

Defining Gaming Communities: A *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* Case Study

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The question of what defines gaming communities has, for a long time, been studied by scholars in different fields of research. From these studies, many recurrent characteristics are identified: shared identity (Hand and Moore 2006; Taylor 2006), knowledge (Crawford 2011; Malaby 2006), and language (Mäyrä 2008); relationships (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008), fan creations, collective values (Erickson 1997), etc. Taking these studies and characteristics into consideration, the following questions may also be raised: what are the internal dynamics and power relationships within these communities? How are social norms—herein broadly understood as a set of expected behaviours (Mongeau and Saint-Charles 2011)—built, legitimized and “imposed” on newcomers? By whom?

Thus, as seen through the literature and these questions, defining gaming communities is a complex task that may be approached in different ways. In this presentation, we will present results from a research that is currently underway and that will conclude in July 2019. This study is being conducted by four graduate students in the field of communications. It aims to contribute to the existing research by defining the main characteristics and social dynamics of the *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (Bandai Namco Studios 2018) (SSBU) competitive community. From these objectives and case study, we seek to answer the following questions: 1) how can we qualify the SSBU competitive community? 2) how does this community appropriate the game’s culture? 3) how are the social norms and “appropriate” behaviours developed within this community?

To answer these questions, we approach the concept of community by proposing our own definition: a community is an entity organized around an object of interest, that is both acted on and acts upon a videogame company and through which power relationships guide how the game’s culture will develop (values, norms, meta, etc.). In other words, companies design their games in a way that may guide (soft-determinism) (Smith and Marx 1994) players’ actions and ways of interpreting or extending what is offered. In a dynamic relationship with these companies, members of gaming communities are active by reinterpreting (Hall 1980), appropriating (de Certeau 1990), and poaching (Jenkins 1992) the videogame.

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Moreover, certain members or leaders gain and consolidate their capital (cultural, social, and symbolic) and influence within these communities (Bourdieu 1986), meaning that they also guide how a videogame's culture will evolve. This is possible since those leaders are legitimized through their discourses and actions which, in turn, reinforce and reconduct their power position (Foucault 1971) over newcomers and regular members. Ultimately, gaming communities operate on the basis of knowledge sharing. Namely, discourses or ways of interpreting, playing, and being are shared and become normalized within a given period of time by certain people. To resume this point, « members of a given community share knowledge on an informal basis, and respect the social norms of their community that drive their behaviour and beliefs » (Burger-Helmchen and Cohendet 2011).

This position reinforces the fact that multiple relationships and communicational dynamics characterize gaming communities. These complex relationships can refer, for example, to a continuous back and forth between the “in-game” and “out-of-game”. As certain behaviours progressively become dominant in-game, thus forming the “meta”, discussions also take place out-of-game (forums, *Twitch*, etc.) where social norms or “appropriate” behaviours are legitimized (Donaldson 2015). Likewise, players creating *Machinima* videos will both use the game as a platform for capturing images and *YouTube* as a way to share their creations, get feedback, and polish their filming techniques (Newman 2008). In any case, the interrelation between both spaces (in and out-of-game) is important to study since they feed off each other and are therefore central to community building. As previously mentioned, the interinfluence between a community and a videogame company must also be studied over time in order to understand how a game's culture evolves.

Considering this theoretical groundwork, we chose SSBU as a relevant and pertinent case study to answer our research questions. Released on the 7th of December 2018 on the *Nintendo Switch*, SSBU is the 5th instalment of the series, developed by *Bandai Namco Studios* and published by *Nintendo*. Throughout the history of the series and now with SSBU, the competitive community has created an important space for itself in and out-of-game: official forums, dedicated channels on *Twitch*, unofficial tournaments, etc. Also known as “smashers”, this community has, especially since *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (HAL Laboratory 2001) on the *GameCube*, attempted to legitimize *Smash* as a “real” fighting game (Harper 2014). This has been accomplished namely by creating a specific set of rules, terminology, and code of conduct (Elmezeny and Wimmer 2015; Jakobsson 2007).

To answer our questions, the methodology used will then be an analysis of this community's discourse at two periods of time: at the game's launch and following the 2.0 patch released almost two months later. As for the methods, first of all, we will conduct a discourse analysis of the following platforms: *Smashboards* and the game's official subreddit. For both platforms and at both periods of time, we will study the ten most popular threads regarding the metagame and/or code of conduct. Our aim is to analyse messages/posts until we achieve data saturation (Creswell 2007). Second of all, for both periods of time, we will compare these findings with a semiotic (how the interface is presented) and discourse analysis of two videos for each of the three most popular SSBU competitive streamers on *Twitch* and *YouTube*. These four platforms were selected as they are the main spaces where the community gathers out-of-game. To conduct this study, we have built an analysis grid with different coding categories that will help us understand the social and communicational dynamics within the SSBU community. Ultimately, with this presentation, we will show our conclusions on SSBU's competitive community and contribute new and pertinent results and reflections to the ever-lasting question about what constitutes a gaming community today.

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