How gaming achieves popularity: The case of *The Smash Brothers*

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ABSTRACT
Using a case example of the crowd-funded YouTube documentary *The Smash Brothers,* the study explores how digital game culture is represented in media. The units for a qualitative content analysis, as described by Krippendorf (2004), are defined through thematic distinction. The results refer to four major categories and compose digital game culture as a whole: game, gamer, gameplay and game community. The interaction between gamer and game (gameplay) is the most featured element in the documentary. Gamers were shown to be individuals, athletes, celebrities and artists. Gameplay was also depicted to be of varying nature and in opposition, considered both a sport and an art. The specific game community is portrayed as being a large, friendly and sociable community. Based on the findings, further research can be facilitated in order to study the representations of digital game cultures in other forms of social media, as well as mass media and public discourse.

Keywords
Game culture, representation, qualitative content analysis, YouTube, documentary

INTRODUCTION
Video gaming has become the norm with the few individuals who do not play games being the exception, "now, as the first generation of gamers flirts with middle age (…) video games are beginning to venture beyond geekdom into a region approaching the mainstream" (Schiesel 2007). With this global popularity of video gaming, there is also a subsequent growth in digital game culture: international communities built around certain games, with their specific languages, rituals and shared spaces. This paper attempts to explore how a digital game culture is represented in media.

Digital game cultures come in a variety of forms and sizes; one example is the *Super Smash Brothers (SSB)* culture. This game culture surrounds the competitive play of a Nintendo party game, and has been an active community ever since the inception of the *Super Smash Brothers Melee (SSBM)* title in 2001. Gamers in this community have taken a seemingly casual party game and turned it into a highly competitive fighting game. They continue to play the game today; years after its initial release, forgoing other more graphically advanced games and even its sequels including *Super Smash Brothers Brawl (SSBB)*.

This game culture enjoyed little mass media attention in past years, until recently, when the culture exploded in popularity. This surge in popularity occurred after a crowd-funded documentary series was released in 2012, showcasing the passionate community and its well-known gamers. Since the release of *The Smash Brothers* series on YouTube, the culture has enjoyed massive attention from gamers, mainstream media and even the company that developed the game. Nintendo's position is clear, it has been known to shun competitive gaming and its community (Beauchamp 2013). However, in an unparalleled event the company has given a personal thank you to the competitive *Smash Brothers* community, hosted an invitational tournament and has even begun catering to and involving the community in several promotional events for its future releases (Nintendo 2014).

Documentaries are a medium that is always regarded favourably for providing a mixture of important aspects such as information, point of view, critical thinking, aesthetics and even entertainment (Schwab 2010). The documentary *The Smash Brothers* can be classified as an expository documentary, which "addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history" (Nichols 2001, 105). The analysis of a documentary is a worthy place to begin as it bridges the gap between journalism and entertainment, attempting to provide an accurate image of its subject. This medium provides several beneficial aspects for the scientific analysis of game cultures such as ready-made and authentic insights into a game culture, as well as a narrative and mediated representations

Independently produced documentaries are becoming a real part of the gaming world, with several digital communities having their own documentaries (created by passionate film makers or gamers). While some game companies sanction documentaries, several films have been crowd funded and produced by the gamers themselves. The creation and distribution of these documentaries make them an integral part of social media in the gaming world and indicative of media convergence. There is a pressing need for a thorough investigation of YouTube representation of digital game cultures, as they rise from their niche into popular culture and public discourse. Analysing how social media (and gamers themselves) depict gaming proves important, not only in deciding the future of this industry, but also in how media products can achieve cultural importance, becoming appropriated and entwined in our daily lives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
In both academia and mainstream press, digital game culture (sometimes called video game culture) is portrayed and framed very heterogeneously. Shaw (2010) proposes a framework for outlining digital game culture based on three dimensions: who plays, what they play and how they play. Shaw concludes that while the term can be framed differently, digital game culture is almost always defined as something separate from popular culture (ibid, 417). Mäyrä (2008, 13) goes on to define digital game cultures as subcultures: groups of people sharing the same values, interests and practices, and through their interactions, form a separate group within a larger culture. He notes that in addition to having a shared space, such as an online forum, these subcultures also share the same language and rituals, while valuing similar artefacts and memorabilia. This concept of multiple game cultures is further divided into the ambiguous categories of hard-core and causal gamers. Mäyrä notes that these differences serve as a cultural distinction within game cultures, but are difficult to classify based on play hours or genre. In addition to forms of subcultures, digital game cultures can be interpreted as individual gamer cultures (with specific characteristics and inventive modes of gameplay), game

