Playing with the Rules: Social and Cultural Aspects of Game Rules in a Console Game Club

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ABSTRACT

In this study of a Swedish console game club I have looked at how the rules of the games are connected to the social and cultural aspects of the context that the games are played in. I have devoted special attention to the game *Super Smash Bros. Melee* and how different contexts of play have formed around this game, for instance the emergence of a professional *smash* scene and the polarization of console club members into *smashers* and *anti-smashers*. My conclusion is that the idea that rules can play a core role in defining a game without the need to take the situated aspects of play into account is problematic. Rules do not inherently belong to the formal aspects of games. Even at the most fundamental level, rules are influenced by, and affect, the social and cultural aspects of the gaming context.

Author Keywords

console games, game culture, play context, rules, social interaction, game clubs, game appropriation

PERSPECTIVES ON RULES

In academic writing on games, rules are usually considered one of the formal aspects of games. According to Salen and Zimmerman [6] this affinity is twofold. First, the rules constitute a game's innermost form. Using the game of *Go* as an example, they note that it can be played with different materials and for different purposes but as long as the rules stay the same, we will still recognize it as *Go*. The second way that rules belong to the formal aspects of games, Salen and Zimmerman say, is the way they are methodical and precise by nature, while aspects of games relating to play and culture "tend to be fuzzy and more difficult to quantify." According to Salen and Zimmerman, game rules are a very particular kind of rules that, unlike other rules, are separate from ordinary life. [6]

Rather than arguing against Salen and Zimmerman, I would like to offer a counter image. Based on a study of a local console game club I will investigate how the social aspects of game-play and the rules of the games are related. By doing this I wish to demonstrate how the concept of rules cannot be placed within a particular perspective such as the formal aspects of games. Instead rules can be viewed from different vantage points such as social, cultural or political perspectives with different but equally valid outcomes.

I will also use the concept of rules as an analytical tool to make sense of my empirical material. By trying to uncovering the rules of the activities I have studied, and why the rule-sets are what they are, I try to understand this particular instance of situated play, the social structure of the group and its place in the wider culture of *gamers* that it belongs to. While there has been some studies of LAN parties [1, 9], I have not managed to find any previous work on console clubs so part of the purpose of the paper is also to convey something of the specifics of this particular game culture.

I followed the web forum of the console club during the preparations for their annual summer meeting where members of the club and other console gamers from all around Sweden gather to socialize and play games together around the clock for a whole week. Besides participative observations at the meeting, I also conducted a number of interviews before and during the event. I had planned to use some kind of cultural probes [2] but it turned out that the participants already were armed to the teeth with equipment to record their own activities, and were hospitable enough to allow me access to their collective treasure of hundreds of images and video recordings when the event was over.

RANDOM SMASH

When I first came to the meeting the attendants were in the middle of one of the tournaments. About fifty out of a total of eighty participants – most in their late teens to early twenties – had gathered in a room resembling a middle-school assembly hall in a community center. In front of the crowd, a guy was pulling names out of a hat and then rolling a pair of dice. After a glance at his cheat sheet (see fig. 1) he proclaimed: "It's everyone against Kirby, single button coin match!" The crowd burst out in laughter and cheers.

I had arrived in the middle of the *Random Shit Brothers Melee* tournament. Since it in essence is a randomized form of the *Nintendo Gamecube* game *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, commonly known as just *Smash*, I will from here on refer to it as *Random Smash*. It will take the remainder of this paper

to attempt to explain what this is all about but for now, let me give the short description. All participants write their name (these are of course their nicknames rather than their actual names) on a piece of paper and put them in a hat. The tournament leader pulls four names from the hat. These players sit down by a *Nintendo Gamecube* to play *Smash*. The leader rolls a pair of dice to determine the rule-set and the winning conditions for the match. The players then roll a die each to determine which team they will belong to. Sometimes three out of the four players end up on the same team. To further *decrease* the balancing of the game, the characters and items in the game are randomized. I will get back to what this means but while there are constant arguments around which the best characters are, there is consensus within the smash community that some characters are inherently better than others. After the match the members of the winning team get their names put back into the hat, the losers once again roll a die. If they roll a six they too go back in the hat, otherwise they are out.

Figure 1: The reference sheet for the first round of *Random Smash*.

This procedure is repeated until there are sixteen names left in the hat. The organizer later proudly pointed out to me in an interview that some of the participants had not been pulled out of the hat even once by this point while some have had to play several rounds to defend their position in the tournament. In phase two of the competition, four games of *Smash* are started simultaneously with invisible random characters. Whenever someone is knocked out of the game, that person stands up and all the games are paused. Instead of eliminating the person standing up from the tournament, this triggers a phase of *Musical chairs*.

