. In addition to formal,

IRB-approved interviews I spoke to my opponents and other players I found around myself at tournaments and uncovered basic information about their history with *Super Smash Bros.* through small talk.

This research draws on traditions of feminist ethnographic fieldwork. In practice this means an attention to liminalities, silences, and gaps, as well as to bodies and their histories and locations in relations of power (Taylor & Witkowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2013). This includes active reflexivity and attentiveness to my own subjectivity as a field researcher, and an attempted-consciousness of how my subject-position mediates my work (Davies, 1998; Visweswaran, 2003; Ahmed, 2014; Taylor, 2018). One feature of this chapter is an analysis of various, intersecting privileges afforded to those who fit the hegemonic Smasher mold.

Methodological Limitations

I must acknowledge that I am a fledgling ethnographer. This is my first ethnographic exploration and I learned many things from it. For example, I should have taken a lot more pictures. I did photograph most of the venues, especially those from later in the study, but, for others, hand-drawn diagrams of the spaces must suffice. These drawings are not snapshots and detail the aspects of the venues that I found salient to this work. Labels are included on atypical, inconsistent things, such as if a venue included a projector screen, or a *Gauntlet: Legends* arcade cabinet that blocked a potential pathway. As far as ‘standard’ things, chairs are represented by squares, tables, by rectangles, and “setups” (Nintendo Switches + Monitors) as trapezoids meant to look like monitors. Scans of these diagrams are presented in the paper’s appendices.

Participant Information

Table 1: *Profiles of interview participants*

“Name”	Pseudonym?	Age	Ethnic Background	Gender Identity	Competitive <i>Smash</i> Experience
Crystal Blitz	Gamertag	18	Hispanic, Latino	Male	First tournament, invited by friend who attends regularly
Kam Steele	Gamertag	21	Japanese	Male	Hosted 50+ tournaments, attended 200+
3rd Degree	Gamertag	19	White	Male	“At least one weekly [tournament] per month since <i>Smash 4</i> came out”
Dove	Gamertag	22	$\frac{3}{4}$ White $\frac{1}{4}$ Korean	Male	Attends a few local tournaments per month, started with <i>Ultimate</i>
Lori Ellis (Speaking about her son)	Name	Son 13		Woman	Started attending tournaments a few months before <i>Ultimate</i> came about, still does
Sandslash	Gamertag	23	Black, West Indian	Male	Played in his hometown since <i>Smash 4</i> , still plays <i>Ultimate</i> after moving
Cameron	Name	19	Black, African-American	Male	Started attending tournaments in college, now sponsored by Tidal esports
Caroline	Name	18	White ($\frac{1}{4}$ Persian)	Woman	Attends on-campus tournaments and frequent library friendlies

Table 1 (continued).

Wayward Chu	Gamertag	27	White	Male	Recently started attending tournaments before moving here
News	Gamertag	19	White	Male	Explicitly only attends on-campus tournaments and friendlies
Taeng	Gamertag	18	Vietnamese	Male	Interested in <i>Smash</i> as a spectator for years, now attends campus tournaments/friendlies
Jack Death	Gamertag	18	$\frac{3}{4}$ White, $\frac{1}{4}$ Filipino	Male	Only “competitive” with friends until college, now attends campus tournaments/friendlies
Andy	Name	19	White	Male	Has been attending tournaments since a <i>Smash 4</i> launch event
Chu’s Friend	Pseudonym	25	Korean	Male	Very sporadic tournament attendance; college roommate used to host <i>Brawl</i> tournaments
Andy’s Friend	Pseudonym	20	White	Male	Has been playing since <i>Smash 4</i> . Has placed as high as second, but still goes 0-2 sometimes
Sean	Name	18	White	Male	Only plays library friendlies
Clutch Doodle	Gamertag	25	White	Male	Likes to attend <i>Smash</i> tournaments as he travels for other endeavors, has since <i>Smash 4</i>

Table 1 (continued).

Sammy	Name	24	Latino, Mexico-born	Male	Unranked but officially considered “not a bad loss” for ranking purposes
-------	------	----	---------------------	------	--

Setting the Scene: Where is “Here?”

In a post-human, increasingly digital world, ethnography should be adapted to the digital. When studying populations that make use of both offline and online sites and the layered connections between them, the framing of place in this ethnographic work is especially important. While working with populations that are unified both by physical space and online networks, it is important to resist the false dichotomy between online and offline places and interactions (Taylor, de Castell, Jenson, 2016). When I first began attending *Ultimate* tournaments for research, I started at a trading card shop in Cary, North Carolina, appropriately called East Coast Gaming (ECG). Despite *Smash* tournaments in my hometown of Des Moines, IA being hosted in a trading card shop, ECG was completely different. Particularly, the store I was used to had a dedicated game room where tournaments were held. When I arrived on this Monday evening in May, the normal layout of ECG had been converted to accommodate *Smash*’s reliance on power outlets, a constraint not faced when the store hosts *Magic: The Gathering* or Pokémon Trading Card Game tournaments. Tables lined the perimeter of the store, with one island in the middle where equipment to livestream the event on Twitch was set up. There were 15 Nintendo Switch consoles, all provided by players, attached to various monitors (again owned by tournament entrants) of whatever brand people happened to own. Every setup was complete with a GameCube controller adapter for the Switch, although some players carried Joy-Cons or Pro Controllers instead, based on their preferences. Most setups were filled with at least three players in a “rotation” playing one-on-one matches using the tournament settings,

practicing for the upcoming event. Although *Ultimate* is played competitively between only two players, (or four, on teams of two) the game supports up to eight players simultaneously. In the back corner of the venue was one setup, with what appeared to be a monitor that had been deemed unfit for tournament play. Crowded around that monitor were a group of several children who were perhaps the only ones in the venue truly *playing* the game, rather than practicing it. I had watched a car-full of these children file out of a blue vehicle as I walked in, heading straight for this back area rather than paying to enter the tournament. This was something I was used to from my years playing Yu-Gi-Oh! in card shops: the events becoming free or cheap daycare for the evening. That said, none of the *Melee* scenes I have been a part of were home to such notable quantities of young children, despite being hosted in similar venues. *Melee*'s comparatively older player base makes sense when it is considered that *Melee* is a nearly-two-decade-old game played on CRT televisions with GameCubes or Wiis, all of which may have been produced before these kids were born, versus *Ultimate* being a current, popular Nintendo title.

When I entered the venue, I approached one of the few setups with only two players and asked to join. They welcomed me, which I expected due to that being the standard I was used to from my experiences at *Melee* tournaments; of course you can play with whoever, and asking, "Hey can I play with you guys?" is really more similar to announcing, "Hey I'm sitting down here now" than actually asking a question. This assumption is something I reflected on even during my fieldwork. Was I only comfortable approaching people in a crowded, predominantly male space because I was used to being in similar spaces? Was I more comfortable because of my ability to pass as "normal" in these spaces, being a 25-year-old white man who dresses like I'm still in high school? In both cases, probably yes. I held my own against the players I had sat down with, which left me going into my first match with confidence. I got absolutely destroyed,

and that is when the negativity started. After losing my first round, I had no clue what to do with myself. Not that I was existentially lost, rather, I did not know what to do at a tournament with 80 players but only 15 setups where I did not know anyone. This became a recurring theme at tournaments: the relatively large numbers of entrants meant lots of waiting. Given that I was attending events alone, this waiting, in my case, was awkward waiting. I had no friends, and it seemed that most other people did. At my first few events at ECG, I did run into a few players I had met while doing fieldwork for a different project in the area. They remembered me and were the ones to approach me at ECG, but I was hesitant to immediately jump in and start acting as if I was their friend, so I still felt awkward and alone, although their greetings did make me feel notably more welcome in the space. The relationships between the tournament-goers and venue owners is an important part of the sociotechnical network that is “*Smash*.”

Of the tournament series I attended, nearly all of them were built on the foundations of *Smash 4* events. *Smash* Sans Frontières (Sans), for example, the tournament I attended at ECG, had been running weekly *Smash 4* tournaments since December 2016. Similarly, Just Roll With It!, the big, biannual tournament hosted in Raleigh, has been running since February 2016. These *Ultimate* tournaments are the exact same tournament series that existed for *Smash 4*, with all the same interpersonal connections and networks still in place, but with the Wii U’s swapped out for Nintendo Switches. Shortly after I began attending tournaments at ECG, the owners of the store began the process of migrating venues. This left Sans without a venue and there was to be a temporary hiatus. In an instance of trying to use my subject-position for positivity, I suggested the possibility of hosting it at the university where I work and study. I contacted the *Melee* club leaders on campus, and we were able to secure rooms for *Ultimate* in their hour of need as a gesture of *Smash*-community-wide solidarity. These tournaments, accordingly, were more

similar to the North Carolina *Melee* events I was used to attending as they were hosted in the exact same room on a different day. These events take place in Daniels Hall, a physics building on North Carolina State University's campus, a testament to the longstanding relationship between video games and STEM on college campuses (Taylor & Stout, 2019). The room works well for hosting 20 to 25-person *Melee* tournaments with a few GameCubes and TVs, but trying to cram 60+ people, 15 setups lining the walls, and streaming equipment into a standard size classroom proves to be more stressful. In addition to the spatial constraints caused by the number of attendees and amount of equipment, the excess, unused tables found in the room were all pushed together in the center of the room to form an island of unusable space, a problem that continued across the course of multiple tournaments there. Sparked by the collaboration between NC State Smashers and the wider Raleigh, NC *Ultimate* scene, another tournament series, Dair 2 Care, began running bi-weekly on Wednesdays in the same room. These events suffered from the same sardine-can-type spatial constraints. A requirement of being in close quarters with bunches of sweaty players certainly mediates who is willing to be in the spaces where *Smash* tournaments are hosted. Even walking around the room at these events was a struggle. There was nowhere to comfortably exist while not playing. Being unsure of what to do with myself and feeling out of place during the downtime was a recurring theme across this fieldwork. This is due in part to the spatial constraints *Smash* tournaments face. Notably, Zenith 5, a different tournament run in Daniels Hall at North Carolina State University, had reserved two rooms rather than one, which made things much less crowded. In addition to Daniels 353, the room where tournaments are normally hosted for the bi-weekly *Smash @ State* series, the tournament organizers booked another room down the hall, Daniels 370, as well. Aside from Just Roll With It!, which is a larger-scale, bi-annual tournament hosted in a ballroom with full-esports fanfare, the events I

attended were essentially hosted in whatever spaces would allow them. Sketches of the rough layout of each tournament venue are included in this report to help readers better visualize the spaces described. It is worth noting that, despite possibly seeming cluttered to readers, in actuality these drawings probably portray the venues as more spacious than they really were. Especially in the tournaments hosted in North Carolina State University's classrooms it was borderline-impossible to move around the rooms. It is no stretch to assert that these extremely close quarters may be off-putting to players, new or old, and that the spaces are a constraining factor on the *Smash* scene. This problem stems partially from Nintendo's lack of involvement.

At *Smash* tournaments, it is standard to pay a "venue fee" on top of your entry fee which, appropriately, goes towards financing the space the tournament is held in. This stands in strong contrast to the way trading card game tournaments are handled. In card games, the company, such as Wizards of the Coast for *Magic: The Gathering* or Konami for the Yu-Gi-Oh! Trading Card Game (Yu-Gi-Oh!), hosts regional-and-above level events themselves, in an official capacity. The staff for these events is still comprised of volunteers, but they are compensated by the company via products such as packs/boxes of cards, or even exclusive, commemorative playmats, deck boxes, or dice available only to volunteer staff. Players at these events are not asked to pay a venue fee like they would be at a *Smash* tournament, only an entry fee for the tournament, despite them being hosted in rented commercial spaces such as convention halls or event centers. In the case of Yu-Gi-Oh!, players also receive five booster packs of the newest set with their entry, which is the MSRP equivalent of the \$20 entry fee they are paying. For side events at these Yu-Gi-Oh! tournaments, those with lower entry fees, a scaling, appropriate number of packs are also given to players. For example, if an event is \$12, the player would receive three packs, as the MSRP on a pack is \$3.99. In *Magic*, the players do not receive this

same type of bonus, but their entry fees directly contribute to making the prize pool larger, like at *Smash* tournaments. While companies promoting the sustained life of a card game versus a video game is not a perfect comparison, these instances provide case examples of how large firms handle tournaments. In both cases, similar to more platformized esports, these companies are actively involved in the competitive scenes for their game. The comparison is made simply to highlight that parent companies handling the overhead costs of tournament venue space is not totally unheard of, even within scenes that still rely on volunteer labor to sustain themselves. Companies can, and do, acknowledge the free labor of especially passionate fans and compensate volunteers for their time.