meta cultures (such as those focused on modding or community based play like Twitch Plays Pokémon) and finally, on a macro level, with digital games as cultural objects (Wimmer 2012, 528).

Digital games, and their cultures, do not exist independently and have to be put into certain contexts, as explained by King and Krzywinska (2006, 38). Furthermore, Mitgutsch et al. (2013, 9) state that games contextualize the way we play, and in reverse, our play methods re-contextualize the rules and goals of games and even our culture, society and history. Evidently, context plays an important role in the way digital game cultures can be observed and analysed. Building on Hepp's work on media cultures, Mitgutsch et al. suggest different contexts, under which digital games and their cultures can be studied. They embed the contexts of digital game culture into process of articulation of a specific media culture, which are "historically, temporally and spatially rooted and contextualized" (2013, 10). Hepp observes that the articulation of meaning in media cultures is a complex circuit, of which different levels exist: the articulation of production, representation, appropriation, identification and regulation (2011, 72). These contexts do not exist in linear process, the cycle of stages are strongly intertwined and continuously take effect on each other. Similar to Wimmer's study of the World Cyber Game's media portrayal, in our study, attention is given to "cultural meaning production", which is mainly evoked through media representations (2012, 532).

Our analysis attempts to evaluate how a specific game culture is represented in a form of social media since a growing number of studies show that YouTube is an appropriate platform for engagement, community formation (Burgess/Green 2009, 53) and for the mediation of identities (Light et al. 2012, 352). YouTube's composition of individual voices, and ordinary people (gamers in our case) represented as celebrities, is why a study of portrayals in this medium is extremely interesting. Moreover, YouTube provides a greater sense of 'authenticity', as stated by Tolson (2010, 278). In addition to increasing popular interest (ibid, 279), this authenticity may possibly help in providing an accurate depiction of the *SSBM* game culture.

Digital games have a long history of being depicted negatively in popular discourse, usually as something troublesome or devoid of value (Consalvo 2003, 320). Consalvo states, "if games become more mainstream, perhaps the discourse will shift too," (ibid, 321) which is something that can be evidently observed in later studies of digital games in media. McKernan (2010) studies the portrayal of digital games in The New York Times, as early as the 1980's. He finds that there are several phases of representation, improving with time, as digital games become a larger part of popular culture, "This change in coverage may be indicative of the main-stream media's recognition of video games as a permanent presence in children's lives," (ibid, 325). Sørensen (2013) also conducts a study investigating the portrayal of digital games in German press. She states that media usually attributes different, or multiple identities to digital games (ibid, 976). The identities given to digital games range from portraying them as a political, technical or civil objects, to representing them as sport, through stressing their team play and strategy elements (ibid, 971). Positive portrayals usually praise the socialization or learning possibilities of games, or they professionalize them and compare them to sport (Wimmer 2012, 537).

Similar to the initial depiction of digital games, gamers are also shown in somewhat of a negative light in mainstream media (Consalvo 2003, 312). Simon et al. find that by positioning gameplay as a solitary and last resort activity for those who cannot find any

other form of social interaction, the resulting image is that gamers are reclusive and socially inept (2003, 2). This line of thought, in both public discourse and mainstream media, leads to the establishment of the gamer stereotype: where all gamers are labelled as male, socially incompetent 'nerds'. While gamers are, of course, the first to parody this representation (ibid, 3), certain fan activities, and findings by academics, prove that gamers tend to live up to their stereotype to some degree. In their study of video game textual and cultural production online, Simons et al (2003) detail one form of fan scholarship: game walkthroughs, or painstakingly detailed guides of how to complete games. They find that these walkthroughs exceptionally exhaustive and professionally produced.