Music starts playing (from a modded *Xbox*) and all the participants run over to the other end of the room where chairs have been placed back-to-back in two rows. This is where the actual elimination takes place. Whoever does not get a seat when the music stops is out, the others return to the consoles but instead of continuing where they left off, they take over a character based on a code (seen as a small yellow label in fig. 2) on the chair they occupied in the *Musical chairs* phase.

It is interesting to note that while the whole idea of *Random Smash* is to take the sports-like competitive edge out of *Smash*, several rules were added to *Musical chairs* such as *running* around the chairs with their hands on their heads to avoid "chair hogging" which made it into a very athletic version of *Musical chairs*.

Figure 2: Hardcore gamers playing *Musical chairs*.

This cycle of *Smash* and *Musical chairs* is repeated until there are four players left. These four play a final round of *Smash*, this time with the single-button rule, to determine the winner of the tournament.

Besides being a creative exhibit in game appropriation, the *Random Smash* tournament points to some interesting aspects of the social structures among these console gamers. When I asked the organizer of the tournament about the rationale behind taking the already unbalanced game *Smash* and completely randomizing the outcome, he explained that the tournament was invented at the previous year's summer event but has been developed and refined to make it more enjoyable. The idea for the tournament grew out of frustration. Some of the participants are so good at *Smash*, some of them even play the game at a semi-professional level, that entering the *Smash* tournament as an intermediate player is pointless, he explained.

In my efforts to understand the popularity of this anti-*Smash* tournament, I interviewed both smashers and anti-smashers as well as the organizers of the tournament and the event. In what first appeared to be a very homogenous group of people, I discovered a strong polarization among the participants at the event between the smashers and the other gamers. When the organizers put *Smash* as one of the official tournaments, they assured themselves of a higher number of attendants since it guaranteed participants from the smash community, but also turned the event into a social battleground, which gave me the opportunity to glimpse the depth and diversity of the Swedish console gaming scene.

WHY SMASH?

Games are often seen as closed systems where we leave a gaming session with nothing more than the satisfaction of winning or frustration of losing. This view builds on the assumption that the gaming experience is only meaningful in the moment of playing the game. A more accurate way of understanding the role of the games to the members of the game club would be to compare it to music, which often plays a major role in identity construction. The preference for a certain style of music and particular bands is similar to gamers favoring certain consoles and being fans of certain game franchises. In the console club there are certain game titles such as *Metroid* that come up time after time. One of the unofficial competitions at the event was a whole quiz exclusively about *Metroid* (see fig. 3).
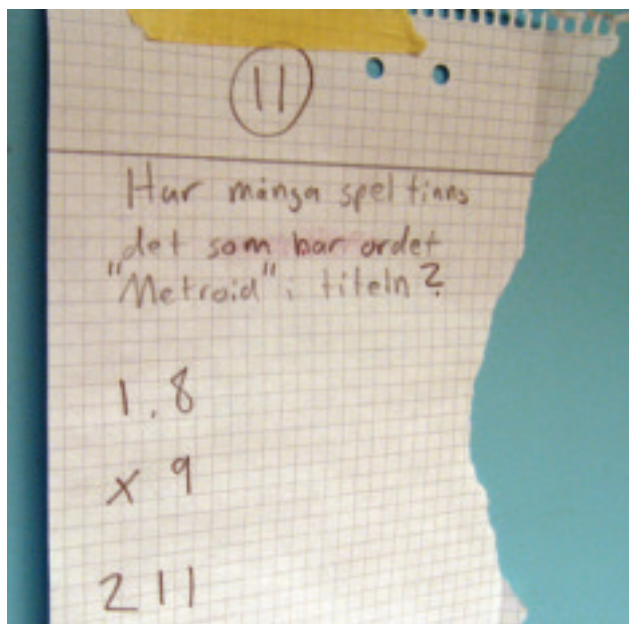
Figure 3: The note reads "11. How many games are there that have the word *Metroid* in the title?"

Most of the members of the game club are around 20-years-old which means that *Nintendo* was dominating the console market when they first started playing console games. This is reflected in a dominance of *Nintendo* titles in everything from the official tournaments to the casual gaming and the unofficial tournaments at the event.

Figure 4: A leg tattoo featuring a selection of *Nintendo* characters.

