Culturalization or Deculturalization?
Looking at the Smash Brother Franchise
from a Fandom Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Culturalization in video games has been inspected under academic principles as the gaming industry grows more aware of the possible impact of cultural distinctiveness on market reception and thus on the production pipeline. Issues with culturalization in video games could range from personal level, meaning how individual player relates himself/herself to the game play, to political or religious level, meaning whether the in-game content is appropriate under a certain regime. However, the concept of culture, when discussed under this current interest in culturalizing video games, is commonly pointed towards races, nationalities, or religions, which all originate from a structural-functional view. In this paper, we provide a literature review on the definition of culture, and how fandom under the new definition of culture could shed insight into the current state of culturalization of video games. After performing a case study of the Super Smash Bros franchise using fandom as the key cultural element, we suggest that instead of treating culture as a fixed structural-functional concept, developers should view culture as a constant changing flow of intra-group/inter-group interaction when approaching culturalization during their game production cycle.

Keywords

Culturalization, fandom, interaction

INTRODUCTION

If the concept of "playground", as envisioned by Wicksteed, is closest to "a space of fun and freedom", and a "thoroughly modern space" where everybody, with no constraint on ages, genders, races or nationalities, could enjoy and be their inner children once more (Winder 2023, 145), then the construction of such a place will not only be technical, but cultural. Thus the parallel relationship Giddings found in playground and video games becomes meaningful (Giddings 2014, 124), as we are essentially trying to culturalize the spaces—to relate all players inside these cultural spaces through our interpretation of what that culture should be. Yet the building process, or "culturalization" in short, is a complicated one, not just because of the process itself, but because of the usually debated definition of culture. This paper,

therefore, attempts to first provide a general overview of current studies on culturalization and the problem with defining culture from a structural-functional point of view, then discuss how fandom could be a good basis for analyzing culturalization given its lineup with culture being a fluid concept, and last use Super Smash Bros franchise as an example to observe how culturalization works within our defined framework.

Background Research

Localization and Culturalization

Localization of video games has long been a well established research subject as globalization and digitization dramatically accelerate the rate of cultural exchange. While overseas markets open their doors to countries with rich entertainment resources, the entertainment businesses, whose clients have always been the locals, could project their influences on audiences who have never touched a game controller. Yet the mere translation of game contents is often insufficient to deliver the desired gaming experience as language is highly contextual (Dawson 2022, 41) and various other social/economic/political/religious aspects would influence how one player reacts to game contents as well (Edwards 2011, 21), and thus localization has to fit the "cultural norms and expectations" (Dawson 2022, x)—just as O'Hagan, et. al. noticed in the current sphere of globalization that "localization is now being applied to both the Content and Package of wide-ranging products and services to render the Message as a whole into an appropriate form in the cultural context of the Receiver" (2002, 66).

A much more robust approach to localization of video games is culturalization, which "includes more comprehensive tasks such as changing art, sound, level, characters, gameplay, story plot and adapting game" (Pyae et. al. 2018, 84). While localization usually takes place when most of the game contents are finished, culturalization is the localization at much earlier stages during the production. If done properly, culturalization could "helps gamers to potentially engage with the game's content at a much deeper, more meaningful level" (Edwards 2011, 20) and "ensures that gamers will not be disengaged from the game by a piece of content that is considered incongruent or even offensive" (Edwards 2011, 21). Starting from such perspective, case studies such as the one done by Pyae et. al. provided evidence that including local cultural elements did improve local residents' engagement with the game content (2018, 86), and interview studies such as by Bankler suggested that foreign cultural elements in educational games could make "the product less accessible and therefore less viable" (2019, 41).

However, an interesting observation made by Edwards is that the gamers are much more forgiving for inappropriate cultural content than the non-gamers, while the latter have more authority on the publishing/marketing state of the game under question (2011, 22). On the surface level, such observation slightly twists away the ultimate goal of culturalization from the hand of player experience and puts it into the hand of political agendas, yet on a deeper level, the struggle exists at the definition of what culture is. Eventually, if culturalization is the answer to catering for better experience for a targeted cultural group, what does culture mean in this context? Is it the overall value system constructed upon key concepts such as

religion, history and politics, or is it the individual case of engaging in an ever shifting virtual community base?