Gamers, however, do not always fit the physical stereotype. Instead of sallow, malnourished or obese, and playing away in their mother's dimly lit basement, Ferrari (2013, 7) states that, "some of the South Korean StarCraft pros could have been heartthrob pop stars in another life". Additionally combating the male only gamer stereotype Jakobsson (2007) notes that during his study of a console club, the diverse environment surprised him.

In his study of the representation of the World Cyber Games (WCG) in Cologne, Wimmer (2012) finds that even though the media still occasionally portrays gamers stereotypically, they are also beginning to depict gamers as athletes and celebrities as well. This is due to how the public relations personnel handled negative media attention, helping eliminate "the cliché that computer gamers represent a homogenous group of male teenagers with behavioral disorders" (ibid, 534). It is only natural to portray gamers as athletes and celebrities when eSports and competitive play are becoming more common within gaming and popular culture. Certain pro-gamers even receive athlete visas to compete in tournaments in the United States (Beck 2014). In another case study of the WCG, Hutchins pinpoints clear parallels between real sport and eSport, bolstering the representation of gamers as athletes or cyber-athletes (2008, 857). However, this image is not only based on comparisons between real sport and eSport, but also due to the game cultures' own presentation of its activities. In his study of a console club, Jakobsson (2007, 390) finds that those playing SSBM "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." The athlete comparison is further strengthened by eSport spectatorship. In a recently conducted social study, it was found that gamers preferred watching pro-gamers playing rather than play themselves (Kaytoue et al. 2011, 1181), much like fans of professional sports.

Gamers who play *SSBM* can be considered a type of fighting gamer. These gamers typically reject the eSport label and attempt to distance themselves from it. This is because fighting gamers' communities existed long before the eSport phenomena (Ferrari, 2013, 3). Other reasons range from an "independent historical identity," to "and a distaste for the outward aesthetic standards of gentlemanly sport" (ibid). Moreover, smashers, like other fighting gamers stress "style and swagger," decorating their control pads and exuding "body English," or unconscious movements made in order to influence the progress of a propelled object during gameplay (ibid, 7).

The most common representation given to competitive gameplay is usually that of sport, hence the term eSport (see comprehensively Taylor 2012). Witkowski (2009, 53) finds that competitive gaming is usually framed like sports by labelling gamers as cyber-athletes and through similar sporting structures, such as teams, training, records and

formal organizations. Ferrari also adds that eSport involves strenuous training, a mental effort resulting in physical exertion (2013, 5). Due to this strenuous training and drilling, there are a wide number of physical injuries that can result from eSport, "carpal-tunnel syndrome, 'Nintendo thumb' and ocular fatigue are just a few of the occupational hazards of a pro-gamer" (ibid). So it seems that digital gameplay proves to be anything but free of physical exertion. In his study of WCG communications, Wimmer (2012, 533) finds that public relations experts of the WCG attempted to frame digital gaming as sport by stressing certain structures, "Psychological support, team building activities, and media training were part of the national team's preparation and are deemed as resemblances to sport."

As observed from their use of online media, digital gaming communities tend to be very media centric and proficient. Church (2013, 100) states that gamers practice media blackouts to prevent spoilers. Additionally, when conducting his study on a console club, Jakobsson (2007) was provided with a "collective treasure" of video and image material, recorded by the console club in documentation efforts (2007, 386). Another activity that highlights the importance of media, especially true in the *SSBM* community, is the broadcasting and spectating of competitive gameplay. Digital gameplay spectatorship is on the rise and this growth is indicative of the growing interest in eSport (Kaytoue et. al, 2011, 1181f.). Twitch TV, a form of social television where users can chat while streaming, is one of the first websites to provide a platform where individuals can broadcast and watch digital gameplay live. While *SSBM* may not be of the most viewed games on Twitch (Kaytoue et. al. 2011, 1185), it still enjoys a relatively large spectator base, with several dedicated channels organized by the community. One such stream, broadcasting the EVO 2013 finals for *SSBM*, managed to accumulate 130 thousand simultaneous viewers, setting the record for the most watched fighting game (Polygon 2013).