A Place [on campus] To Belong

Due to the heavily embodied nature of playing a game in the same room with other humans, the *Smash* scene is rife with concerns over whether, how, and when one belongs. The same people may interact both in-person at tournaments and online, with potentially different power-relations in both places. With this project as a whole being a connective ethnography, one that seeks to problematize online versus offline divisions, I embraced these hybridized research sites. Modes of belonging can be both physical or imagined; the embodied spaces where tournaments are held: classrooms, stores, bars, houses, dorms, apartments, or the technically mediated spaces of online networks — Facebook groups and Discord servers — where players both stay connected and updated as well as cultivating friendships to new heights. This sense of community is seen and felt in *Smash*-centric Discord servers that have channels for discussing other things. These may range from other video games, to schoolwork, to politics. In Facebook group chats, the lines may be distorted even more; the purpose of the group may have originally been coordinating a carpool for a tournament in a neighboring state, but then never gets deleted,

and essentially becomes a group chat amongst friends for sharing memes and venting about your job. On NC State's campus, there is a unique space within D.H. Hill Library where students can play video games. Consoles and games can be checked out from the library and there is a repurposed room in the corner with three large TVs where students can gather to play. This public space provides students, especially those in their freshman year of college, a home away from home. It gives them a space to feel that they belong, other than their dorm rooms, which is open effectively all the time. Students constantly ask one another via Discord to meet up there, even if just for a few minutes in passing between classes, even if they do not have their controllers with them. Cameron, who is now a sponsored player for Tidal esports, shared a story of his experience with *Smash* at college:

My first friend that I made at NC State, not from high school was my friend J-Non cause I put in the Discord and was like, "Hey does anyone want to come play friendlies in [this dorm]?" And he was like yeah. And he came to the activity room and we played on this super laggy monitor. We had a bunch of fun. (Cameron)

This feeling of belonging resulting from involvement with competitive *Smash* is not only felt by people living on college campuses. I interviewed Lori Ellis, the mother of a 13-year-old player, who said, "I bring my son to these because it's important to him and I want him to get out and be around other people." In addition to that comment, she later further shared:

[*Smash*] has given him a forum to talk; to at least start conversations with people when before it might be very difficult. Um, and that's one thing we work about with him,

sometimes reciprocal conversations, but at least it's a door that he can open. You know, uh, teachable moments and it, and it brings him joy and they're just in there playing a video game. So, I'm okay with that. You know, he could be out doing something you're not supposed to. (Lori Ellis)

Lori's anecdotes of her son's experiences with the competitive scene posit *Smash* as welcoming. These sentiments are echoed by other players like 3rd Degree, who has been competing in *Smash* tournaments since 2016 and is now 19 years old, who said, "These are some of my best friends that I've met over the years," and that he hangs out with people he has met through *Smash* more than he does with friends from high school.

Pretending to Play *Ultimate*: Passing and Fieldwork Reflections

Recruiting participants for interviews proved to be more difficult than I had expected. I planned to start regularly attending tournaments, become a face in the community, and easily be able to get people to do interviews with me. It was difficult for several, divergent reasons. First, as I have touched on before, I was not placing well in tournaments. It took me a few weeks to even win a single match, which was potentially significantly impactful on my credibility within such a meritocratic community. This made recruiting participants more difficult than initially expected. I wrestled with recruitment actively and made several efforts to make it easier or smoother. For one, I began using my tournament losses as a recruitment tool. If someone beat me, I would try to strike up a friendly conversation and ultimately segue into asking if they would be willing to do an interview later, when they had time. Usually this resulted in them saying yes, forgetting about me for hours, and then slipping out of the venue once they eventually got knocked out of the tournament. I was hesitant to recruit participants who had just

lost to me, on the rare occasion I won, so I eventually began staking out players who were in the losers' bracket. *Smash* tournaments are typically double elimination, so if a player loses in the losers' bracket, they are out for good. This made them ideal prospects for being interviewed, as they no longer had a tournament bracket to worry about. This technique proved more effective than asking people who beat me, but I was careful not to recruit too many players via this method, for fear of skewing my study too far towards the experiences of players who typically lose early in bracket. I tried to counter this issue by arriving earlier to tournaments and asking to interview people before the event started. This proved effective in a few cases but was limited by the number of people who showed up early for events, coupled with the fact that arriving early was often due to having obligations to the tournament, meaning people were too busy to be interviewed anyway.

Past these constraints, another embodied aspect that I believe had effects on how I was perceived by other members of the community was my attire. Most of the tournaments I attended were on either Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays, and I taught on all three of those days, so when I went to these tournaments dressed in the same button-down shirts that I led classes in, I literally looked like a professor. Although showing up to a weeknight tournament in work-esque attire is far from unheard of, when dressed like this, I could not pass as a typical *Smash* player as effectively. I think this influenced my ability to pass as an average player in the community, and I became conscious of this going forward. I have included a picture for reference, which I took specifically to document my outfit in response to these thoughts. (Pictured in appendices).

In regard to how welcome I felt at tournaments, participants did start making me feel more welcome over the course of the study after being interviewed. These blossoming friendships are exemplary of the rapport and bond formed with participants during interviews. At

the last tournament I attended, two participants I had interviewed, Jack Death and another named Sammy, both separately came up to me before my first set and told me good luck, which felt great given how alone I had been feeling at *Ultimate* events. In that instance, I think it appeared that I belonged in that space, to the point that I felt the need to qualify it to my opponent, who had told me this was his first tournament. So, I informed him that I was a researcher, I only knew both of the people who had greeted me because of interviewing them, and I was relatively new to playing *Ultimate* competitively myself, in an attempt to ease any intimidation-fueled anxiety he may have been feeling on top of normal first-tournament-jitters. While occupying multiple roles at once over the course of this study, *Smash* player and researcher, I tried to be carefully attentive to how my actions could affect participants. This meant attempting to be an ambassador of *Smash* and trying to be encouraging, both at tournaments, and during interviews with players from NC State's library. My opponent whose mental health I thought I was protecting then proceeded to destroy me 2-0, which further illustrates how different *Melee* and *Ultimate* are, and how a lot of the carryover comes in the form of cultural competence, not in-game skill, due to the many subtle, mechanical differences in gameplay. I have been playing *Melee* competitively for almost five years and got soundly defeated by a guy who had previously only played on Wi-Fi.

Framing in Connective Ethnography

My time spent caring about *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* for this study raises questions of when digital ethnographers are in or out of fieldwork (Pink et al., 2016). I found myself scrolling through Twitter or browsing YouTube in my free time and seeing things relevant to my research. This may be something awesome like a 15-year-old girl defeating a big-named, high ranked player using a low-tier character. It may also mean seeing that same young player getting “cancelled” for using racial slurs on Discord before her rise to stardom. On YouTube, I found

myself scrolling through my subscriptions and occasionally finding important information such as the fact Nintendo of Europe sponsored a tournament circuit, an unprecedented level of support and acknowledgment from *Ultimate*'s publisher (Armada, 2019).

Demonstrating what “community” means via practices

“*Location*, like *community* or indeed *action*, is a contested and ambivalent term.”

(Mackenzie, 2010, p. 128).

This summarizes the difficulties in discussing groups of people who play *Super Smash Bros*, and the ambivalences and layers around “belonging”—to the scene, to a tournament location, to one iteration of the franchise or another. While there is no spatially unified overarching “community” of players defined and united by location, players constantly make reference to “The community.” Additionally, as part of Nintendo’s neglect of competitive *Smash*, there is no active effort made to cultivate or manage a united imagined community like there is for other major titles like *League of Legends* (Kerr & Kellher, 2015). Taken together, these contingencies further complicate distinctions between various local or regional *Smash* scenes and The *Smash* community as a whole. The word “scene” is often used interchangeably with “community” by *Smash* players. Boundaries of communities may be set by space at a regional level, but there may be multiple sub-groups within a given spatially defined community. For example, the Raleigh scene defines itself as a community but, within that, there are other scenes as well, such as the one at North Carolina State University. Membership in that group is contingent not only on living in a specific spot, but by enrollment at a specific school as well. Distinctions between communities based around space are further blurred when considering the tournaments hosted at NC State are not restricted to attendance only by students; anyone from

the local area can enter the bracket if they wish. The potential positive impact of playing *Smash* on players' lives as wholes are captured well via Andy's story:

I actually wrote my college application on *Smash* really cause, um, I think it's the most impactful thing that's been in my life, honestly. Because back then I was so unmotivated, I didn't want to do anything. I didn't even wanna really go to college. Uh, and I just never tried in anything. And then once I started going to tournaments and then meeting new people I can actually connect with on another level and not just an acquaintance kind of level or a level where it's not something like you can actually bond together with. So I started making friends through that. And then it also taught me how I can improve in anything, how I can learn always, and how I could just be like better, a better version of myself. (Andy)

Andy's story is exemplary of the deep bonds that can be formed through *Smash*, as well as how skills acquired through playing competitively, improving, and attending tournaments can be applied elsewhere in life. These intimate interpersonal connections and personal growth sparked by *Smash* are not unique to Andy. Sammy also shared stories of how *Smash* has positively impacted his life and expanded his social circles, saying,

Kam and Tony for example, those two I wouldn't have ever met if I hadn't played *Smash*. They have like done a lot in my life to like change it for the better. So like I've lost like 40 pounds thanks to their, like, you know, like, "you can do it," you know, just do this and do this and do this and you're going to be a lot happier with yourself. And I did, I

used to weigh 231 right? Right now I'm 190 which is worse than my best, which is 170 but then I moved out of my mom's house and I stopped eating at home. So I gained 20 pounds from that, which I'm working on losing again. But you know, like I may have never had like friends who have, who would have been as genuine as him to like motivate me to improve myself as a person. Um, and that's only because I know them through *Smash*. And same thing for college. (Sammy)

These narratives resonate the sense of community felt as the intersection of the multi-faceted, sociotechnical network that is “playing *Smash*,” a lot of which happens outside the confines of the game. Playing *Smash* means spending your Saturday mornings in a car with a few other people and your Saturday nights at Denny’s after the tournament. Or, playing *Smash* is doing cardio at the gym for the first time ever because some Fox player who lives three hours away from you has convinced you to do it with enough encouragement over Discord. The reason that playing *Smash* matters at all is because “playing *Smash*” means much more than playing the game. This claim is backed by Kam’s own musings about *Smash*’s role in his life:

I'm like super integrated into the scene at this point. Like I'm a panelist and I helped with the Discord server in the Facebook group and I run the largest tournament here. So, even if I quit as a player, I feel like I'll probably stick around at least for a little while until I absolutely hate the game. (Kam Steele)

Hegemonic Gamer governance: Skill over all, as a given.

Within competitive gaming, skill can serve as a stand-in for a person's entire identity. While *Smash* is played face-to-face, which may bring less blatant harassment than historically "toxic" online games like *League of Legends* (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015; Adinolf & Turkey, 2018) how good you are at *Smash* is still closely tied to how you are received by the competitive community. Meritocracy looks different when encountered on the ground at a local level vs when talking about it abstractly in terms of top player privilege enjoyed and abused by internationally renowned players. A valuing of skill over all carries with it implications that may be missed due to the layered intersections of race, gender, sexuality, financial status, region of residence, and more which alter players' starting lines and constrain individual realms of possibility. Meritocracy actively ignores inequalities and, "the effect of meritocracy is to make the inequality among people seem fair and just" (Paul, 2018). The treatment of skill as the defining characteristic of people opens up the door to the justification of excluding people based on how good they are (or are not). That part is obvious but, less explicitly, yet still powerfully, an emphasis on player skill influences who feels they have a right to exist in these spaces at all. Placing skill level on a pedestal means alienating those who do not have the means to improve, which is problematic given the often invisible or distant structural constraints faced by potential competitors. A plethora of privileges coincide to allow some players more of a sense of belonging than others. These advantages are described in detail below.

Privilege one: Owning a setup

As illustrated by several anecdotes from players' first tournaments and early days in competitive *Smash*, new players face jarring skill differentials with veteran players, to the point of feeling as though it is a necessity to get better in order to belong. I noticed and felt this in my

own experiences entering *Ultimate* tournaments throughout my time doing fieldwork. At first, I was attending tournaments and that was the only time I had access to playing the game. Despite actively playing competitive *Melee*, another game in the franchise, for over 4 years, I was struggling to come up with even a single win because I would lose both lives (stocks) and entire games to situations where I understood my mistake, or how to counter my opponent's play, but my lack of practice with the game left me unable to perform mechanically. These different types of game related knowledge have been extensively explored in the past. The distinction between in-game skill or knowledge and out-of-game skill or knowledge is articulated in different, complimentary ways, such as the word “meta-game” collectively referring to relevant out-of-game knowledge (Ash, 2013). Others frame these knowledges as “handling the game” which includes “physical and motorical” aspects, contrasted with “meaning-making activities” which include the “understanding of the game in terms of how the game is to be played, their role in the game, and the culture around the game” (Jakobsson, Pargman, Rambusch, 2007) This proved to be a significant obstacle to feeling like a fully accepted member of the community. In response to my distress and in an effort to help me pass as someone who “actually played the game,” my advisor offered to let me borrow a Nintendo Switch to practice on.