In the comparison between games and music, the original *Super Smash Bros.* game for the *Nintendo 64* becomes the equivalent of a seventies super group. The cast of the game consists of popular characters from a number of different *Nintendo* games such as Link from the *Legend of Zelda* series and Pikachu from *Pokémon*. This is a common practice within the game industry in general where characters from popular games live on long after the game that originally made them famous has disappeared form the sales charts. Rather than being transmedia storytelling [4], we could call this *intermedia gameplay*. In *Smash* a number of characters from different game worlds and different types of games come together to fight each other and the result is an iconic title for the *Nintendo* fans (see fig. 4).

THE SCIENCE OF SMASH

In an earlier study, I immersed myself in the *Everquest* (EQ) gaming community. In many ways, these communities could not be further apart. EQ is a game of great inertia where accomplishments are slowly built up over long periods of time and players collaboratively fight monsters rather than fighting each other. The player base in EQ is also different with a higher average age and it is an internet based game where participants mostly interact without meeting physically. But the more I learn about the smashers, the clearer it becomes that the two communities have one thing in common. Knowledge, learning, and information dissemination plays a key role. In EQ you get credit in different ways for reporting information such as new items, monsters or strategies to the shared information sources on the web. The most important information is, however, often kept secret within guilds since guilds are competing with each other by comparing their progression in the game. After a while these secrets tend to spread to so many players that they cannot be kept secret anymore. Websites encouraging players to share strategies – sometimes offering money for them – also contribute to this knowledge dissemination.

In *Smash*, strategies cannot be kept secret in the same way due to the simple fact that players play against each other. Fights from the big tournaments are recorded and made available to the community where they are carefully analyzed. The only way of keeping a move secret in *Smash* would be to never use it. To come up with a new move is a highly regarded feat within the community. The process of getting it accepted into the canon of *Smash* knowledge is similar to a patent application process. Besides describing the technique and its usefulness, a video of it being used in the game has to be made available to one of the major smash community websites *Smashboards* [1] or *MLGPro* [2] where it is determined whether the move is new and of use in competitive play.

Here is the entry for a move called *Wavedashing* from the *SSBM Compendium of Knowledge* [7] to illustrate the detail and complexity we are dealing with:

Wavedashing - How To: Wavedashing is difficult to pull off at first, but with practice it eventually becomes second nature. To perform a Wavedash, jump (hit X/Y), then immediately airdodge (hit L/R) into the ground at an angle. Each character has different timing based on their jump animations/duration. For the most noticeable results, select Luigi, who is known for his long wavedash.

Wavedashing - Uses:
- Edgehogging
- Mind-games
- Spacing
- Wavedashing forwards/backwards into an attack
- Wavedashing into/out of shield/shine
- Wavedashing into a grab
- Wavedashing combined with normal dash dancing
- Wavedashing upon landing (just the dodge into the ground required)
- Wavedashing into platforms for quicker landings (just the dodge into the ground required)
- And much, much more!

Wavedashing - Common Concerns:
- Attending any large scale tourney will greatly increase your knowledge of the usefulness of this technique (along with many others).
- Every 'Pro' knows how to wavedash and can perform it at will.

[1] A *Smash* community site with over 58.000 registered members <http://www.smashboards.com> (Last visited 1 Mar 2007)

[2] The website of the *Major League Gamer Association* which arranges the largest and most prestigeous *Smash* competitions with prize checks of up to $10.000. <http://www.mlgpro.com/> (Last visited 28 Feb 2007)

- Learning to wavedash does not mean immediate ownership of your friends.
- If you are just hearing of this technique, you are not as good as you may have previously thought, and you are not beyond learning this technique (to stifle the common egotistical beginner argument lodged against this technique). Learning it will bring more rewards than shunning it, so see past the difficultly of learning it and don't be afraid to do a little work.
- Is wavedashing the most important general technique to learn? No. That most likely resides in L-Canceling/Shuffling. Is wavedashing an important technique? Yes.
- Wavedashing must be incorporated into your game over a period of time to fully achieve its desired effects.

When wavedashing first hit the smash scene about two years ago it created a competitive advantage for those who mastered it. But soon all the top-tier smashers had learned it. This pattern can be recognized from traditional sports where new techniques like the fosbury flop in high jump or the V-style in ski jump gave the inventor the upper hand until others learned to master the new technique. Just as the V-style was highly criticized and deemed to be against the rules or at least the intention of the rules when it was first introduced by the Swedish ski jumper Jan Boklöw, some *Smash* moves and strategies have been strongly contested at first, only to get accepted once most players have learned to take advantage of them, or at least found effective countermeasures.