Similar to how gamers are always portrayed as male, digital gaming communities are also thought to be mostly male-dominated spaces, "the sight of a female gamer remains a remarkable spectacle within a commercial and cultural space still dominated by male designers and male consumers" (Dovey/Kennedy 2006, 29). However, as mentioned earlier, Jakobsson (2007, 391) found the console club to provide a more open and accepting environment, the club was "more broadly defined allowing for much more diversity in personal expression."

METHODOLOGY

The proposed method for this study is a qualitative content analysis as described and explained by Krippendorff (2004). This content analysis will be applied to all nine episodes of *The Smash Brothers* documentary. The qualitative method allows for scholars to contextualize their content through the use of existing literature, articulate new meaning to content based on its assumed context, and finally, allows for new research questions and answers to arise during the course of the analysis (Krippendorff 2004, 88).

The *SSBM* documentary is a crowd-funded video project dealing with the game's community and culture. The documentary is a nine-part series, with each episode focusing on a prominent *SSBM* professional player, and their rise to the top of the competitive community. The series is available for free viewing on YouTube with each episode averaging around 100,000 views (when the research began) and with the first episode having the most views (560,000). In total, the documentary provides 257 minutes of content to be coded.

The units for this content analysis are defined through thematic distinction. That is to say when a specific segment in the documentary is coded, it is done so because it fits a theme proposed by the researchers. Unlike physical, categorical or propositional distinctions for units, using thematic units for the content analysis proves to be extremely beneficial for researchers interested in the study of representation (Krippendorff 2004, 108). This is because thematic units provide extremely rich narratives, in addition to being very closely linked to the viewer's understanding of the text (ibid.).

In hopes of increasing the reliability and the ability for replication of this study, a certain number of thematic codes were devised into a coding scheme or codebook. The codes, attributed to certain phenomena, belong under four major categories, highlighted by the literature, and compose digital game culture as a whole. These major codes are gamer, game, gameplay and community. Under each major category exist several sub-codes, each describing a distinct phenomenon.

Individually these sub-codes have been generated in one of two ways. Deductive codes are based on themes and phenomena that were originally highlighted by relevant literature. An example of a deductive code would be the comparison of eSport or videogame play to regular sport, something that is heavily detailed in game research so far (see theoretical framework). During the analysis, when an individual in the documentary states something comparing gameplay to sport, or when imagery assists in making a similar comparison (actions shots of controllers mixed with gameplay footage), they will be coded within the same deductive sub-code. It is important to note that the coding of segments sometimes overlapped, with certain segments being coded as depictions of both gamer and interaction, or community and gamer, etc. Examples of this are segments were gameplay is represented as a sport; it is then natural to assume that the same segments are also portraying gamers as athletes.

On the other hand, inductive codes are based on observations of the content. An example of an inductive code is the influence an individual would have on the identity of a digital game. While the thematic code of a game's influence on an individual's identity is considered a deductive code (due to its appearance in surveyed literature) the counter-code is considered inductive because it is based on observations by the researchers.

Due to the nature of the documentary medium, special attention is given not only to dialogue or what is being said, but also to imagery and sound. For example, not only is discussion surrounding videogame play as sport (when players describe their play as a sport or compare gamers to athletes) coded under the thematic code of "sport comparison" but imagery and video footage also alluding to the same comparison are categorized within the same code. Such footage that is dedicated to just gameplay, with accompanying sport-like commentary or stimulating music, is coded as comparing gameplay to sport, since it is very similar to how sport highlights are presented in broadcast television. Additionally, it is important to note that the documentary episodes will be coded in their original order to take in consideration narrative importance.