In order to be a full ‘participant observer,’ in classical ethnographic terms, I needed to be able to participate in competitive *Ultimate*, and in order to participate, I needed to be good, or at least be able to pretend I knew what I was doing. Having access to a Switch allowed me to experience *Ultimate*’s online play for myself, a gameplay experience several interview participants had shared negative anecdotes or joked about. While I did have to endure a noticeable number of lag-ridden games, I do not think I was experienced enough at the game to find the actual gameplay experience (when it was working) much different than playing people

offline. This may partially be due to my years playing *Super Smash Bros. Melee* competitively, a game with almost no input delay, whereas *Ultimate* has a 6-7 frame (around a tenth of a second) delay between when the player inputs an action and when it occurs (Kuchera, 2018). This is to say: the game feels uniquely abnormal to me, as my hands and body have been conditioned by years of playing *Melee*, so it may be easier for me to write things off to being a product of *Ultimate* itself, rather than a result of poor online service quality, compared to a player whose primary *Smash* experience has been with *Ultimate*. When I first got the Switch and started playing online, I was pretty bad, even relative to online quickplay players, which led to interesting insights. When playing *Smash Ultimate* online, matchmaking is determined by the “Global *Smash* Power” (GSP) of the character you select. The system is notably ambiguous compared to other modern matchmaking systems with clearly defined ranks, but players gain or lose roughly 100,000 GSP per win or loss and are matched with players of similar GSP (Newell, 2018). My starting GSP for Ganondorf, my preferred character, was around 1,700,000, and, by the time I was good enough at *Ultimate* to win more than one game in a row consistently, I had dropped all the way down below 100,000 GSP. When playing online, preferences can be set for which maps to play on, but there is no guarantee of getting what you select. While recording angry fieldnotes reflecting on my failures, I realized that my rank was so low that, despite my preferred settings, I kept getting matched up with people who wanted to play on non-tournament legal maps, sometimes even with items on. As I began to climb the ranks, my mini hypothesis seemed to hold up, and I stopped getting matched up with people wanting to play with more casual settings as my rank grew. This essentially means that when playing *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* online, you have to be good (or at least highly ranked) enough to even get to practice what committed players understand as the “proper” competitive style of playing. Allowing

players to manipulate settings when playing online at all is one of the largest nods Nintendo has given to the competitive scene, but the way it was implemented simultaneously demonstrates a lack of care and an antagonism towards them. If Nintendo cared about actively promoting the competitive scene, they could have a playlist with the settings used by major tournaments, a practice seen in basically every competitive online game within the modern landscape of platformized esports (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Joseph, 2017; Feldman, 2018 Partin, 2020). The closest thing *Ultimate* has to dedicated competitive settings is Elite *Smash*, which is a separate matchmaking queue reserved for players who reach a high enough GSP, around 4,300,000. This means that players wishing to practice under remotely tournament-esque settings have to earn the right to be able to play the game the way they want to, while also accepting their applied preferences may be ignored anyway. This system stands in striking contrast to the plethora of playlists offered in other online games. This lack of choice, combined with the spotty, laggy connection quality, leads serious players to avoid playing online at all. Kam Steele, for example, shared his views, saying:

I try to avoid playing online mainly just because playing online usually isn't the best way to get better at the game... Um, if I have to play online and if I do play online, I'll play people that I know. (Kam Steele)

Negative views of online play by the most dedicated players lead to further divides between “Wi-Fi warriors” (people who play only online) and players who regularly attend face-to-face tournaments. These revelations uncovered via playing the game and reflecting, as well as speaking to more long-term players, serve as a testament to the felt downsides of Nintendo’s lack

of promotion of *Smash* competitively. Blizzard's *Overwatch*, Riot's *League of Legends*, and Valve's *Counterstrike: Global Offensive* and *DOTA2* all have links to streams of competitive tournaments available directly within their clients, but Nintendo does not even have a competitive playlist. In general, Nintendo offers almost no structural support, financial or otherwise, towards *Smash* tournaments, whereas other companies own the game, organize and host the major tournaments, and control the broadcast of those events as well (Budding, 2019; Partin 2019).

Privilege two: Autonomous mobility

As discussed, one salient effect of Nintendo's chronic neglect of the competitive side of *Smash* is that the online experience is demonstrably poor. Many interview participants shared complaints and jokes about the game's online play. Andy's friend spoke about how he used to only be able to play online, and how that frustrated him because he knew he was not getting the "authentic" experience. He said, "Like I used to, um, really wish I could compete in tournaments back when I didn't have a car and now I'm able to drive to them. It's a really sweet thing" (Andy's Friend). This player had driven Andy as well as another friend two and a half hours from Charlotte to Raleigh, NC on a Monday night to play in an in-person tournament, because he had previously experienced the constraint which a lack of the ability to travel to events puts on a person's relationship with the game. While having a car is useful for driving to events, many participants who did not have vehicles still voiced their excitement to be living at a school where tournaments were hosted on campus. One player who goes by Jack Death, for example, was only able to attend tournaments as a special occasion, with his mother finding it more justifiable to drive him and multiple friends to events, but not him, alone, which limited his ability to attend and get experience playing face-to-face. In addition to Jack, fellow student-players Taeng,

Caroline, News, and Sean only attend on-campus events, limited in mobility by lack of cars as well. Their coincidental attendance of a university where tournaments are hosted means they are privileged, in one aspect, but their lack of ability to travel further fundamentally shapes how they experience *Ultimate*. These college-campus-only Smashers are an archetype of player constrained by physical space.

Privilege three: it's *Super Smash BROS*.

Smash titles, as with most fighting games, are played primarily offline, face-to-face. The resultant embodied co-presence felt by tournament attendees has historically led to relatively high levels of diversity in fighting game communities compared to esports as a whole. These established norms of embodied co-presence with a wide array of people were born out of the public, physical spaces of video arcades where fighting games were first played (Kocurek, 2015; Tobin, 2016). As seen in the table near the beginning of the chapter, when participants were asked to describe their own ethnic background, responses were: 7 white, 4 Asian (1 Japanese, 2 Korean, 1 Vietnamese), 2 black, 2 Latino, and 3 people of two or more races. However, what this more accurately means is the men (and boys) who attend these tournaments are a fairly diverse group of guys. *Smash* is “a series whose vast player base, spectator base, and history had been dominated by men” (Budding, 2019). Of the 18 participants I conducted interviews with, only one identified as female. Both cis and trans women were present at tournaments at which I conducted fieldwork, but in noticeably marginalized numbers, with no more than a handful at any given event. This is not an original revelation from my own work, but a known problem in *Smash*, and esports more broadly, as a whole. With due credit to Smash Sisters for the good the organization does, it is a community run effort built entirely on unpaid, voluntary labor, which means it comes with its limitations. Events hosted by Smash Sisters are typically found only at

the largest tier of tournaments, like Dreamhack, Super Smash Con, or The Big House, privileging women who are able to attend these “super majors.” If they do not coincidentally live in close geographic proximity to a big tournament, the women who attend super majors likely have already broken through some initial barriers and formed a dedicated enough relationship to *Smash* to warrant spending time and money to travel. This, unfortunately, may not be having much impact on women and girls watching a tournament’s Twitch stream, unaware that there’s a space dedicated to making them feel included at that same event. That said, increased visibility may mean painting a target on their backs. Female-identified players already experience disproportionate levels of harassment compared to males and, as former professional *Counter Strike* player and AnyKey co-founder Morgan Romine points out, “When a girl or woman competitor plays in a broadcast tournament, the harassment, sexism, and sexual comments increase exponentially thanks to the public chat stream” (Romine, 2019). Dr. Romine also echoes Lily Chen’s points on the cyclical problem of the lack of female visibility in esports (Chen, 2015). In general, Smash Sisters gets flak for being a segregated event, which leaves them susceptible to gaslighters. Despite this, pushes for positively segregated events, aimed at those traditionally marginalized the most in esports, have proven effective. The University of California - Irvine recently hosted an event open only to trans-identified people. Researchers at the event noted that, once the doors were eventually opened for anyone to attend, the mood of the room completely changed. Marginalized people face several barriers that may not seem directly salient to video games which influence their comfortability in the embodied, physical spaces where competitive games are played. This same notion of a complete shift in affect when a gaming event specifically aimed at a marginalized group of people becomes desegregated is evidenced in work on after school clubs hosting girls-only events. Researchers video-recorded

players, and girls are seen enjoying themselves, feeling comfortable asking questions, having fun playing (Jenson, & de Castell, 2011). Throughout this event, hosted in the school library, boys showed interest but were kept away. Once the boys were eventually allowed to approach the area where the girls were playing, there was a visible shift in the comfort level of the girls, with them noticeably tensing up as the boys came over to offer unsolicited advice. Within the context of my ethnography itself, it is important to note how framing tournaments as the site of analysis would miss the women who are interested in playing competitively but do not feel comfortable due to intersecting structural constraints.

Privilege Four: Carryover Clout

With the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2019, players have unique personal histories with the franchise overall which mediate their relationship with competitive *Ultimate*. Since competitive gaming communities can be so meritocratic, carrying over skill means carrying over social status (Paul, 2018). There are players in these communities, like Kam Steele or Andy, who regularly attended tournaments for most of the lifespan of *Smash 4*, the previous game in the series. There are players like Clutch Doodle who have casually played every *Smash* game since *Smash 64* with their friends, but never took the plunge into the competitive scene. There are players like Lori's 13-year-old son who got into the competitive scene near the end of *Smash 4*'s life, and has enthusiastically continued attending tournaments for *Ultimate*. There are college students who have had an interest in competitive *Smash* for years, but are only getting to play face-to-face with others because of moving away to school, and other students for whom *Ultimate* is their first *Smash* game. There are two layers of privilege at work here: in-game privilege afforded by experience with the game via raw time spent practicing other *Smash* titles, which includes experience with specifics of the tournament scene, and then also the

privilege of having a higher baseline accrue ment of fluency in navigating tournament structures within the *Ultimate* scene that has carried over from the *Smash 4* scene. In addition to in-game skill amassed over time, being a long-time tournament attendee can provide advantages via social networking. Sammy details this by saying:

Robert (a local tournament organizer) is a great example actually. Like him and — I don't know if you know a player named Scrappy — but they're like players who are always there, you know, and they're always nice, they're always on commentary. You don't have to be good to like, hang with the top players. Right. It's just like, these are just people.

Interestingly, in my own experiences over the course of this ethnography, people who had been playing competitive *Smash* longer seemed to treat me with more respect. They saw my custom controller and the types of decisions I made in game and spoke to me encouragingly, highlighting that I had potential that simply was not realized yet. This is to say, players who defeated me more soundly or “beat me harder” would often treat me with more respect and encouragement because they recognized that my decision making was good, but my mechanical skill with *Ultimate* specifically was lacking. Essentially, they could tell that I had competitive *Smash* experience, and would approach the situation by giving me more pointed advice, versus players who I was actually closer to beating who would say little more than, “GG,” and casually fist-bump me after the set, as if I was just another scrub and it had been business as usual; to them, I was just another easy win early in bracket. Relating back to carried over advantage, I could feel my lack of this specific brand of sociotechnical capital quite noticeably. When

attending tournaments for fieldwork, I would die frequently to “cheesey” strategies (those that only work when the opponent does not [yet] understand how to counter them), sometimes even multiple times in the same game. This type of specific, situational knowledge is certainly advantageous in competition. Further, with *Ultimate* more closely resembling its predecessor *Smash 4* than any other *Smash* game, those who played *Smash 4*, whether in a tournament setting or casually with their friends, harbor embodied understandings of the physics of the world, accrued over time, which leave them better oriented than a player like myself who is used to the feel of *Melee*, as well as providing a head start over those who have only relatively recently begun competing, since the release of *Ultimate* (Keogh, 2014; 2018).

Building on this point, several of the participants I conducted interviews with were active attendees of *Smash 4* tournaments prior to *Ultimate*’s release. There are widely varying experience levels even amongst this subgroup. Players like 3rd Degree and Andy began going to tournaments around when the game was released in 2014, while people like Kam Steele and Sandslash first started by playing casually with their friends for a while, which eventually led to an interest in the tournament scene by the time all of the extra, downloadable characters had been added to the game, in February 2016. Lori’s son attended his first few tournaments near the very end of *Smash 4*’s competitive life. All of these players carried an idiosyncratic advantage over their peers for whom *Ultimate* is the first *Smash* game they have played competitively. Crystal Blitz and Dove were both invited to their first *Smash* tournaments by friends relatively recently, after the release of *Ultimate*. Others, like Taeng, have started attending *Ultimate* tournaments of their own accord once coming to college despite never playing competitive *Smash* before. None of the participants I talked to shared stories similar to my own of being involved in *Melee* tournaments prior to the release of *Ultimate*. I expected more players with similar stories to

mine, as *Ultimate* is the fastest and most fluid game in the franchise since *Melee* itself. Despite not formally doing an interview with him for the study, I know of at least one other player with a similar story in the region, Sharkz as he is currently ranked 93rd on the *Melee* Panda Global Rankings (MPGR), which are the official, international rankings (Nestico, 2020a). The highest he has been ranked in North Carolina for *Ultimate* is 9th, despite being one of the best *Melee* players in the entire world. I point this out to highlight how, while some carryover of fundamentals and skills is possible, much of the advantage of having played other *Smash* games is outside the game. Things like knowing where to park at the venue, knowing the tournament organizer well enough to let them know you will be a few minutes late, being experienced in controlling your body's arousal during and between matches, especially after close wins or losses: These advantages are those enjoyed as a result of direct prior experience. These embodied, game-related aspects of playing *Ultimate* are vital aspects of what constitutes perceived belonging at tournaments and in the scene (Keogh, 2014; 2018).

Continuing with the theme of carryover from *Smash 4* and decentering the actual games specifically, the leadership of the *Smash Ultimate* Club at NC State is the same as it was for *Smash 4*; the same people are still president, vice president, and treasurer. For the entirety of the first semester after *Ultimate*'s release, the club was even still officially called *The Super Smash Bros. for Wii U* Club. Currently, the official email for the club's username remains "smash4wolfpack@ncsu.edu," standing as a relic of the *Ultimate* club and community on campus' direct ties to the existing infrastructures put in place by the *Smash 4* community. The weekly tournaments are the club's only "meetings" which is common for college *Smash* clubs compared to other esports clubs both in my past anecdotal experiences, within this study, and based on prior research I have done with collegiate esports clubs (Taylor & Stout, 2019). I

attribute this distinction to the fact *Smash* is primarily played face-to-face, while other popular games like *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* are normally played exclusively online. It makes sense why clubs centered around online games make a more active effort to have in-person meet-ups specifically for the sake of gathering.

A live game vs a zombie: *Ultimate* compared to *Melee*

In the *Melee* scenes I have been a part of, we welcomed with open arms anyone who was interested in playing this 18-year-old party game using specific settings. Being used to this, I expected more of a warm welcome in the *Ultimate* scene than I got. Due to the larger attendance of *Ultimate* tournaments vs *Melee* (80+ entrants on Monday nights, opposed to 20 on a Friday if we were lucky), I often found myself standing around awkwardly between rounds, which was partially a consequence of being an unskilled player who normally lost my first round. While many more players were willing to bring their equipment, monitors and Nintendo Switch consoles (there was a limit of 15 setups, based on limitations of space, versus *Melee* being lucky to get 5), the sheer volume of players still meant longer wait times between matches.