Redefining Culture

The definition of culture given by Edwards is "the accumulated, managed content of a specific context", or in a simpler way, "a combined set of 'content assets' that clearly define the look, feel, sound, taste and general nature of the culture" (2011, 22). A similar definition was given by Pyae et. al. when they constructed a user study around a video game that adopts the Burmese language, music, ancient costumes and landscapes (2018, 84), and by Zhao, who assumed in a product culturalization study that Chinese culture includes the specifics such as the usage of lunar calendar and the norm of different address structure (2004, 29-30). Characterizing culture as content under context aligns well with the structural-functional definition of culture, that cultures are the systems of symbols, which is not surprisingly "still reflect most—or the only—contemporary thought on the subject of culture" (Baldwin et. al. 2006, 13).

Yet the structural-functional approach to defining culture could be very limiting and problematic when examined under the topic of video games. Such definition typically assumes consistency in representation of symbols in order for the system to work, thus ignoring the fact that culture is not only an outcome but also a process that is facilitated by today's rate of information exchange. A good example would be any meme images on social media these days, which would be agreed by Awad that "any image no matter how original carries a history, it borrows from previous symbols and images, and the new meaning it constructs is dependent on how it affirms, supplements, or refutes the previously constructed meaning" (2020, 29). The definition of culture under the structural-functional approach also relies on solid concepts such as races, religions and languages to differentiate culture from culture. Groups that have complex layers of cultural intersections are often not considered under this definition, while these groups of people with mixed cultural identities are gradually making up for the majority of residents on the internet, and the usage of culture as a simple tool for categorizing people into different groups is very outdated (Chao et. al. 2005, 1129). Another problem with the structural-functional definition of culture roots from the missing discussion of power relationship that accompanies the development of culture, which could become problematic as video games are not only cultural products for consumption, but also platforms on which players and developers are constantly contesting for the right to remodeling the existing cultural space (Johnson 2020, 371). Ignoring the power dynamic within cultural construction often leads to insufficient insight into the development of cultural products, as it is a null assumption that game developers are independent of the influence of the gaming community.

Addressing all the mentioned problems above while defining culture as a system of symbols is too difficult without a proper framework; however, understanding the concept of culture under the lens of fandom proves to be surprisingly useful. Fandom is not only a cultural concept of high fluidity as a lot of its meaning derives from inter-fan-groups interaction—"originates in response to specific historical conditions and remains constantly in flux" (Jenkins 2013, 3)—but also a complicated construct that breaks down the geographic and generational boundaries (Jenkins 2013, 1) while "rife with feuds and personality conflicts" (Jenkins 2013, 282), which

inevitably results in a dynamic structure. Therefore, fandom provides a solid observational basis on which some insight into the redefinition of culture could be obtained.

Why Study Fandom?

Catering to fans has long been an industrial practice, and the immense economic value of fans and fan cultures—fandom in short—is well noticed and exploited by industries and politics alike in the digital age, while fandom itself "has emerged as an ever more integral aspect of lifeworlds, and an important interface between the dominant micro and macro forces of our time" (Gray et. al. 2017, 6). However, when the idea of culturalization is brought to the discussion table, the idea of fans also being a cultural group is generally ignored, especially when a rigid structural-functional definition of culture is applied. Such approach is quite outdated given that Jenkins had already noticed how fan culture was not an unchanging and timeless conglomeration of objects and symbols even before he experienced the digital age (2013, 1). Yet at the same time, Jenkins expressed his troubling concern that claiming "such a widespread and diverse group may still constitute a recognizable subculture" was difficult (2013, 1). This concern was well derived from Jenkins' observation that "nobody functions entirely within the fan culture, nor does the fan culture maintain any claims to self-sufficiency" due to fan culture's "inescapable relations to other forms of cultural production and other social identities" (2013, 3).

A more progressive way to look at fandom and culture is to adopt a perspective from the Social Identity Theory, which believes "a situation is 'cultural' when the context activates group-based identities and categorization" over the personal identity of the subject (Baldwin et. al. 2006, 18). The concept of group formation and membership prestige from inter/intra group comparison being central to the identity building of social lives serves well to define culture in the complex flow of information exchange, identity shifting, and hierarchical dynamics, which in turn makes fandom, whose characteristics fall well under the Social Identity Theory, an ideal subject for analysis.