RESULTS

During the viewing of the documentary segments were coded into categories based on which one of the pillars they were representing. The most coded category was gameplay (216 codes), followed by gamer (197), community (165) and finally game (75). Under each major category there are subcodes, dealing with a phenomenon that might be represented in the documentary. The most commonly overlapping codes are ones

comparing gamers to celebrities and comparing gameplay to sport, which both overlap with comparing the gamer to an athlete. It is important to note that the sheer number of codes does not affect the results presented below, as this study is primarily qualitative. Each dimension represented seems equally important and the number of codes served simply to systematize results. Furthermore, the order of which the thematic units are presented does not follow quantitative importance, but instead follows the same logical thread as our theoretical framework.

Representations of the game

One common game representation in *The Smash Brothers*, based on its recurrence within the narrative, *is its influence on individuals* and vice versa. The influence the game has on individual identity is showcased in several ways, initially; there is a segment dedicated to gamer-tags and their selection. Gamers are asked about their tags (with the name appearing on the screen) and why they chose that name. The creation of this gamer-tag is a form of identity construction, as aptly put by the gamer Wife: "I found a second self in Smash. Having this gamer-tag and this alternate life and this alternate set of friends (…) allowed me to have an identity that was very different. In regular life some people call me the most positive person they've met (…) but in smash I'm arrogant, arrogant and condescending, and I can be aggressive and forceful and it's fun to have this second identity." (Beauchamp 2011, "No Johns")

Furthermore, *SSBM* is shown to be a significant part of the lives of its gamers. Several of those interviewed gave heartfelt statements about how much the game meant to them (Beauchamp 2011, "Game"). Other gamers like Chillindude829 mention that because of *SSBM* they were able to make such great friends, "it's more than a game, it's literally part of my life. Most of my close friends, most of my best friends I've made through Smash (…) it shows their excellent judgment to play this amazing game" (Beauchamp 2011, "Game"). This influence that *SSBM* had on individuals is represented in a dramatic and magnified manner, when in the final episode the producer asks Wife to "wrap up" Smash and he replies with, "it really means so much to me and I really think it was important but you're asking me why? Well, it was a chance for us to be somebody. It was a chance for all of us to be somebody and that was a big deal." (Beauchamp 2011, "Game")

On the other hand, *individuals* are also shown to have an *influence on the identity of the game.* Throughout the testimonials and episodes, interviewees name pro-gamers like Ken, Chu Dat and Mango (who used specific game characters) paving the way for other players by showcasing how the characters should be used. In one of the episodes focusing on Ken, the "King of Smash," it was explained how he pioneered several techniques with his character, which have become commonplace in todays *SSBM* gameplay. Techniques such as "dash dancing" (running back and forth quickly to confuse the opponent) and the "Ken combo" (a deadly finishing move) are all explained in detail and credited as Ken's inventions.

While the game is represented as *entertaining* to play the way it is used and depicted in the documentary delivers the message that is also extremely *entertaining to watch*, similar to professional sport or creative performances. The spectator sport label is only given because gameplay is also portrayed as a sport. Every episodes of the documentary contain large segments of original gameplay footage, sometimes even recorded through primitive cameras. The footage displayed is always the original gameplay of some climatic, historically relevant, or dramatic match. This footage is presented accompanied with either recounts by gamers, or sport-like match commentary. However, in most

instances, this footage is shown without any explanation and with either stimulating music or just the sounds of the attending crowd. Even when used as visual aids to the stories being told by gamers, a lot of the footage remains unexplained and serves to either showcase high-risk matches or the skill of certain pro-gamers. These *entertaining* segments help deliver the message that *SSBM* is an enjoyable game to be watched as well as to be played.

Representations of the gamer

Both professional and casual Smashers (*SSBM* gamers) are presented in a variety of ways, with comparisons being drawn between them and athletes, celebrities and performers. Being community organized and funded, the documentary is assumed to depict gamers in a non-stereotypical fashion, however, the analysis proves that while some of the representations attempt to combat the gamer stereotype, there were also several portrayals that enforce it.