Another fundamental difference between the cultures of the two scenes is that *Melee* is a GameCube game, which means that it receives no balance updates. This is fundamental in shaping the way the game is thought about and who plays it. Since *Ultimate* is a live game that is still [technically] being supported by the developers, it is closer to the “patch culture” seen in more popular esports like *League*, meaning players have to react to increases or decreases in their character’s strengths and abilities. That said, *Ultimate* is the current iteration of the game, and the one Nintendo puts advertising support behind, so it is more generally accessible to the public. If Nintendo were to support one of the *Smash* titles with a fully platformized esports similar to *League*, *Overwatch*, or *CS:GO*, *Ultimate* would be the game benefiting from direct,

structural support (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017; Feldman, 2018; Partin, 2020). This holds implications situated within decades of socio-cultural context. While there are a significant number of *Melee* players, some highly-skilled, who did not grow up with the game, the main demographic of *Melee* is people nostalgic for it who are rediscovering the game and interacting with it in a new way, rather than finding it for the first time. Playing *Melee* “properly” requires technology that must be acquired second-hand: a GameCube or Wii from the 2000 aughts, a miniDVD produced almost 20 years ago, and a CRT television, possibly older than both other items. This contrasts with the equipment required to play *Ultimate*, all of which can be purchased at a Walmart or Target. Nintendo’s treatment of competitive *Smash*, changes in gaming and the dawn of esports, a budding, new generation of players, and the physical accessibility of the equipment required to even play the games; these are some of the many contingent sociotechnical factors shaping what “*Smash*” is and who cares about it.

Chapter Conclusion

With respect to de-centering *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* as the unifying factor of this fieldwork, I had revelatory experiences while sporadically attending *Melee* tournaments as well throughout the same time period as my fieldwork. After primarily playing *Ultimate* for a while, I noticed via going to my first *Melee* tournament in a long time that I did not have time to get good at *Ultimate* because of grad school. I suffered a loss at this tournament to someone I historically had beaten, and who I felt I would have won against had I been more in-practice, but time constraints had made adequate practice an impossibility. I realized the same was true for *Ultimate*; I got a little better in the summer but could not devote adequate time to practice once school started back up. I finally understood feelings I had heard expressed over the years by players who were once high-level competitors, who refused to enter tournaments once their

professional lives began consuming more of their time. It always seemed silly to me that people would not simply enter tournaments when they could and be happy with whatever results they produced, but once I experienced it for myself, I get it. “*Smash* is for everyone” ... except those without time to devote, such as parents or graduate students.

While I played a *Smash* game competitively prior to undertaking this work, which makes me a part of the overarching “*Smash* scene,” I was not an *Ultimate* player. Despite attending tournaments regularly throughout this study, at venues across the area, being in Discord servers and Facebook groups related to local *Ultimate*, and practicing the game at home, I feel it would be disingenuous to claim I truly ever felt like a part of the scene. Area tournament organizers and the participants that I interviewed knew me, but being a graduate student seriously limited my ability to become a complete participant. This is because playing *Smash* involves much more than simply playing *Smash*, as this investigation has hopefully demonstrated. Playing *Ultimate* competitively requires the ability to travel to events, the privilege of feeling a sense of belonging in these spaces, and having access to both a Nintendo Switch and an excess of time in order to practice. The sense of community felt extends past wins and losses, and many positive anecdotes shine through, despite the plethora of problems within *Smash* and esports culture. This fieldwork allowed for an exploration of differing experiences with *Ultimate* and provides insight into how playing *Smash* is different based on factors of subject-position. This chapter serves as a capstone to this connective ethnography and is followed by a collectively cohesive conclusion.

Conclusion

Patching *Smash*: How to Fix the Imperfections

As Chris Paul frequently reminds readers throughout *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, those in subject-positions of power, such as cis white men like him and I within gaming culture, have a moral obligation to try to help more marginalized people (Paul, 2018). This is the motivation behind his work, and a sentiment I harbor as well, but I want to explicitly stress how doing this work properly requires attention to the actual voices and thoughts of those historically erased from the gaming narrative. Adrienne Shaw excellently articulates the trap I am talking about with this story of her experiences maturing alongside video games,

Growing up, most of our friends played regardless of gender, race, or class, even though not everyone had a console in their own home. Because of all this, it never really occurred to me that gaming was something only a certain type of person did. In fact, it was only in my adult life that I heard people talking about the heterosexual, white, cisgendered male gamer as the norm. This is not to say such stereotypes did not exist also during my childhood and adolescence. Ads and popular representation did often construct a “boy” player as the main game audience. There was, however, a disjuncture between the audience hailed by these constructions and the lived experience of game play with which I grew up. (Shaw, 2015)

This passage includes numerous insights, the first being its offering of a first-hand reminder that gaming has never just been for straight white boys. Shaw also is clear to point out how this narrative did exist in ads at the time, although it was drowned out by her own lived experiences. I draw on this not to make any claim that games culture has always (or ever) been outwardly

inclusive to all people, but to highlight the perspective of a queer woman asserting that she has belonged in gaming ever since the 1980s when her family got their Nintendo Entertainment System that she grew up with. A highlighting and a non-erasure of women in gaming, as well as an acknowledgment that they have always been present is essential. This, coupled with the recent push for positively-segregated events aimed specifically at women, provide some level of hope for the future of esports (Romine, 2019).

As someone with a highly vested interest in a competitive *Smash* game, I worry about making these communities sound both better or worse than they are in terms of toxicity. I do not want to perpetuate the idea that only men, or white men, attend *Smash* tournaments, and I also wish to distance myself from the perspective that “everything’s fine, the problem’s already solved, women play games, anyone is allowed to enter a tournament,” etc. However I do want to reassert that *Smash* scenes are at least less rife with hatred than the fully-mediated player networks of online games like *League*. I may have struggled to make friends in the relatively large crowds of *Ultimate* tournaments versus what I was used to from *Melee*, but, over the course of my fieldwork, no one ever told me to drink bleach or something, which I’ve been told while doing cooperative, group content on *Runescape* before by someone who will never meet me. The *Smash* scene privileges skill and largely ignores both the resultant problems and the differing relationships of power that go into skill accrument, which is problematic for multiple reasons. Even within the self-contained, grassroots microcosm of the current, unsupported competitive *Smash* landscape, putting in-game skill on a pedestal has proven to be problematic through the resultant rule-bending of top player privilege and its affordances for abuse. Further, tournaments, events meant to measure prowess amongst opponents, are not in line with Nintendo’s vision for

the franchise. Not only does this skill-focused way of playing alienate many players, it creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of a lack of financial support from Nintendo.

It is important to restate that being a “professional gamer” or an “esports athlete” and making money off of video game competitions was completely illegal in Japan until 2018, and that it is still somewhat of a contentious issue, rather than simply “legal” now (Nakamura & Furukawa, 2018). This offers both a potential, partial explanation for Nintendo’s past actions, as well as the hope of relatively new terrain. Also in 2018, Capcom, the makers of *Street Fighter*, announced the Capcom Cup. This tournament is an invite-only event at the end of the Capcom Pro Tour (Calvin, 2019). This event is the All-star game equivalent to an end of season event in traditional sports, featuring the top ranked players from the respective season’s Capcom Pro Tour, which is a series of officially sponsored tournaments put on by Capcom. These events, beginning in 2013, were born out of international grassroots competitive *Street Fighter* scenes which had been hosting tournaments for two decades (Stevens, 2018). Given the lengthy life of *Street Fighter* prior to this level of recognition, perhaps *Smash* fans can draw some level of parallel hope from this tale.

This work is grand in scope, which makes it hard to do well or thoroughly. The examination of the Code of Conduct provides support for the idea that fan-created and community-enforced documents of this type can cause positive, tangible impact. The organization suffers from a lack of financial support and only a small pool of volunteers, but the systems put in place by the CoC’s existence are a solid foundation for moving in the right direction. What was learned via analysis of *Project M* is that no matter how passionate the outcry of small pockets of competitive *Smash* fans, Nintendo’s core values of inclusive, family-friendly gameplay are what guide their decisions. Finally, through observation, interviews, and

immersion in *Ultimate*'s culture, I challenged the game's tagline of "everyone is here" and explored the intersecting layers of privilege that factor into the meritocratically mediated choice to attend competitive events.

REFERENCES

- Adinolf, S. & Turkay, S. (2018). Toxic Behaviors in Esports Games: Player Perceptions and Coping Strategies. In Proceedings of the 2018 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play Companion Extended Abstracts (CHI PLAY '18 Extended Abstracts). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 365–372.
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1145/3270316.3271545>
- Ahmed, S. (2014, November 4). White men. [Blog Post]. Feministkilljoys.
<https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/11/04/white-men/>
- Altice, N. (2017). *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer / Entertainment System Platform*. The MIT Press.
- Armada. [SmashBoards user] (2013, February 09). Leffen is banned!
<https://smashboards.com/threads/leffen-is-banned.333990/>
- Armada. (2019, September 14). *NINTENDO Smash Ultimate Circuit*. [Video] Youtube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO3vMINPJtI>
- Ash, J. (2013). Technologies of Captivation: Videogames and the Attunement of Affect. *Body & Society*, 19(1), 27–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X11411737>
- Ashcraft, B. (6 November 2017). *Super Smash Bros. Melee Community Has It Tough in Japan*.
<https://www.kotaku.co.uk/2017/11/06/super-smash-bros-melee-community-has-it-tough-in-japan>
- Baker, C. (30 August 2016). *Meet Dennis 'Thresh' Fong, the Original Pro Gamer*. Rolling Stone. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/meet-dennis-thresh-fong-the-original-pro-gamer-103208/>
- Baker, C. (4 October 2017). *Thirty years ago, the first entry in Capcom's revolutionary*

fighting-game franchise hit arcades. The world of gamerdome has never been the same.

An oral history of "Street Fighter." Red Bull. [https://www.redbull.com/us-](https://www.redbull.com/us-en/theredbulletin/All-About-the-History-of-Street-Fighter)

[en/theredbulletin/All-About-the-History-of-Street-Fighter](https://www.redbull.com/us-en/theredbulletin/All-About-the-History-of-Street-Fighter)

Baker, E. (23 October 2017). "*Melee is a conversation.*" [Tweet]. Twitter.

twitter.com/SableDisabled/status/922603417310318593

Bennett, T. (2006). "Popular Culture and the 'Turn to Gramsci,'" in J. Storey, (Ed.), *Cultural*

Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader, 3rd ed. 92-99. Harlow: Pearson.

Blanco, M. (1 December 2018). *theScore esports takes us through Leffen's journey from Super*

Smash Bros. Melee community villain to god-slaying Evo champion.

[http://shoryuken.com/2018/12/01/thescore-esports-takes-us-through-leffens-journey-](http://shoryuken.com/2018/12/01/thescore-esports-takes-us-through-leffens-journey-from-melee-community-villain-to-god-slaying-evo-champion/)

[from-melee-community-villain-to-god-slaying-evo-champion/](http://shoryuken.com/2018/12/01/thescore-esports-takes-us-through-leffens-journey-from-melee-community-villain-to-god-slaying-evo-champion/)

Bogost, I. & Montfort, N. (2009). *Platform Studies: Frequently Asked Questions.*

Digital Arts & Culture Conference. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01r0k9br>

Bogost, I. and Montfort, N. (2007, April 19-21). *New Media as Material Constraint: An*

Introduction to Platform Studies. Proceedings of the First International HASTAC

Conference, Electronic Techtonics: Thinking at the interface, Duke University, Durham,

North Carolina.

Bogost, I and Montfort, N. (2007, September 14-18). *Platform Studies: Computing and*

Creativity on the VCS, MPC, and Wii. In Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Cultures

Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

Bogost, I and Montfort, N. (2019). *Platform studies examples.*

<http://platformstudies.org/examples.html>

Bogost, I and Montfort, N. (2019). *Platform studies levels.*

<http://platformstudies.org/levels.html>

- Boluk, S. and Lemieux, P. (2017). The Turn of the Tide: International E-Sports and the Undercurrency of Dota 2. In *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bowman, N. D., Weber, R., Tamborini, R., & Sherry, J. (2013). Facilitating game play: How others affect performance at and enjoyment of video games. *Media Psychology*, 16(1), 39-64. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2012.742360>.
- Brown, J. S. & Duguid, P. (1996). The social life of documents. *First Monday*, 1(1). <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/466/387>
- Budding, E. (2019). *The Book of Melee: The story of gaming's greatest grassroots community and the heroes who kept its heart beating*. Independently published.
- Burk, D. (2014). Owing E-Sports: Proprietary Rights in Professional Computer Gaming *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 161(6). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2386205>
- Calvin, J. (4 January 2019). *How Street Fighter went from Backroom Arcades to Esports Sensation*. <https://esportsobserver.com/street-fighter-esports-essentials/>
- Campbell, S. (29 May 2006). *Are they worth fighting for?* GotFrag DPAD. [Archive]. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120210100738/http://dpad.gotfrag.com/portal/story/32773/?spage=2>
- Castells, M. 2000. "The New Economy: Informationalism, Globalization, Networking," in *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1: Rise of the Network Society, 2nd Edition*. (77-162). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Caswell, E. (June, 2018). "eSports." *Explained*, season 1, episode 8. [TV Series]. Netflix.
- CBS. (2008). *Ken Survivor Bio*. <https://www.cbs.com/shows/survivor/cast/21252/>

- Celine. (30 October 2017). *Nintendo software and hardware sales data from 1983 to present*.
<https://www.resetera.com/threads/nintendo-software-and-hardware-sales-data-from-1983-to-present.2725/>
- Chee, F. M., Taylor, N.T., & de Castell, S. (2012). Re-Mediating Research Ethics: End-User License Agreements in Online Games. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 32(6) 497–506 doi:10.1177/0270467612469074
- Chen, L. (2015, May 26). *How I responded to sexism in gaming with empathy - Lilian Chen*. [Video] Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orOa-yRL4NI>
- Chess, S., & Shaw, A. (2015). A conspiracy of fishes, or, how we learned to stop worrying about GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 59(1), 208–220.
- Cravens, G. (12 August 2008). *Mehta: Winning "didn't feel as good as I thought"*. [Archived] <https://web.archive.org/web/20080813222102/http://www.getyourtournament.com/2008/08/mehta-winning-didnt-feel-as-good-as-i.html>
- Code of Conduct (Public)*. (2018, September 11). [Google Doc]
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Jj7_EMUK5r6wF0ESbU9sq__zpRzhIUjOtF4Vbx5BJ4/edit
- Cullen, A. L. L. (2018). “I play to win!”: Geguri as a (post)feminist icon in esports. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(5), 948–952. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1498112>
- D’Anastasio, C. (25 July 2017). *Melee Player's Criminal History Divides Smash Bros. Community*. <https://compete.kotaku.com/melee-players-criminal-history-divides-smash-bros-comm-1797239305>
- D’Anastasio, C. (5 January 2018). *Smash’s Beloved Feminist Icon is not Trolling, Mostly*.