Fandom as Conflicting Forces

The key concept behind fandom as a culture in itself is that there is never harmony in its community structure. To imagine that any particular fandom around a subject has a community base that acts as a solid whole is very much falsified. On an inter-fandom level, a given fan culture is usually depicted as "discourses driven by fans seeking to enforce lines of demarcation and distinction between themselves and other fans" (Gray et. al. 2017, 11). Although such portrayal is believed by Gray et. al. as outdated and stereotypical, the scope of the rivalry/disagreement well expands from sports (Kido et. al. 2020, 324) to TV shows (Johnson 2020, 370), since "opposition serves to deepen one's identification and allegiance (to one's own team), but is also characterized by a larger fandom of the competition that unites the two opponents" (Kido et. al. 2020, 324).

It is also noticeable that the term "inter-fandom" is only relative to "intra-fandom" as fandom communities contain divisive factors that exist down to the personal level. As Jenkins described in one specific circumstance, "even within the same context, specific populations (especially the young) may be particularly drawn

toward foreign media content, while others may express moral and political outrage" (2006, 157). Since "being a fan may be as important to one's community memberships as one's sense of self" (Gray et. al. 2017, 11), meaning ultimately, fandom must provide members with values for being individual selves, individual fan within the fandom community could maintain a specific set of personal values in contrast to other members while still participating in the group, and that normative fandom of shared affinities and even aspirations is, in its intrinsic transculturality, always already a site of difference" (Hitchcock et. al. 2020, 182). Being in one fandom group also does not always conflict with being in others—identity construction usually requires diverse experiences in different community settings— and the fluidity of membership is thus adding another layer of complexity to the inter/intra-fandom conflicts.

Fandom as a United-Whole

Indeed, fandom is down to its core fluid and ephemeral, yet what makes fandom a good representation of general culture is that members of fandom, though diversified and are in constant conflicts on intra/inter-fandom level, also constantly unite under one group or another to build a sense of cohesive community. This phenomenon could be understood under the concept of "performativity", which was defined by Lumby as the conforming action—or "performance"—inside a given super structure (2009, 354). Similar claim was made by Beyes et. al. in their observation that "digital cultures are performative cultures", while "this assumption is illustrated by the ubiquitous and invisible infrastructures that constitute them…creating a socio-technical environment, in which performances of the technological come about" (21). In such a super structure, the generation of the sense of self is dependent on the digestion of data (Beyes et. al. 2017, 21), and is reinforced by the negative consequences for behaving not according to the cultural context (Lumby 2009, 354).

The collective property of fandom is well documented in Kido et. al. analysis of sports fandom when, on one hand, fans are always in rivalry, rooting for one team or sport against another, and on another, they could engage in a much broader topic such as "sport" itself as a collective whole, thus "even sports fans who boo one other on game day can be seen to identify with one another in some sense; at its root, their opposition to one another is inspired and sanctioned by a larger shared fandom." (2020, 325) Similar observation was made by Johnson who coded the new term "fantagonism" as an "ongoing, competitive struggles between both internal factions and external institutions to discursively codify the fan- text- producer relationship according to their respective interests," (2020, 371) which is based on how fans are both divided to claim for the control of core narrative of fandom they love and united to protect their loved fandom from industries whose treatment of their loved products is concerning. It is succinctly summarized by Jenkins, "the more authority fans ascribed to the author, the more suspicious they become of that authority" (2006, 132). It is therefore not surprising to see the similar "common but divided" theme also permeates Itō et. al. introduction to their book, where they believed that "although otaku share common types of cultural referencing and infrastructures…otaku subcultures employ strategies to distinguish themselves from mainstream culture, to distinguish different subsets of otaku culture, and to distinguish internally among members of these different subset niches" (2012, xxv).

Therefore, once it is understood that fandom is highly fluid, diversified, but also cohesive in nature, the concept of "culture" in general could attain a more solidified form; that culture is the process of the never ending interaction between different groups of people and the resulting conglomeration of a dynamic whirlwind of network that constantly absorbing, ejecting, and shape-shifting yet still revolving around a certain object, symbol, narrative, or belief. Culturalization, in this context, is the building process of such a whirlwind.