Initially, there are a number of pro-gamers presented in the documentary who are valued in the community not only for their skill but also for being "cool". When discussing the rise of one of these pro-gamers (PC Chris), the narrator openly admits, "the new champion found instant fame, not only for his technical skills but for being what few pro-gamers had been before: cool." (Beauchamp 2011, "Revolution") This line is complemented with a myriad of older photographs displaying PC Chris in a stylized and hip manner. Throughout the episode, which focused on PC Chris, segments are dedicated to breaking the stereotypical image of the gamer. He is shown attending a house party, casually telling the camera "these are my friends" as he mingles and plays a drinking game (beer-pong). The reigning champion of *SSBM* (Mango) is also depicted in a similar way. Mango is portrayed as a carefree individual who likes to have fun and party heavily. When interviewed, Mango himself comments about his adventures, "I'm pretty sure I've almost died twice (...) I've been arrested almost eight times just cause I'm always talking smack to the cops – never back down, dude!" (Beauchamp 2011, "The Natural")

The stereotypical gamer image is opposed in the documentary not only through the presentation of non-traditional gamers, but also through a lot of what is being said by the gamers themselves. Chillindude829 comments that when he began going to tournaments as a high school student, he was surprised that the people he went to meet were not "basement dwelling nerds" but older people who did not fit the gamer profile, "if I ever told people at school or anything, like I go to tournaments [they would say] oh that's lame. Oh yeah, well let me show you this motherfucker Wes that goes to these tournaments, he's a fucking badass." (Beauchamp 2011, "Show Me Your Moves")

Nevertheless, there are also representations of gamers who fit the gamer stereotype so accurately; they could have probably pioneered it. MewtwoKing (M2K) is one such *SSBM* pro-gamer and has an entire episode in the documentary dedicated to him, entitled "The Robot". He is represented rather stereotypically in both his demeanour (at tournaments and in interviews) and his appearance. Wife comments that M2K is "superficially stereotypical" and Chillindude829 adds that when M2K first appeared in the scene, he despised him, "he represented everything terrible about the smash community (…) especially when he started getting good that's when I had a problem with him. I didn't want this guy to be the face of Smash." (Beauchamp 2011, "Paper Cuts") It seems that while the stereotypical image of the gamer is well recognized and despised within the community, it still exists; leading to the assumption that there might be some truth to the stereotype after all. What also adds to the gamer stereotype is the portrayal of

gamers as mostly men. Throughout the entire nine episodes, only four female gamers were presented, and only one of those women is interviewed more than once. Milktea, comments on the lack of female gamers when she mentions the mistreatment she received when first joining the community and being labelled as an "attention-whore". (Beauchamp 2011, "The Natural")

Being *casual or hard-core* is a common distinction between gamers noted by academics (see theoretical framework). This distinction is represented in the documentary as well, with all Smashers (except extremely casual players) being considered *hard-core* gamers. The documentary depicts *SSBM* gamers taking a party-game to new competitive heights, as Prog states, "we're weird as a game [community], we took Smash, this party game and made it our own" (Beauchamp 2011, "Game"). *SSBM* gamers certainly see themselves as maniacs and Prog goes on to confirm the account by stating that these gamers love the game so much they continue to play it 12 years after its release, ignoring its sequel.

While the literature suggests that gamers are similar to *scholars* in their fan work (see above), very few comparisons are made of gamers to scholars; still, there is work of *fan scholarship* present in the documentary. One comparison is made of M2K, who is portrayed as very studios in his gameplay, learning frame-rate data and amassing a wealth of knowledge on the intricacies of *SSBM* (Beauchamp 2011, "The Robot"). Other gamers, on the other hand, are represented as learning through play. The only other scholar comparison (or work of actual *fan scholarship*) comes from how advanced, in-game techniques are presented in the documentary. Albeit jokingly, these techniques are usually explained and presented in the *SSBM* laboratory, where two scientists stand around and introduce the hypothetical physics behind certain techniques and moves (Beauchamp 2011, "Show Me Your Moves").