<https://compete.kotaku.com/smashs-beloved-feminist-icon-is-not-trolling-mostly-1821807846>

DaftMaetel15. (2018, September 05). *R/SSBM - Eikermann banned in CO Melee*. Reddit.

https://www.reddit.com/r/SSBM/comments/9d9qh1/eikermann_banned_in_co_melee/

Danskin, I. (2015, August 19). *Things of Beauty: Super Smash Bros. as Spectator Sport*. [Video]

Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qxVDOc-oV8>.

Dallyn, S. (2017) Cryptocurrencies as market singularities: the strange case of Bitcoin. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 10(5), 462-473, DOI: 10.1080/17530350.2017.1315541

Davies, C.A. (1998). *Reflexive ethnography: A guide to researching ourselves and others*. New York: Routledge

Dengeki. (2015, February). *Sakurai Interview*.

<https://www.sourcegaming.info/2016/03/31/dengeki2015/>

Donaldson, S. (2017). Mechanics and Metagame: Exploring Binary Expertise in League of Legends. *Games and Culture*, 12(5), 426–444.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015590063>

Dyer-Witheford, N. and de Peuter, G. (2009). “Immaterial Labor: A Worker’s History of Videogaming,” in *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3-33.

EastPointPictures. (2013, November 26). *The Smash Brothers*. [Video] Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSf2mgkRm7Q&list=PLoUHkRwnRH-IXbZfwlgiE8eXmoj6DtKM>

Ewalt, D., & Perez, M. (2018). *The 30 Under 30: Games*. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/30-under-30-2017/games/#26ddcc954395>

Eikermann.doc. (2018, September 05). [Google Doc]

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1004DH4Kfd0cLmY3b7BK9VrMCzKTx3G44QK5n3lG2A/mobilebasic>

ESIC. *Code of Conduct - ESIC*. <https://esic.gg/codes/code-of-conduct/>

Espen, A., (2007) “*I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player*”. Proceedings of DiGRA ‘07 Conference: Situated Play.

Fahey, M. (2014, November 22). *Smash Bros. GameCube Adapters Sold Out, Online Prices Go Nuts*. <https://kotaku.com/smash-bros-gamecube-adapters-sold-out-online-prices-g-1662162871>

Feldman, B. (2018). *How Fortnite Became the Most Popular Video Game on Earth*. New York Magazine. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/07/how-fortnite-became-the-most-popular-video-game-on-earth.html>

Fields, D. & Kafai, Y. (2007, July 16-21). *Tracing insider knowledge across time and spaces: A Connective Ethnography in a Teen Online Game World*. Conference: Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Computer Supported Collaborative Learning, CSCL'07, New Brunswick, NJ, USA. 199-208. 10.3115/1599600.1599640.

Fields, D.A., Kafai, Y.B. (2009). A connective ethnography of peer knowledge sharing and diffusion in a tween virtual world. *Computer Supported Learning* 4, 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11412-008-9057-1>

Fields, D. A., & Kafai, Y. B. (2010). *Knowing and Throwing Mudballs, Hearts, Pies, and Flowers: A Connective Ethnography of Gaming Practices*. *Games and Culture*, 5(1), 88–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009351263>

Foxman, M. (2019). *United We Stand: Platforms, Tools and Innovation With the Unity Game*

- Engine. *Social Media + Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119880177>
- Gach, E. (2019, January 8). *Top Smash Player Gets Temporary Twitch Ban For Drinking Too Much On Stream*. Kotaku. <https://kotaku.com/top-smash-player-gets-temporarily-banned-from-twitch-fo-1831585195>
- Gallagher, R., Jong, C., & Sinervo, K. A. (2017). Who Wrote the Elder Scrolls? Modders, Developers, and the Mythology of Bethesda Softworks. *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*. 10 (16). pp. 35-52.
- Gillespie, T. (2017, August 24). *The Platform Metaphor, Revisited*. Social Media Collective. <https://socialmediacollective.org/2017/08/24/the-platform-metaphor-revisited/>
- Gitelman, L. (2014). *Near Print and Beyond Paper*. In *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Duke University Press.
- Gray, K. (2013). Collective Organizing, Individual Resistance, or Asshole Griefer? An Ethnographic Analysis of Women of Color In Xbox Live. *ada A journal of gender new and technology*, (2). <https://adanewmedia.org/2013/06/issue2-gray/>
- Green'n'Clean. [SmashBoards User] (2008, April 11). Re: Dispute ended: New Sakurai interview - Wavedashing was intentional [*Oh. My.God. Why the hell did he get to make the ****ing game?*] SmashBoards. <https://smashboards.com/threads/dispute-ended-new-sakurai-interview-wavedashing-was-intentional.162416/>
- Griffin, S. (1982). "The Way of All Ideology." in *Feminist Theory*, ed. N. Keohane et al. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.
- Hanford N.A. (2018). At the Intersection of Difficulty and Masculinity: Crafting the Play Ethic. In: Taylor N., Voorhees G. (eds) *Masculinities in Play*. Palgrave Games in Context. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Hernandez, P. (24 April 2015) *Meet The 'Villain' of Super Smash Bros.* Kotaku.

<https://kotaku.com/meet-the-villain-of-super-smash-bros-1700057042>

Honda. (8 August 2019). *Honda x Team Liquid | "It Drives Me" ft. Hungrybox.* [Video] Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FjNKCALHTw>

Hungrybox. (22 November 2019). *Campbell's Soup ad* [Video]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/liquidhbox/status/1198012899865833472?lang=en>

Hungrybox. (16 February 2020). *Hungrybox wins Smash Summit 9 and CALLS OUT*

NINTENDO. [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31ghkB6G1rA>

Hungrybox. (19 February 2020). *Jersey Mike's coupon.* Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/LiquidHbox/status/1230182678550454279>

Jenson, J. & de Castell, S. (2011). Girls@Play, *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(2),

167-179, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2010.521625

Johnathan. (September 2018, September 21). *Frame One: The Laser.* Medium.

<https://medium.com/@jad7845/the-laser-frame-one-e4cc6a620421>

Johnathan. (2019, April 5). *Frame Two: Water.* Medium.

<https://medium.com/@jad7845/frame-two-water-4581dfd6166>

Jones, S., E., and Thiruvathukal, G. K (2012). *Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii*

Platform. MIT Press.

Joseph, D. (2017). *Distributing Productive Play: A Materialist Analysis of Steam.* PhD

Dissertation: York University.

Kahn, H.E., & Sassen, S. (2014). *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research.* Bloomington,

IN. Indiana University Press.

Kaplowitz, J. (2019, August 2). *Finally Nintendo is going door to door to patch wavedashing out*

of *Melee*. The Hard Times. <https://thehardtimes.net/harddrive/finally-nintendo-is-going-door-to-door-to-patch-wavedashing-out-of-melee/>

Kennedy, H. W. (2018). Game Jam as Feminist Methodology: The Affective Labors of Intervention in the Ludic Economy. *Games and Culture*, 13(7), 708–727.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018764992>

Keogh, B. (2014). Across worlds and bodies: Criticism in the age of video games. *Journal of Games Criticism* 1(1), 1-26.

Keogh, B. (2015) Between triple-A, indie, casual, and DIY: Sites of tension in the videogames cultural industries. In Oakley, K & O'Connor, J (Eds.) *The Routledge companion to the cultural industries (Routledge Media and Cultural Studies Companions)*. (pp.152-162). Routledge, United Kingdom.

Keogh, B. (2018). *A play of bodies: How we perceive videogames*. MIT Press

Kerr, A & Kelleher, J., D. (2015) The Recruitment of Passion and Community in the Service of Capital: Community Managers in the Digital Games Industry. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 32(3), 177-192, DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2015.1045005

Kessel, J. (12 July 2018). *2nd update on the progress of the Harassment Committee*.

<https://smashboards.com/threads/2nd-update-on-the-progress-of-the-harassment-committee.456494/>

Kessel, J. (2018, September 11). *The SSB Community Code of Conduct*. SmashBoards.

<https://smashboards.com/threads/the-ssb-community-code-of-conduct.458342/>

Kocurek, C. (2015). *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*. University of Minnesota Press. Retrieved February 21, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt19704vf

- Klepek, P. (2 December 2015). *Smash Community in Shock Over Sudden End to Popular Mod, Project M*. Kotaku.
<https://kotaku.com/smash-community-in-shock-over-sudden-end-to-popular-mod-17457674>
- Kuchera, B. (2018, December 14). *Why Super Smash Bros. Ultimate feels so laggy: It's not just you*. Polygon. <https://www.polygon.com/2018/12/14/18140814/super-smash-bros-ultimate-input-lag-latency-feel>
- Kwak, H., Blackburn, J., & Han, S. (2015). *Exploring Cyberbullying and Other Toxic Behavior in Team Competition Online Games*. In Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '15). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 3739–3748.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702529>
- Lazzarato, M. (1996). *Immaterial Labor*, in P. Virno & M. Hardt *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, [translated by Paul Colilli and Ed Emory]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 132-147.
- Leander, K. M., & McKim, K. K. (2003). Tracing the everyday 'sittings' of adolescents on the internet: A strategic adaptation of ethnography across online and offline spaces.
Education, Communication, Information, 3(2), 211-240.
- Leander, K. M. (2014). Toward a Connective Ethnography of Online/Offline Literacy Networks. In Julie Coiro, Michele Knobel, Colin Lankshear, Donald J. Leu (Eds.) *Handbook of research on new literacies* (pp. 51-84). Routledge.
- Lederle-Ensign, D., & Wardrip-Fruin, N. (2016). *What is Strafe Jumping? idTech3 and the*

- Game Engine as Software Platform*. Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association. 2(2). 10.26503/todigra.v2i2.35.
- Lee, D. (2015, January 27). *Evidence.zip*. <http://www.meleeitonme.com/evidence-zip/#prettyPhoto>
- Lee, D. (2016, December 27). *SSBMRank 2016: 90-81*. Red Bull.
<https://www.redbull.com/us-en/ssbmrnk-2016-81-90-red-bull-esports>
- Lee, D. (2018, January 9). *SSBMRank 2017: 60-51*. Red Bull.
<https://www.redbull.com/us-en/ssbmrnk-2017-60-51>
- Lee, D. (2018, January 16). *SSBMRank 2017: 10-1*. Red Bull.
<https://www.redbull.com/us-en/ssbmrnk-2017-10-1>
- Lee, A. (2018, July). *Super Smash Bros. "Harassment Task Force" accuses top Melee player Nightmare of sexual misconduct*.
http://gametyrant.com/news/super-smash-bros-harassment-task-force-faces-legal-challenge?utm_source=gametyrant.com&utm_medium=related
- Lee, A. (2018, June). *Eikermann Retires from Competitive Melee After Abuse Allegations Surface*.
<http://gametyrant.com/news/eikermann-retires-from-competitive-melee-after-abuse-allegations-surface>
- Lee, A. (2018, November 7). *Top Las Vegas Smash 4 player JK banned from competition After writing threatening messages*. <http://gametyrant.com/news/top-las-vegas-smash-4-player-jk-banned-from-competition-ft-r-violent-threats>
- Lin, H. & Sun, C-T. (2011). The Role of Onlookers in Arcade Gaming: Frame Analysis

- of Public Behaviours. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research Into New Media Technologies*, 17. 125-137. 10.1177/1354856510397111.
- Mackenzie, A. (2010). *Wirelessness: Radical Empiricism in Network Cultures*. MIT Press.
- Marcotte, J. (2017). *Queering Game Controls*. CGSA 2017.
- <http://tag.hexagram.ca/jekagames/cgsa-2017-queering-game-controls-slides-and-talk/>
- Marcotte, J. (2018). Queering Control(lers) Through Reflective Game Design Practices *Game Studies*. 18(3). <http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/marcotte>
- Marcus, G. (1995). "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24. (pp.95–117).
- Mauss, M. (1973) Techniques of the body, *Economy and Society*, 2(1)/, 70-88, DOI: 10.1080/03085147300000003
- Medler, B. (2011). Player Dossiers: Analyzing Gameplay Data as a Reward <http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/medler>
- Meehan, T. (2015, December 3). *The Real Reason Project M's Developers Cancelled the Smash Bros. Mod was Fear of Legal Action*. <https://gamnesia.nintendoenthusiast.com/the-real-reason-project-ms-developers-cancelled-the-smash-bros-mod-was-fear/>
- Mew2queen (2019, January 27). *I'm Submitting my Defense to the Court of Public Opinion*. TwitLonger. https://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1sqpqid
- MIOM (2018, April 16). *Melee Ruleset*. Melee it on Me. <http://www.meleeitonme.com/ruleset/>
- [@sheridactyls]. (2017, September 14). *Announcement: The CC Leadership Panel has accepted Axe's offer to step down from the 25, and welcomes Emilywaves into the panel*. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/sheridactyls/status/908122317254881281>
- Nestico, A. (2020, January 13). *#MeleePGR2019: 100-91*. Red Bull.