However, a more concerning question after culture presents itself as an ephemeral or imagined existence is how could the video game culturalization process be carried out if such complexity exist, and there is no better example of a video game that thrives on fandom than Nintendo's Super Smash Bros franchise. Since the Super Smash Bros franchise has to not only incorporate various different fandom bases into one single game—as Nintendo advertises this franchise in its store by deliberately mentioning Simon Belmont, King K. Rool, Inkling and Ridley all together—but also maintaining its own identity as a favorable franchise—as Nintendo claims straightforwardly that the mentioned iconic characters are joining other characters in Super Smash Bros' history (Nintendo 2023), which is no less than a direct legacy call as another marketing point—it manifests itself as the perfect embodiment of a fluid, contentious yet unified cultural product. It would be very intriguing to see how the concept of culturalization is explored in Super Smash Bros Ultimate as complex layers of fandom culture unfolds itself.

REVISITING CULTURALIZATION USING SUPER SMASH BROS AS THE EXAMPLE

If the goal is to identify games which rely heavily on culturalization for their success, Super Smash Brothers as a franchise will probably be the most exemplary among them. As a gaming franchise that tries to unite as many popular characters across different games as possible in its own universe, Super Smash Bros is undoubtedly a project that requires developers to have a deep understanding of the fandom of drastically different game genres. While fans of the original games will gradually develop their loyalty to Super Smash Brothers, fans of Super Smash Bros will have the opportunity to taste other games they may have never touched before.

To illustrate the possible way a fan of an original game franchise may experience Super Smash Bros, Yanhong Lu, one author of this article would like to elaborate his personal anecdote about Super Smash Bros and another Nintendo franchise, Xenoblade Chronicles:

> *His experience with Super Smash Brothers was short and distinct. He grew up in China, and it was not an environment of gaming consoles, and thus his childhood was devoid of Nintendo games. His first contact with the gaming console was brought upon by his roommates at university in the US. It was a Nintendo Wii U, and for the first time in his life, he touched a gaming controller. Super Smash Brothers was the most popular game among his U.S. friends circle, and he did enjoy it along with his friends, but he did not grow a strong attachment like many of his friends did. Thus, the announcement of the Nintendo Switch coming onto the market with the new Super Smash Brothers Ultimate did not thrill him as much as Xenoblade Chronicles 2, whose anime-styled design caught his eyes immediately—he had indeed*

learnt a bit about Xenoblade series through playing Shulk, the protagonist in Xenoblade Chronicles 1, in Smash, and decided to give the second game in the series a try. He played it, and it became his favorite. After some time, he was busy studying as a graduate student and thus sold the console, believing that he had made enough memories with Nintendo. However, he was pleasantly surprised one day when he was told that Pyra and Mythra, the heroines from Xenoblade Chronicles 2, were announced as DLC characters added to Super Smash Brothers Ultimate. Up till this day, he still remembers the boiling blissfulness he felt that placed him on the verge of tears while watching the trailer. This one single DLC announcement was enough for him to buy a new Switch and the entire Super Smash Brothers Ultimate package.

If that author's personal experience with Super Smash Bros demonstrates how one within a certain fandom community could possibly enjoy another fandom, which is a carnivore celebrating one's favorite game along with other games in a positive way, the meek result of PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale sheds some light on just how easily such carnivore could fall apart due to incompatible cultural qualities presented by fandom differences. Since essentially building a game such as Super Smash Bros and PlayStation All-Stars is creating a fandom space of its own, players would like to see if such fandom provides them with new identities to explore and enjoy. To fans, "the imagined but voluntary communities we join through fan attachments are as important as the self- identity that is constructed and narrated by fans individually" (Gray et. al. 2017, 11). Therefore, if ripping off the characters from the original game and shuffling them into one place is what players can only perceive as a carnival-type franchise, it won't be enough for fans to form a new fandom around the product—it offers nothing new. The challenge is always to build one game's own cultural identity so a new fandom, or a new culture, can be established, and to be compatible with other fandom circles, and Super Smash Bros shows that this self-preservation practice is in itself both culturalizing (developing its own community network around its own gaming concept) and deculturalizing (reducing its community network's engagement with other games' community network).