The game clubs and social structures around playing games play a direct role in skill and knowledge building. When I ask the number one smasher in Sweden about how much he practices he tells me that he only plays when he has access to top quality competition. Since it is not a network game, he needs to meet up physically with the other players. For this reason the best smashers in Sweden all come from the three big city areas. It also turns out that the guy who was arranging the *Random Smash* tournament is a smasher himself, but he comes from a small town and therefore never has the chance to advance to a level where he can compete with the big city smashers at tournaments. This is what inspired him to invent *Random Smash*.

Next version of *Smash* will be for the *Nintendo Wii* and will feature network play over the internet. This means that the possibilities for people to become really good will be less related to geographical factors. The smashers I interviewed agreed that this was a good thing, but on the other hand they predicted that the distinct differences in style between the Japanese, American and European smashers will decrease which they thought was unfortunate.

SMASHERS AND ANTI-SMASHERS
After a few days of participative observations at the meeting I understood that the smashers and anti-smashers had a long history of conflicting ideas about console

gaming. The smashers personify the idea of gaming as sports. They talk about their home clubs as sports clubs, they wear t-shirts with the club logos and their game handle printed on them, and they think of the meeting as a competition. To them, *Smash* is their discipline. They all play other games too, but only the way a pole-vaulter may incorporate running into the practice schedule to improve his pole-vault approach or occasionally play some soccer just for fun.

The anti-smashers, on the other hand, have no understanding for this dedication to one particular game. For most anti-smashers, the joy of gaming comes from playing an endless stream of new games. To them, gaming is more akin to listening to music or watching movies, where a central aspect of their hobby is to try, discuss, evaluate and recommend different titles. While the smasher sees *Smash* as a discipline, the anti-smasher sees it as a title on a chart that is here today and gone tomorrow.

I asked both smashers and anti-smashers why they thought that *Smash* has become so popular as a tournament game. The smashers claimed that it was because it had such depth with layers of skills and strategy that had to be mastered if you wish to become a *pro*. One anti-smasher instead claimed that it was because the game was so exceptionally simple. Its origin as a kid/party game made it a fitting tool (not unlike a football for instance) for boys who only want to compete rather than play games for their true qualities, she claimed. As paradoxical as these two statements may seem, I believe that they are both correct but the perspectives applied by the two informants make them see two completely different games.

WEAK BECOME HEROES
The young console club is steadily growing and especially the main events attract more and more participants who are prepared to travel long distances to attend, despite the typically very limited budget of people in their late teens to early twenties. The club seems to fill a need among people who love to play console games.

The Swedish gaming scene has traditionally been dominated by PC gaming. It is no coincidence that Sweden, with only nine million inhabitants (slightly less than London's population), is the home of both the world champion *Counter-Strike* team *SK* and the world's largest annual LAN party *Dream Hack*. In this climate the console club seems to function as a sanctuary for gamers who prefer games like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario*.

In a wider context, gaming as a whole still has a negative connotation to many and is often connected to childish behavior, obesity and being a nerd. Within the confides of the console club, being a gamer is instead seen as something positive. The particular skills developed through years of dedicated practice become seen and admired.

There are, however, conflicting ideas about which the ideals of this sanctuary should be. While the club has an open membership policy, it is clear that different sub-categories of gamers – such as the smashers and anti-smashers – actively fight to stake out their territory within the sanctuary. Here the rules of the games become tools in a political struggle for the power to define what the club is.

Figure 5: *Xbox* gamers.

The *Xbox* consoles have been connected to each other in a LAN. It seems appropriate that this has been set up in the gymnasium. When I interview one of the organizers he complains about this room. He does not like that they sometimes turn off the light in the ceiling. "It feels like walking into a LAN-party," he moans.

I had expected to find that dedicated console gamers would be different from typical PC-gamers. But I had not expected to find so many different sub-groups among the console gamers. There is a clear rift between the *Nintendo* fans and the *Xbox* gamers, and among the *Nintendo* players we have the smashers and anti-smashers, and among the anti-smashers we have the retro gamers etc. Looking at the console club feels a bit like viewing one of those fractal images that were so popular in the nineties. When I look closer, more levels are revealed seemingly ad infinitum. Gamer culture is multi-faceted. Although I have made simplifications in order to achieve some clarity in my presentation, I still struggle with the multiplicity of layers just in this small empirical sample.

WHO MAKES THE RULES?
Salen and Zimmerman [6] separate rules into three levels: constitutive, operational and implicit. The constitutive rules are the abstract core mathematical rules of a game. These are often hardcoded into digital games and, it seems, therefore impossible to change. In the case of *Random Smash*, the re-designers of the game have actually not changed this layer. What they have done is to carve out a very particular subset of the rules with the goal of making the outcome close to completely random.