- <https://www.redbull.com/us-en/mpgr-2019-100-91>
- Nestico, A. (2020, January 24). #MPGR2019: 10-1. Red Bull.
[redbull.com/us-en/mpgr-2019-10-1](https://www.redbull.com/us-en/mpgr-2019-10-1)
- Newell, A. (12 December 2018). *What is GSP and how does online work in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate? Learning is half the battle*. Dot Esports. <https://dotesports.com/fgc/news/what-is-gsp-and-how-does-online-work-in-super-smash-bros-ultimate>
- Newell, G. (2013). “*On Productivity, Economics, Political Institutions, and the Future of Corporations: Reflections of a Video Game Maker*.” [Video]. Invited Presentation at University of Texas Austin, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs.
- Nieborg, D. B. (2015). Crushing Candy: The Free-to-Play Game in Its Connective Commodity Form. *Social Media + Society*. 10.1177/2056305115621932
- Nieborg, D.B. (2016). From premium to freemium: the political economy of the app. In T. Leaver & M. William (Eds.), *Social, Casual, and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic. (pp. 225-240).
- Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4275–4292.
- Nintendo. (2019, September 4). *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate – Mr. Sakurai Presents "Banjo & Kazooie"*. [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPh3HM6ofWU>
- Nintendo. (2020, January 16). *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate – Mr. Sakurai Presents "Byleth"*. [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2aqVILlKkcg>
- Nakamura, Y. & Furukawa, Y. (2018, February 8). *You Can Now Officially Play Esports for Money in Japan*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-08/at-long-last-japan-finally-oks-video-gaming-as-a-profession>

Nintendo Dream. (2008). <https://www.sourcegaming.info/2016/03/31/dengeki2015/>

Hoffman, C. & Thomason, S. (May 2008). *Nintendo Power*, 228.

<https://www.sourcegaming.info/2015/09/06/nintendopower228/>

Nolla, K. [@drpiggyphd] (2018, December 01). [*The Code of Conduct reporting system is now live: We have assigned panelists to cases*]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/drpiggyphd/status/1068717808190660608>

Nolla, K. [@drpiggyphd] (2019, November 9). [One case every six weeks is not enough].

Twitter. <https://twitter.com/drpiggyphd/status/1193336802729451520>

North, C. (2019, February 7). *Did You Know: In 2008, This Super Smash Bros. Tournament Had Items On,*

<https://ggn00b.com/for-noobs/did-you-know-in-2008-this-super-smash-bros-tournament-had-items-on/>

Osborn, A. (2015, December 2). *Super Smash Bros. Mod Project M No Longer in Development.*

<https://www.ign.com/articles/2015/12/02/super-smash-bros-mod-project-m-no-longer-in-development>

Partin, W. (2018, July 13). ‘*StarCraft II*’: *How Blizzard Brought the King of Esports Back From the Dead.* [https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/starcraft-ii-esports-history-](https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/starcraft-ii-esports-history-1202873246/)

[1202873246/](https://variety.com/2018/gaming/features/starcraft-ii-esports-history-1202873246/)

Partin, W. (2019). *The esports pipeline problem.* Polygon.

<https://www.polygon.com/features/2019/7/11/18632716/esports-amateur-pro-players-teams-talent-process>

Partin, W. (2020). *Esports and the Platformization of Cultural Production.* Unpublished

Paul, C. (2018). *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst.*

Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.

Perlmutter, Z. (2019). *How Nintendo kept the GameCube controller in constant circulation.*

<https://www.nintendoenthusiast.com/nintendo-gamecube-controller-constant-circulation/>

Pink, S., Horst, H. A., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice.*

Plante, C. (2020, February 5). 'Smash Ultimate' Fighter Pass 2 Release Dates,

Possible Fighters, and Leaks to Know. [https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/super-](https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/super-smash-bros-ultimate-fighter-pass-2-release-date-characters-doom-guy-travis-touchdown)

[smash-bros-ultimate-fighter-pass-2-release-date-characters-doom-guy-travis-touchdown](https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/super-smash-bros-ultimate-fighter-pass-2-release-date-characters-doom-guy-travis-touchdown)

Plantin, J.-C., Lagoze, C., Edwards, P. N., & Sandvig, C. (2018). Infrastructure studies meet platform studies in the age of Google and Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 20(1), 293–310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816661553>

PMDev Team (2013, December 27). *Clone Engine Blogpost - Limits, Restrictions, and Possibilities.*

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140203064757/http://projectmgame.com/en/news/clone-engine-blogpost-limits-restrictions-and-possibilities>

PMDev Team (2015). *Download Page.* [Archived November 4, 2015].

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151104230906/http://projectmgame.com/en/download>

PMDev Team. (2015). *Project M farewell post.* <https://projectmgame.com/>

PMDev Team. (2015). *Project M About page.*

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151129014713/http://projectmgame.com/en/about>

PMunofficial. (2020). *Download Page* (Unofficial site)

<https://pmunofficial.com/en/download/>

Polar Ace [@PolarAceEsports] (2019, August 2) [*Polar Ace drops Captain Zack.*] Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/PolarAceEsports/status/1157444378861953024>

Postigo, H. (2010). Modding to the big leagues: Exploring the space between modders and the game industry. *First Monday*, 15(5). doi:<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v15i5.2972>

Rambusch, J., Jakobsson, P., & Pargman, D. (2007). Exploring E-sports: A Case Study of Gameplay in Counter-strike. DiGRA '07 Conference.

Rocketman. (2002). *Rocketman question*. Smash Brothers Questionnaire.

https://www.nintendo.co.jp/n01/n64/software/nus_p_nalj/smash/flash/syukeiken/index.html

Romine, M. (2019). Women's Esports Competitions: One Path to Equity. Medium.

<https://medium.com/@rhoulette/womens-esports-competitions-a-path-to-equity-65edbc7c6b29>

Ruberg, B. (2019). *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. NYU Press.

Sakurai, M. (1999). *Moves: Advanced*. Smashbros.com.

http://web.archive.org/web/19991117180837/http://smashbros.com/moves_advattacklanding.html

Sakurai, M. (1999). Smashbrosdojo.com.

https://www.nintendo.co.jp/n01/n64/software/nus_p_nalj/smash/Control.html%E7%A%BA%E4%B8%AD%E6%94%BB%E6%92%83%E7%9D%80%E5%9C%B0

Sakurai, M. (2002). *Rocketman response*. Smash Brothers Questionnaire.

https://www.nintendo.co.jp/n01/n64/software/nus_p_nalj/smash/flash/syukeiken/index.html

Scacchi, W. (2010). Computer game mods, modders, modding, and the mod scene. *First Monday*, 15(5). doi:<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v15i5.2965>

Scully-Blaker, R. (2016). *Smash Mods, Smash Creativity: Nintendo, Project M, and Enclosure*.

DiGRA. First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG. Dundee, Ireland, August 1-6, 2016.

Seif El-Nasar, M., and Smith, B. (2006). Learning through game modding. *Computers in entertainment - theoretical practices*. 4(10).

Shaw, A. (2015). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press.

Shieber, J. (2017, May 2). *Wavedash raises \$6 million for its platform fighting game*.
<https://techcrunch.com/2017/05/02/wavedash-raises-6-million-for-its-platform-fighting-game/>

Shoujo, S. (2020, February 18). *Patch 10.4 notes*. Riot Games.
<https://na.leagueoflegends.com/en-us/news/game-updates/patch-10-4-notes/>

Sicart, M. (2017). Queering the Controller. *Analog Game Studies*.
<http://analoggamestudies.org/2017/07/queering-the-controller/>

Siitonen, M. (2009). *Conflict management and leadership communication in multiplayer communities*. In H. Kennedy (Ed.), *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009.

Slush. (2018). *The History of Leffen - Transformation of a Villain / The History of ESPORTS (SSBM DBFZ)*. [Video]. Youtube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_pYV6L6Xwk&feature=youtu.be

Smash Code of Conduct Graphic [Digital image]. (2018, September 11).

<https://imgur.com/a/SONQI0q>

SmashBoards. (2008, August 10). *CPU won EVO!*

<https://smashboards.com/threads/cpu-won-evo.188025/>

Smith, W. (2016, April 21). Mango: "Being a Mango fan is a beautiful thing--and also sometimes the worst thing in the world." ESPN.

https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/15288899/being-mango-fan-beautiful-thingand-somes-worst-thing-world

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA : Polity

SSB Code of Conduct: 2-Page Summary. (2018, September 11).

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QUADABxEVWtnu46-H7Lg06YqLvxbAfBxCcqF7KzsPw/edit>

[@SSBConductPanel] (2019, January 23). [*Mafia unbanned Twitlonger*]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/SSBConductPanel/status/1088289503003971584>

[@SSBConductPanel] (2019, January 25). *23 appeals/Mafia unban reactions*. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/SSBConductPanel/status/1088839277138583552>

[@SSBConductPanel] (2019, July 5). [*Ally lifetime Ban*]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/SSBConductPanel/status/1147143409448214529>

[@SSBConductPanel] (2019, July 8). Sexual Violence Training. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/SSBConductPanel/status/1148756133605232640>

[@SSBConductPanel] (2019, October 2). [*CoC Apology I*]. Twitter

<https://twitter.com/SSBConductPanel/status/1179400908460974086>

[@SSBConductPanel] 2019, November 9). [*CoC Apology Update*]. Twitter.

<https://twitter.com/SSBConductPanel/status/1193342218733576194>

[@SSBConductPanel] (2020, January 18). [*SV mandatory minimums*]. Tweet.

<https://twitter.com/SSBConductPanel/status/1218610697552220161>

- Su, N.M. (2010). *Street fighter IV: braggadocio off and on-line*. CSCW '10.
<https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/1718918.1718981>
- Stenhouse, H. (2019, October 29). *The King of Smash, Ken Hoang, talks Melee, life and his love of art*. <https://ag.hyperxgaming.com/article/8746/the-king-of-smash-ken-hoang-talks-melee-life-and-his-love-of-art>
- Stevens, A. (2018, December 14). *How Capcom Created an Esports Fighting Circuit Out of a Grassroots Scene*. <https://esportsobserver.com/capcom-cup-street-fighter/>
- Stitch. (2016, August 29). *The Brief History of the World Cyber Games*. Dot Esports.
<https://dotesports.com/counter-strike/news/the-brief-history-of-the-world-cyber-games-12394>
- Suarez, L. (2020, January 23). *Fall 2019 #PGRU: 10-1*. Red Bull.
<https://www.redbull.com/us-en/pgru-fall-2019-10-1>
- Sundén, J. (2009). *Play as Transgression: An Ethnographic Approach to Queer Game Cultures*. DiGRA 2009. Stockholm, Sweden.
- Supercell. (2020). *Supercell Creators*. <https://creators.supercell.com/en/register>
- Tate, D. (2018, December 19). *A Guide on Wavedashing in Smash Ultimate: What Is It Good For?* TeamDignitas.net. <http://team-dignitas.net/articles/blogs/smash/13255/a-guide-on-wavedashing-in-smash-ultimate-what-is-it-good-for>
- Taylor, N. 2009. *Power Play: Digital Gaming Goes Pro*. PhD Dissertation, York University, Toronto.
- Taylor, N. 2009. “*Where the women are(n’t): Gender and a North American*

- 'pro-gaming' scene.*” In *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory: Proceedings of the 2009 Digital Games Research Association conference*, eds. Barry Atkins, Helen Kennedy, and Tanya Krzywinska. London.
- Taylor, N. (2016). Now you're playing with audience power: the work of watching games. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 36(4). pp. 293-307
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1215481>
- Taylor, N. (2018). I'd rather be a cyborg than a gamerbro: How masculinity mediates research on digital play. *MedieKultur: Journal of media and communication research*. 34(21). 10.7146/mediekultur.v34i64.96990.
- Taylor, N. & Jenson, J. & de Castell, S. (2009). Cheerleaders/booth babes/ Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys. *Digital Creativity*, 20. (pp. 239-252). 10.1080/14626260903290323.
- Taylor, N., Jenson, J., de Castell, S. and Dilouya, B. (2014), Public Displays of Play: Studying Online Games in Physical Settings. *J Comput-Mediat Comm*, 19 (pp. 763-779). doi:10.1111/jcc4.12054
- Taylor, N. & de Castell, S. & Jenson, J. & Hurley, R. & Lakkaraju, K. & Sukthankar, G. & Wigand, R. (2018). *Management (Im)Material: Negotiating Leadership in Virtual Worlds*. 10.1017/9781316422823.008.
- Taylor, N. & Stout, B. (2019). *Gender and the two-tiered system of collegiate esports*. ReFiG 2019 Conference, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Taylor, T.L. (2002). *'Whose Game Is This Anyway?': Negotiating Corporate Ownership in a Virtual World* in F. Mäyrä (Ed.), *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