At the surface level, the culturalization/deculturalization practice in Super Smash Brothers Ultimate can be observed in Nintendo's redesigning of the in-game characters. When designing the in-game visual elements, it is important to make sure when two characters are placed in the same frame, they will have coherent visual qualities, so the players could find a fine balance between recognizing the character in the original game and understanding that they are engaging in a cultural space of a different game. If it sounds weird that Snake from Metal Gear is going to battle Kirby in Kirby's Dream Land on paper, then it will look even uncanny when Snake blows up Kirby with his hand grenade on an actual screen. Therefore, in order to make such a scene to happen, Snake has to shake off the blood and rust and become cartoonier, and Kirby must take on some 3 dimensionality, so it looks a bit more serious. The same observation could be made in regard to Mario. Extra length is added to his legs and semi-realistic cloth texture is added to his jeans—all to make sure the sense of realism comes through, especially when most of his move set is based on leg movements. Are Snake, Kirby and Mario in Smash still the iconic characters in their original games? Yes they are, but by changing some original features on them, Nintendo is able to reduce the visual connection of the players with the original game, thus lowering the seriousness when different fandom bases are engaging with one another—the idea of "my favorite character joining Smash" is

visually less than the equivalent of "the character in Smash is exactly the character I devote myself in". On the other hand, the nuanced adjustments made to each character are creating visual cohesiveness to Smash as a unique franchise, and therefore strengthening the community network that recognize Smash as the center of discussion.

On the gameplay level, Nintendo tries to maintain the originality of the original move set of each character, yet also introduces a simpler move-set input system while injecting randomization to the game. One typical problem with most fighting games is the steep learning curve for move-set input, which can result in drastic skill gaps between players. Although the experience of growth is core to the fighting game experience, players inevitably would take up a critical lens on the performance of different characters (and they would become even more scrutinizing if such character under investigation is from downloadable content, or "DLC" in short phrases), believing certain characters are better than others, and that the game is not balanced. The steeper the skill gap between players becomes, the more likely players would become critical of the balance of the game. It is important to notice, however, that skill gaps within player community are not necessarily detrimental, since skill gaps could encourage players to be better and thus devote more time into the game, yet maintaining a large skill gap in Smash that is the conglomeration of various franchises could potentially tear the fandom apart, since once players realize that playing their favorite character is frustrating in Smash, the contrast to their experience in the original game could very likely turn them away from Smash. Therefore, by installing a much simpler move set input that is largely condensed into "direction+attack" (for instance, move sets of fighting game characters such as Ryu and Ken in Smash are very similar to the move sets in the original Street Fighter game; yet the input is simplified so players don't need to z-motion forward twice and kick in order to release the Shin Shoryuken—players only need to press the B button when they finish charging the ultimate move gauge to release the move), Nintendo is able to groom its community network by maintaining the discussion on power level in its own fandom sphere while distancing itself from the original fan base, since it would not make sense to compare Ryu in Smash to Ryu in Street Fighter as they don't play the exact same way despite having very similar move set, thus succeeding in both culturalization and deculturalization.

A continued topic following the skill gap is the never ending comparison of the power level of each Smash character, which Nintendo also addresses with a culturalization/deculturalization approach. Since Smash is mostly known as a person-versus-person (PVP) action game, players tend to judge characters by their "rankings" and would quickly assume virtual violence to defend or attack another fan bases within the same fandom, just as any sports fans rooting for one team over the other (Kido et. al. 2020, 318). Fans of the original game, of course, would prefer their favorite character to be powerful and cool-looking in Smash, but since to perfectly balance a game containing 82 characters for all levels of players is simply impossible, the bitterness sips in when fans of one particular game believe their favorite character is less capable in comparison to the others. What might be worse is that the power dynamic between fans and creators under the typical fandom structure, like "fantagonism" proposed by Johnson, is much more complex with not only "fan and institutional interests competing to establish dominant meta-textual interpretative discourses while legitimizing specific audience relationships to the industrial production of the hyperdiegetic text" (2020, 371) but with dissipation of

central control over such hyperdiegetic text on the institutional end—Super Smash Bros as an independent franchise could not affect the metanarrative of the characters in other games, but is still required to present these characters in a faithful way. The way that Nintendo uses to dissipate player anxiety with power level is to introduce random items and random stage selection to the game. If players are keener to improve their skill and enjoy the sense of growth, they could pursue what typical fighting games offer in Super Smash Bros by turning off the random items/stages option, but for casual players, the introduction of randomness could greatly balance their experience against opponents with higher skill level, thus making the ranking of characters less important. The culturalization practice in this strategy is to solidify the central concept of "carnival", so the fighting in the game becomes comical, and thus is deculturalizing at the same time—Sephiroth wearing bunny ear is a pretty interesting image to raise discussion around Smash, but players probably won't associate this silliness to that iconic villain in the original Final Fantasy VII game.