The constitutive rules of the game allow for this, in fact, *Random Smash* can be seen as a way of bringing *Smash* back to its origin as a lighthearted party game. The smashers also subverted the constitutive rules of the game. When American smashers from the west and east coast first started playing against each other in tournaments there was a clash of cultures in terms of which rules to use. While the west coast players saw the randomness of different items and stages as an essential flavor of the game, the east coast players tried to strip down the experience to the core of game. They all agreed, however, that certain restrictions to the original design were necessary in a tournament situation and items like the hearts and apples were never allowed. In the light of how differently the game has been played by different players, in different places, and at different times, it becomes clear that the constitutive rules actually play a very small role in defining the game.

Both the smashers and anti-smasher focus on the chance versus skill aspect of the game in their appropriations of it. Things that we tend to think of as neutral design decisions have become political statements within the context of the console club. In fact, the term *random* was often used in a derogatory manner both on the web forum and at the meeting when discussing different games.

Before the meeting there was a thread on the forum where the club members discussed which games to hold tournaments in. Deciding the tournaments is a central part of defining the agenda for the meeting and thereby for the club itself. In this thread someone claimed that to be good at *Mario Kart* you would need "hyper-diaper-lotto-skillz," implying that that game is so chance based that real skill does not get awarded. Instead the poster suggested *Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* ending one of his posts with the comment "Many settings and alternatives = MANLY game."

Here we can see how the rules of the games become tools to express opinions about the club. Reading the forums made me feel like I was about to enter a present day version of a men only club. But while there was a strong dominance of boys at the meeting, I instead felt that the sanctuary was more broadly defined allowing for much more diversity in personal expression than I had expected (see fig. 6). It was just that the section of participants that the *Random Smash* tournament catered to had been very silent on the forum. When the main point on the agenda is which games to compete in, it's only natural that the part of the crowd that is less interested in competition becomes invisible. In this regard the *Random Smash* tournament becomes an important symbolic act from the organizers to acknowledge the rights of the anti-smashers to be a part of the club. This was not the only time the random aspects of a game were emphasized. In the final tournament of the week, also initiated by the organizers, *Warioware* was played with the hand controls exchanged for dance mats with similar results.

Figure 6: Cosplayers.

The ongoing process of developing the knowledge about smash reveals another interesting thing about the constitutive rules. The player-created information sources like the *SSBM compendium of knowledge* [7] among many others actually outweigh the knowledge the designers had of the rules of the game. We will have to revise our understanding of how rules come into existence. They are not hardcoded into the game by the programmers. The rule system is in itself an emergent system [5] where the program code is full of meta-rules like *jump* and *airdodge* that become *wavedashing* when the system is put in motion by the players.[3] The *SSBM Compendium of Knowledge* [7] is not in any way aspiring to be the rulebook of *Smash*. Instead it takes a very pragmatic approach to describing what can be done in the game. Perhaps this is a good model for how to look at rules, an open-ended list of possibilities emerging in the actual playing of the games.

Let us return to Salen and Zimmerman [6] one more time. When they say that *Go* is *Go* as long as the rules stay the same, I see a parallel in how *Random Smash* is still *Smash*, to some extent, because the core rule set remains the same. This is significant since it is by creating a false sense of security among the smashers that the *Random Smash* tournament becomes so pleasurable to the anti-smashers. The smashers find themselves completely incapacitated on their home turf but by the subversive interpretation of the rule-set.

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[3] It is debated whether wavedashing was first discovered by the beta-testers before the game was released, but none of them have clamied to have done so in any official forum.

CONCLUSIONS

The idea that rules have a core position in defining a game without the need to take the situated aspects of play into account is problematic. As we have seen in the example of *Smash*, the very nature of a game can change without changing the core rules. Rules do not inherently belong to the formal aspects of games. Even at the most fundamental level, rules are influenced by, and affect, the social and cultural aspects of the gaming context. In the console club, rules of games are used as tools in a larger discussion relating to the values of the community.

I am not, however, suggesting that we need to rewrite all the books on games that at some point focus on games separated from the practice of playing them and state that rules is a core aspect of this formal approach. I am instead interested in adding more perspectives to the understanding of the role of rules in the study of games. It is also a question of balancing the perspectives. Placing rules at the center of the formal model of games and the formal aspects before social and cultural perspectives creates a skewed understanding of games.

Going back to Huizinga [3] or Sutton-Smith [8] it may seem that this is nothing new, but looking at the abundance of models of games with rules at the center and players somewhere in the outer rim, I believe that it is time for a recalibration of the system. The formal game analysts have appropriated rules as an analytical concept and scholars from other fields of game studies need to reclaim it.

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