- Taylor, T.L. (2003). "The Sopranos Meets EverQuest: Socialization Processes in Massively Multiuser Games" with Mikael Jakobsson, *FineArt Forum*, 17(8).
- Taylor, T.L. (2004). "*The Social Design of Virtual Worlds: Constructing the User and Community Through Code*" in M. Consalvo et. al. (eds.), *Internet Research Annual Volume 1: Selected Papers from the Association of Internet Researchers Conferences 2000-2002*. New York: Peter Lang, (pp. 260-268).
- Taylor, T.L. (2006). "Does WoW Change Everything?: How a PvP Server, Multinational Playerbase, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause," *Games and Culture*, 1 (4): 1-20; reprinted in J. Walker and H. Corneliussen (eds.) *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, (pp. 187-201). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Taylor, T. L. (2009). The Assemblage of Play. *Games and Culture*, 4(4), 331–339.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343576>
- Taylor, T. L., & Witowski, E. (2010). *This is how we play it: what a mega-LAN can teach us about games*. FDG '10: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games. June 2010. (pp. 195–202).
<https://doi.org/10.1145/1822348.1822374>
- Terranova, T. (2004). "Free Labour," in *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 73-97.
- Unger, A. (2012). Modding as Part of Game Culture. In: Fromme J., Unger A. (eds) *Computer Games and New Media Cultures*. Springer, Dordrecht.
- [@TempoAxe] (2017, September 13). [*There's already plenty top player representation. Armada and I wouldn't have stepped down if we didn't think Emily was the right choice.*] Twitter.
<https://twitter.com/TempoAxe/status/908171219307872259>

- The Score Esports. (2018, November 24). *The Story of Leffen: The God Slayer* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-m5RnRySsEU&t=617s>.
- Tobin, S. (2016). Hanging in the video arcade. *Journal of Games Criticism*.
<http://gamescriticism.org/articles/tobin-3-a>
- Visweswaran, K. (2003). Defining Feminist Ethnography. In Lincoln, Y.S., & Denzin, N.K. (Eds.) *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief. Crossroads in Qualitative Inquiry Series*. AltaMira Press. Walnut Creek, CA.
- Voorhees G., & Orlando A. (2018) Performing Neoliberal Masculinity: Reconfiguring Hegemonic Masculinity in Professional Gaming. In: Taylor N., Voorhees G. (eds) *Masculinities in Play*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Walker, I. (2018, October 01). *Controversial Smash Player Banned From Several Events Under New Code Of Conduct*. <https://kotaku.com/controversial-smash-player-banned-from-several-events-u-1829437361>
- Warwo, A. (2018, October 5). *Wavedash Games lays off a majority of staff*. 5 October 2018.
https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/328071/Icons_dev_Wavedash_Games_lays_off_Majority_of_staff.php
- Warner, M. (2002). *Publics and Counterpublics*. Zone Books. New York.
- Wasko, Janet. 2001. "The Disney Empire," in *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. (pp. 28-69). Polity.
- Webb, K. (2019, July 9). *A top 'Super Smash Bros.' player admitted to dating a teenage competitor and immediately announced his retirement*.
<https://www.businessinsider.com/super-smash-bros-ally-retired-dating-teenager-player-2019-7>

- Wellman, B. & Haythornthwaite, C., (2002). *The Internet in Everyday Life: An Introduction in*
B. Wellman & C. Haythornthwaite (Eds.) *The Internet in Everyday Life*. Blackwell
Publishers Ltd.
- Whitehead, T. (2017). Former Project M devs unveil Icons Combat Arena; it sure looks like
Super Smash Bros. 17 July 2017.
http://www.nintendolife.com/news/2017/07/former_project_m_devs_unveil_icons_combat_arena_it_sure_looks_like_smash_bros
- Williams, J.P., Kirschner, D., & Suhaimi-Broder, Z. (2014), Structural roles in massively
multiplayer online games: A case study of guild and raid leaders in World of Warcraft. In
Johns, M., D., Chen, S-L, S. & L.A. Terlip, L., A. (Eds.), *Symbolic Interaction and New
Social Media*. (pp. 121-142). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Williams, R. (1980). "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Theory," in *Problems in Materialism
and Culture: Selected Essays*. (pp. 31-49). London: Verso.
- Witkowski, E. (2013). Eventful masculinities: negotiations of hegemonic sporting masculinities
at LANs in Mia Consalvo, Konstantin Mitgutsch and Abe Stein (Eds.) *Sports
Videogames*. (pp. 217-235). New York: Routledge.
- Womack, B. (2015, March 24). *Friendlylies: TSM Leffen, Smash's Loveable Villain*. Red Bull.
<https://www.redbull.com/us-en/friendlylies-tsm-leffen-the-villain>
- Womack, B. (2015, November 11). *Friendlylies: Ken, the 'King of Smash'*. Red Bull.
<https://www.redbull.com/us-en/friendlylies-ken-the-king-of-smash>

Special Thanks to Source Gaming poster Soma, for translating and transcribing several Japanese websites and magazine articles. Citations appear for the source material, but this note is an effort to pay respect to their work.

FIGURES

Venue Drawings

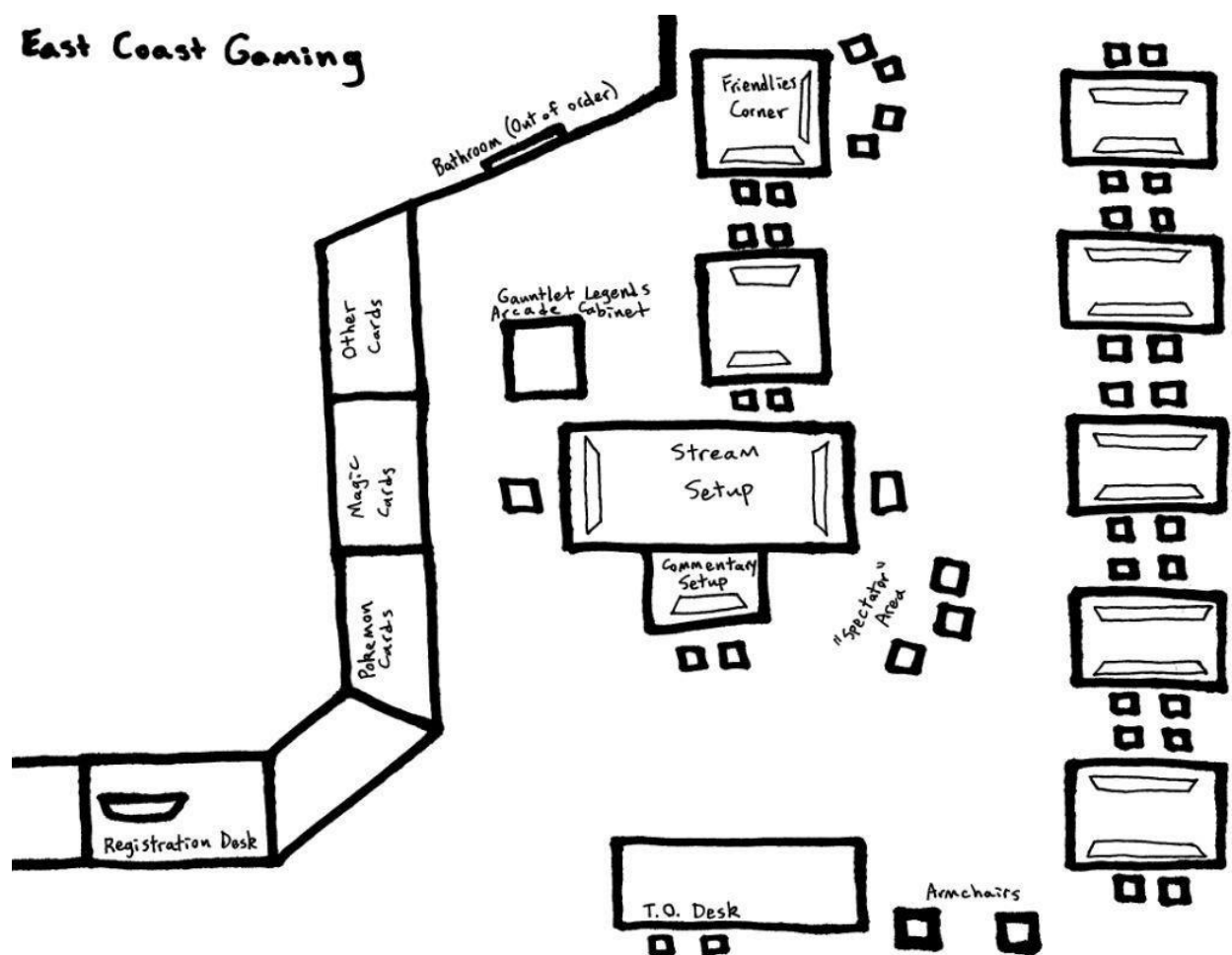


Figure A - East Coast Gaming (Cary, NC)

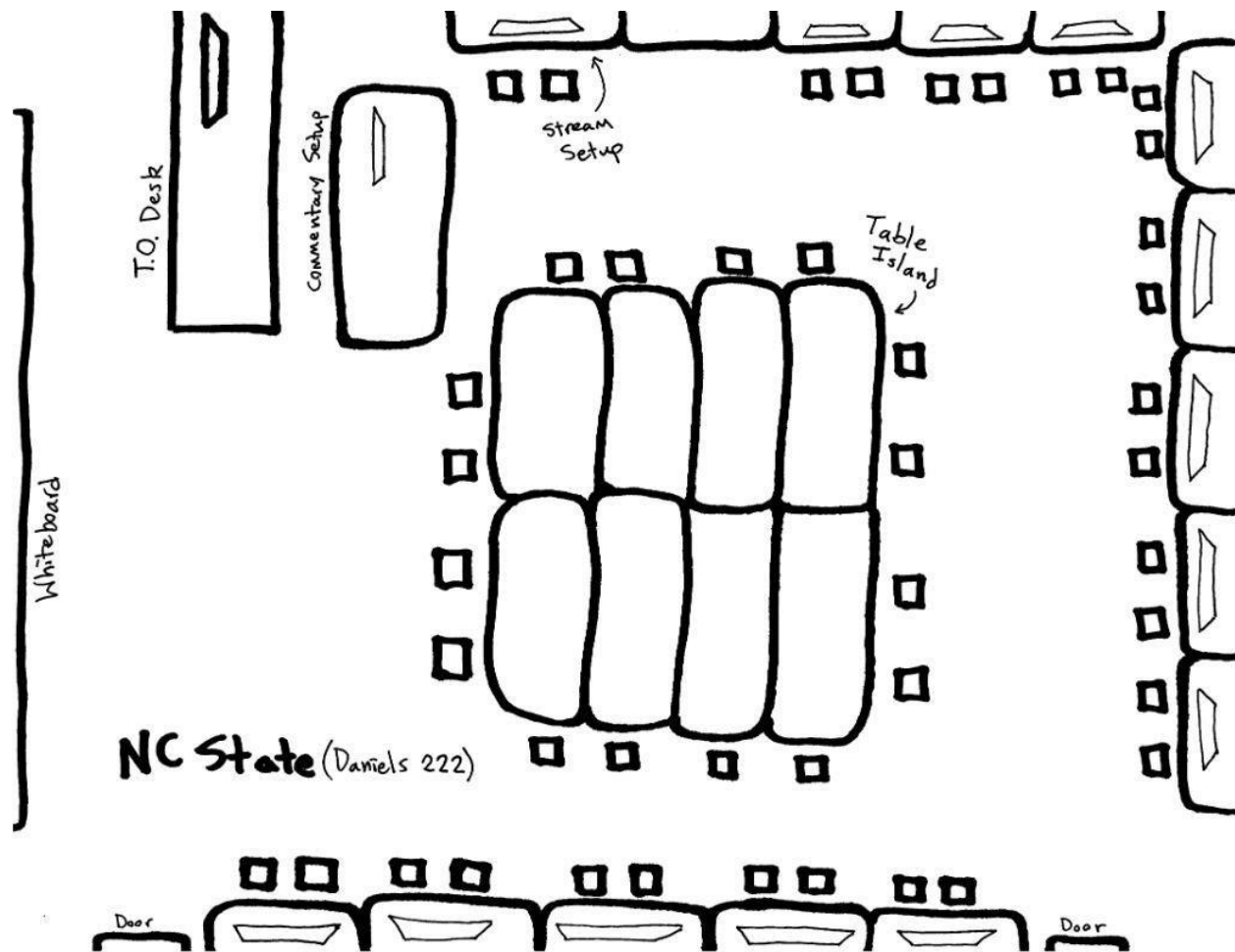


Figure B - North Carolina State University (Daniels Hall Room 222)