The culturalization/deculturalization practice also exists at the executive level. It is not hard to see that Nintendo giving it an "action game" tag is both a semi-accurate description of the gameplay and an emphasis on a more friendly gaming experience that separates it from other "fighting games" such as Street Fighters. The overall presentation of Super Smash Bros in trailers also takes on an "epic but funny" tone instead of the seriousness in fighting games such as Tekken or Mortal Kombat, which not only fits with Nintendo's idea of friendly content, but also reduces the mental labor of consumers when they form expectations of what to experience from their purchase. The marketing direction of Smash as a family-friendly game, which is in consistency with most other Nintendo brands, is obviously culturalizing as the strategy directly connects to the already existing Nintendo fandom, while distancing Smash from other fighting games also fits well in the deculturalization narrative.

Nintendo is also introducing culturalization/deculturalization practice on a community level by avoiding directly advocating any form of professional competition. It is common practice for the production company to hold or support competitive events centering their games—League of Legend, Counter Strike, Street Fighter, to name a few. Competitive gaming, or e-sport, has brought public attention and profits to gaming industry, and is growing to be one of many new forms of digital entertainment. However, public exposure always comes with a more diversified and thus more cantankerous fan base. While many gaming companies do have the options to address the conflicts of their fans, Nintendo is rather caught in a rather powerless situation since the part of the Super Smash Bros fandom it represents overlaps with fandom of other games, making the scenario less controllable as already complex fandom communities starts to intermingle with each other. Though avoiding finding solutions to a potential problem sounds more regressive than proactive, Nintendo does make the right decision to produce a more stable fandom structure. By not inviting the idea of actual "competition" to the table, Nintendo maintains its community network from breaking into fandom pieces of those original franchises which could well be literally combating one another if given the opportunity. In the sense of deculturalization, avoiding official support of serious Smash competition distinguishes Smash from typical fighting games that do develop into e-sport, which decreases the amount of community discussions that see Smash as a hardcore fighting game.

Another culturalization/deculturalization practice of Nintendo Smash on the community level is not very different from many other games, which is public relationship (PR) control over media. Despite Nintendo being able to create a fantasy in which different games could coexist, the displeasure resulted from the tension inside the Super Smash Bros fan community could well manifest itself as harsh outcries against Super Smash Bros, like the moment when Byleth, a character from the Fire Emblem franchise, was announced to join the roster of Smash. Many negative responses, such as "r/smashbros is on suicidewatch now" ([deleted] 2020) or "r/smashbros meltdown incoming" (tlozfox 2020), could be found under Nintendo's official announcement of the Byleth release on Reddit, and post such as "I've never felt more hostile toward a franchise I've never played than I do toward Fire Emblem" (Francisco 2020) could be found on Twitter commenting on the disappointing at the Byleth release. Well known YouTube content creator Alpharad was very meticulous when expressing his opinion on the Byleth release in his YouTube video, saying he was alright with Byleth but did believe there were too many Fire Emblem representatives in Smash (2020). Maximilian Dood, a well known game commentator, could not hold back his disappointment when he reacted to the Nintendo live stream of the Byleth release—showing high excitement and expectation for a Dante (an iconic protagonist in Devil May Cry series) showcase before the start of the Nintendo steam, and turning into reserved applause when the showcase turned out to be Byleth (2020). The Nintendo PR control for the Byleth release was simple: they turned off the comment function under the trailer, as they had always been doing, and stayed radio silent while gradually promoting more positive or neutral reviews from the fan community, raising titles such as "Byleth wields not only a sword" (Yami Sean 2020), "Let Byleths be Byleths" (epicpandaking 2020), and "I think byleth is a great character" (Stijin8123 2020) to be the top Reddit threads under Byleth. The culturalization aspect of Nintendo's reaction towards the controversy of Byleth is that Nintendo did not perceive the controversy as detrimental to the community networks—rather, Nintendo chose to believe that this controversy could be solved and digested by the community network, and it might even enrich and vitalize the community network even more due to the increase in community participation—drawing bystanders and onlookers who were unfamiliar with Smash into the discussion, for instance. The deculturalization aspect is also well known as the "filtering" effect—to cut loose those who could not tolerate the given cultural structure centered on Smash, preventing the formation of unhealthy or dead knots in the community network.

The Super Smash Bros franchise succeeded in creating an overarching cultural structure that includes all different fandoms by applying culturalization/deculturalization process to harmonize differences between them while building its own cultural identity. Seeing Super Smash Bros as a platform of a cohesive cultural group of highly diversified and intertwining cultural subgroups serves well to address the three issues with the normal definition of culture as a collection of symbols (in this case, a collection of different game elements). At first glance, Super Smash Bros is a collection of symbolic characters and icons across multiple game franchises, yet through its own culturalization/deculturalization process, it manages to convert the rigid image of these cultural symbols into malleable assets whose cultural identities could be readily reinterpreted by the fan community. It also blurs the boundaries between these different fandom icons with the same culturalization/deculturalization process, and the discussion of power

dynamics in modifying the cultural space is always sustained by Nintendo's community control.

CULTURALIZATION: PRODUCING A UNIQUE CULTURAL SPACE WITH FREEDOM OF INTERPRETATION

In this paper, we propose a different angle to look at the definition of culture under the current trend of culturalization in the gaming industry. Instead of treating culture as a conglomeration of symbols such as a certain icon, a certain language, or a certain religion, researchers in the current field of culturalization should understand culture as an ever-changing flow of interaction between different groups of people. We further argue that using fandom as the subject of study for culturalization could fit with a more progressive look at culture. The ever-evolving, conflicting, yet cohesive nature of fandom could solve the three key aspects ignored by the structural-functional definition of culture—that cultural symbols are constantly changing over time, that a clear separation between cultural groups is missing in the contemporary setting, and that the power dynamics for defining culture within the culture group also provides key information. Therefore, we propose to define culture under our discussion as the process of network building between social groups and the resulting conglomerate of fluid community structures that circle around an object, a symbol, a narrative, or a belief. The culturalization process is the building process of such culture redefined.

We further inspect the Super Smash Bros franchise under the new lens of culturalization, since the Super Smash Bros franchise is a collection of different fandom and thus is consistently trying to satisfy the needs of a highly diversified fan base. From our observation, we argue that if any specified cultural groups should be understood as ever evolving, shifting, and intermingling in nature, customizing game content to fit the expectations of any culture group would be futile without a framework of reference. The Super Smash Bros example serves well to demonstrate this point of view—if Nintendo did not create Super Smash Bros as its own culture reference, it could very likely become a mixing pot of all other gaming fandom without providing any necessary uniqueness of its own that constitutes the need of fans who constantly seek their own imagined identity in this new fandom experience. Therefore, the priority of culturalization should be establishing the center of its own cultural space, then observing the possible interactions and chemistry with other cultural spaces, making decisions based on the observation, and finally waiving the threads of social networks together around its own core. It would not be an ideal approach if culture is simply taken as a set of symbols—though it could satisfy certain hard-line requirements given a specific situation, since it would not be flexible enough to integrate with the ever shifting culture space in today's digital world.

Since culturalization does not limit itself to only entertainment products such as video games and could grow well into larger platforms such as metaverse, or concepts like "playground", it would be crucial to have a new way to look at what culture truly is. Treating culture as a specific set of tangible elements is still the main approach a lot of researches on culturalization adopt. Despite having a more manageable framework, such an approach alienates itself from the reality that culture is both of a process and of a product. On the other hand, the Super Smash Bros franchise provides a unique reference point which demonstrates that through

careful culturalizing/deculturalizing process, drastically different fandom circles could still exist in harmony around one centered cultural space. The implication is significant since we live in a world in which the term "coexisting" could sometimes be a distant dream, and if we could extract some more concrete knowledge from the framework provided by Smash, we might be able to build a future metaverse based on acceptance and understanding, instead of polarization and segregation. Therefore, we highly suggest that future researches on culturalization in digital space should focus on establishing a feasible framework for studying changing and shifting concepts (adding time as another dimension to the current matrix, probably), from which researches of culturalization could root themselves in reality, and from which a cultural space that is unique but welcoming, and a playground that is united but individualized could finally become the resting place for tired souls on the web of information today.

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