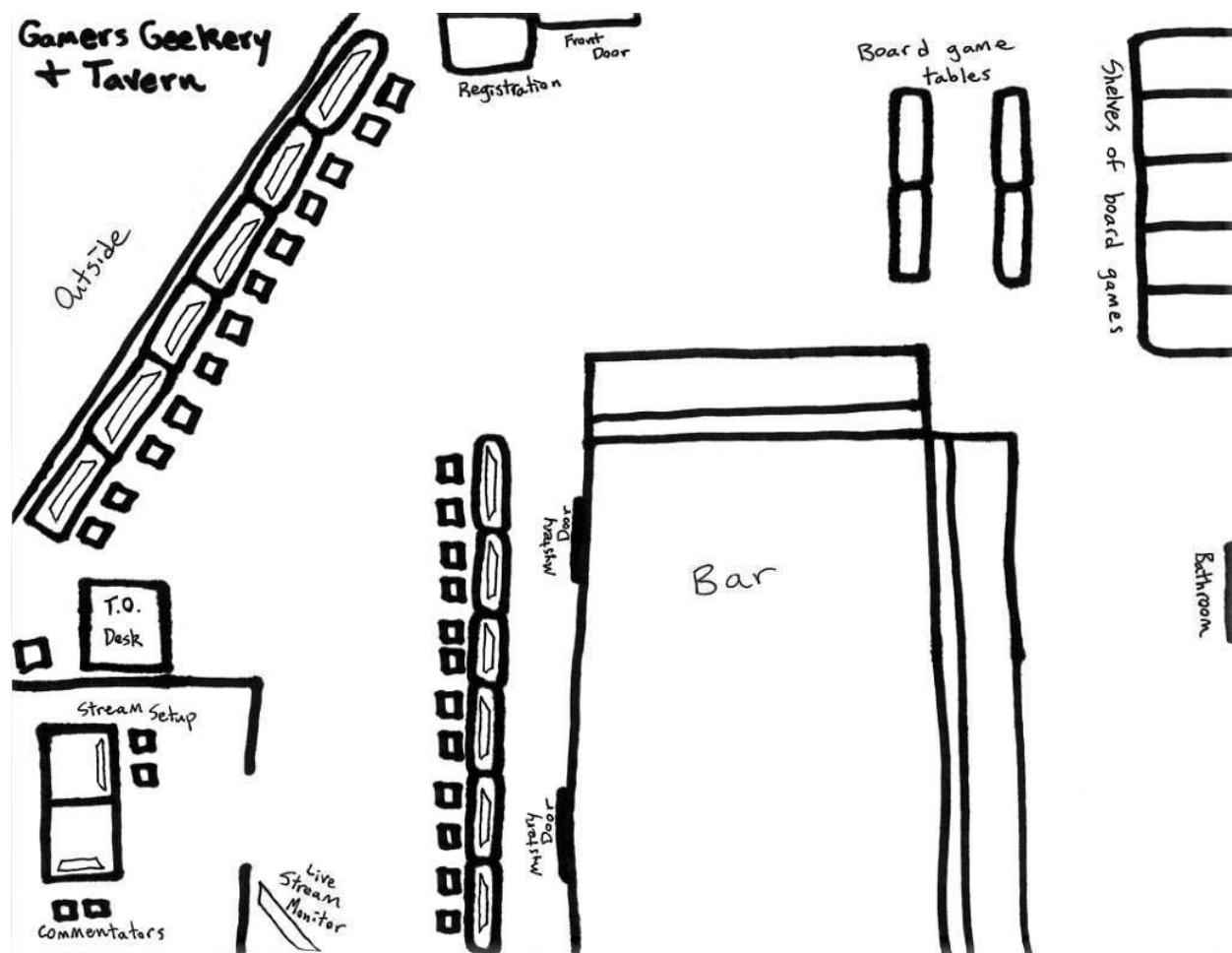


Figure C - Gamers Geekery and Tavern (Cary, NC)

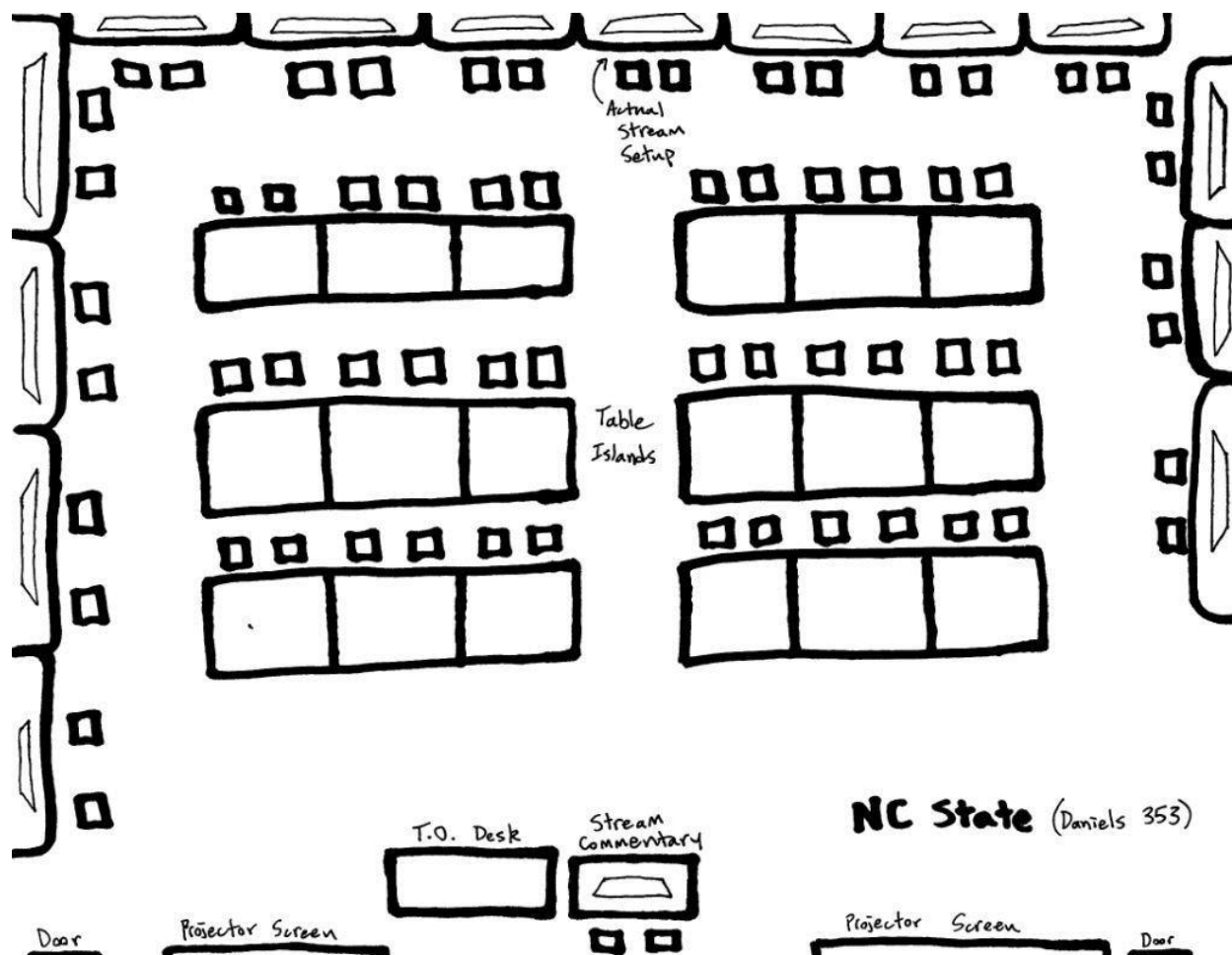


Figure D - North Carolina State University (Daniels Hall Room 353)

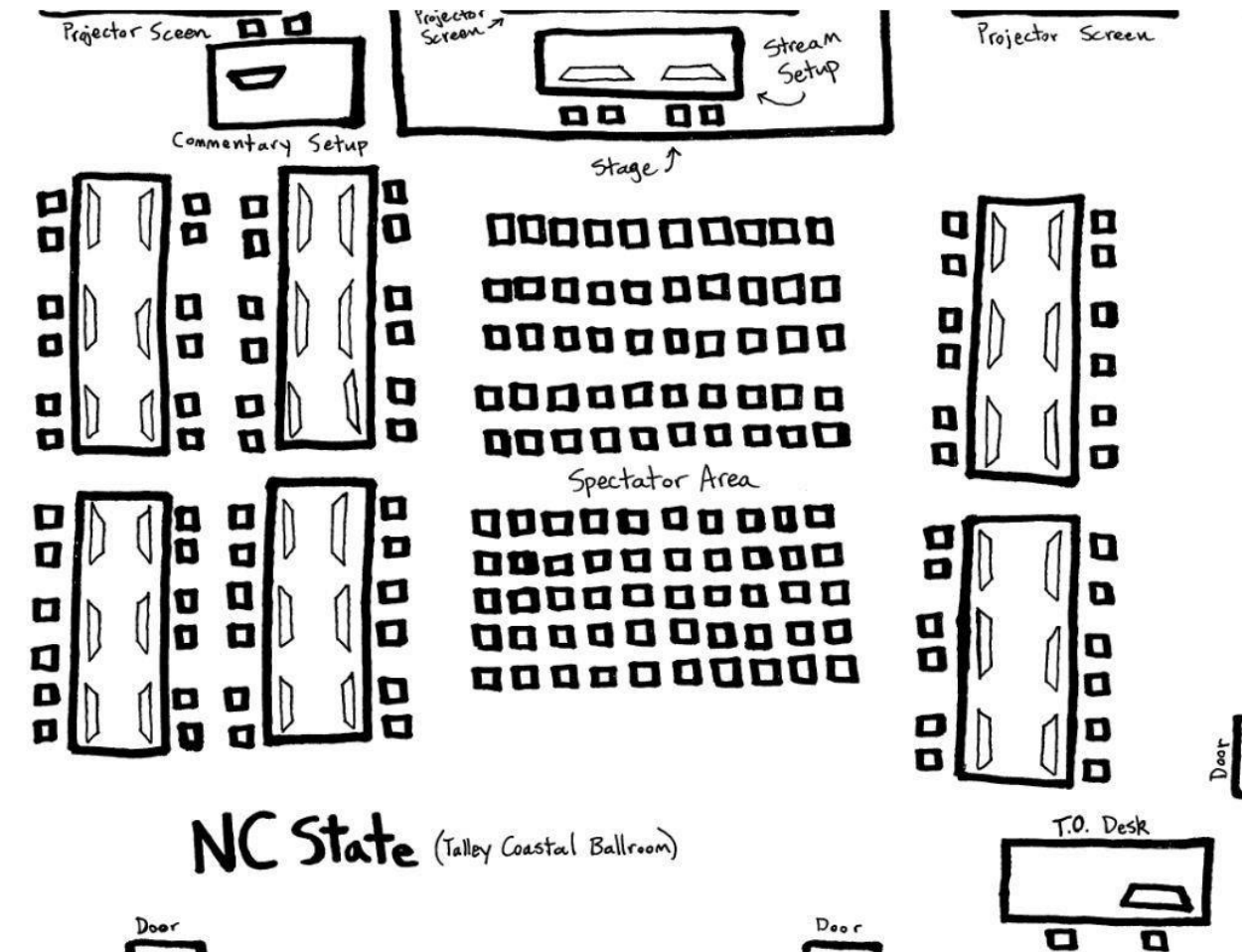


Figure E - North Carolina State University (Talley Student Union: Coastal Ballroom)

Photographs



Figure F - *Smash Sans Frontières* - Gamers Geekery and Tavern (Cary, NC)



Figure G - North Carolina State University, (Daniels Hall Room 353) - *Smash @ State* (Raleigh, NC)



Figure H - North Carolina State University, Talley Student Union, Coastal Ballroom - Just Roll With It! 11 (Raleigh, NC)



Figure I - North Carolina State University, Daniels Hall Room 353 - Zenith 5 (Raleigh, NC)



Figure J - North Carolina State University, Daniels Hall Room 370 - Zenith 5 (Raleigh, NC)



Figure K - Me at a tournament in “teacher” attire



Figure L - Jay's CD and Hobby - Star KO 13 (Des Moines, IA)

APPENDIX

Interview Schedule

1. Background questions:

- How old are you?
- Where do you live now (region and/or city)?
- Do you live with your parent(s)/guardian(s), or on your own/with partner/with friends/other?
- Do you go to school? What level / studying what?
- Are you employed? Doing what?
- How would you describe your ethnic background?

2. Gaming questions:

- When did you start playing video games?
- What games are you currently playing?
- What systems do you have at home?
- What is your earliest memory of playing video games with other people?
- What is your most memorable moment:
- Playing online? Playing at an event?
- What other hobbies do you have?

3. Event-specific questions:

- How often do you go to tournaments?
- How many other LAN events have you been to? Participated in?
- Did you travel from out of town to get here today? If so...
- How are you paying for this trip?
- Did you travel with other people?
- How did you hear about this event?

4a. Competitive gaming questions for players only:

- How did you get involved in competitive gaming?
- How often do you practice? For how many hours a week? With who?
- How do you get better?
- Are you a member of a team or squad? What do you bring to the team?
- Are you or your team/squad sponsored?
- What is the highest you've placed at a competitive gaming tournament?
- Are you here to win or here to have fun?
- Have you ever lost in tournament to someone significantly younger than you?
- What do your parents/friends/romantic partners think about your involvement in competitive gaming?

4b. Competitive gaming questions for both spectators and players

- What kind of people play MOBAs? RTSs? Fighting games?
- What kind of stereotypes have you encountered about gamers in general? About people playing Ultimate specifically? Do you think they're true?

5. Community Questions

- Are you a member of any Facebook groups/discord servers?
- How comfortable do you feel talking in those?
- How comfortable do you feel at this event?

- How many people here have you met F2F at events?
- How many do you know from online?

- Is there anything else you'd like to say about how your experiences with Smash have impacted your life or who you are as a person?

6. Supplementary Questions (Time permitting)

- How long have you been at this event? How long do you plan on staying?
- What have you spent the most time doing so far?
- What are you most looking forward to?

- When do you think you'll stop playing Ultimate? What do you think the reasons will be?
- How important is competitive gaming to you? On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being highest priority 1 being lowest, how would you rank competitive gaming compared to other activities (school, work, romantic relationships, other hobbies)?