Smashers are also depicted in the documentary more as *fighting gamers* than eSport individuals. As characteristic of *fighting gamers,* smashers care dearly about their controllers; M2K walks around with a box of controllers, one for each character he uses (Beauchamp 2011, "The Robot"), while others modify and stylize their controllers. More importantly, trash talking during gameplay is a common incidence that many players discuss in interviews. While some players dislike it, others such as Wes and PC Chris feel like it is an essential experience of playing *SSBM*: not only do you have to play well but you also have to do so under pressure (Beauchamp 2011, "The King of Smash").

Portraying *gamers as athletes* is a very common occurrence within the documentary. Several pro-gamers are compared to real *athletes*; M2K was described as being the Michael Jordan of *SSBM* at one point in his career (Beauchamp 2011, "The Natural"). When relating his style to another pro-gamer, HungryBox admits, "he's a sprinter, I'm a marathon runner," (Beauchamp 2011, "The Natural"). Another player interviewed at Apex (an international tournament) stated, "we European players know everything about the American players, a bit how European basketball fans follow the NBA." (Beauchamp 2011, "Don't Get Hit") Adding to the *athlete comparison*, several gamers stated during interviews their need for extensive practice, or a clear and conscious effort to improve. The series also shows pro-gamers acting as representatives of their state (or country) during tournaments.

Pro-gamers are often portrayed as *celebrities* in the documentary. Representing each pro-gamer individually (and in detail) per episode, results in a lot of background information being shared about these gamers. This interest in the lives, motivation, hobbies and career

of gamers is similar to the interest shown to other mainstream celebrities. Several segments are dedicated to individuals discussing, not only the achievements of these pro-gamers, but also their personalities. The lives of these gamers, their families and so on, not just their achievements, are generally central themes in every episode. When available, the pro-gamers are questioned about their lives, like subjects of public interest, and their answers are shared with the audience and built into the narrative of the documentary.

Much like *celebrities* who are hated or loved because of their status and performance, pro-gamers are both respected and hated based on their gaming skill. When recounting Ken's story, "The King of Smash," gamers relate how at the beginning, people cheered Ken on and respected his play, but as time went on, crowds began to turn on him; rooting for the underdog instead. Moreover, when describing the playing style of HungryBox, several interviewees state that even though he wins tournaments regularly, he is disliked for his defensive playing style. Several players mention that his style is not entertaining or enjoyable to watch (Beauchamp 2011, "The Natural"). Enjoying one player's playing style more than another's hints that competitive gaming is not strictly a sport, with one sure-fire way of competing or winning. It is more like a performance, where beauty of form and function are also taken into account (see representations of gameplay).

Representations of the gameplay

The *SSBM* documentary presents various images of gameplay. Initially, one important portrayal about playing or gaming, as highlighted by the literature, is that *gameplay is defined by its rules*. Throughout the documentary, various types of play are shown, each different because of its rules. "Money matches" are an example, where participating gamers put forward an amount of money, and the winner takes all the winnings. "Crew battles" are also a type of play where five gamers pool their lives together and face opponents as a team, in one-on-one matches (Beauchamp 2011, "Don't Get Hit").

Competitive *SSBM* play is also depicted as being *defined by strict rules:* four stock matches, an eight-minute time limit and the banning of items. In the documentary, East Coast Smashers complain that when the competitive scene was still new, West Coast Smashers would use items in tournaments. One gamer recalls a story of how he beat a tournament organizer in the West Coast because of items, afterwards items were banned from competitive play (Beauchamp 2011, "No Johns"). Hence, rules are represented as severely important to gameplay, and an instrumental feature in defining the type of play taking place (competitive or casual).

The literature surveyed also suggests that *competitive gaming is compared to sport*, due to a surprising number of similarities between the two activities. In the *SSBM* documentary, this comparison is the most common portrayal of gameplay based on the occurrence of messages and themes suggesting so. Other than comparing gamers to athletes, competitive gameplay is represented as an activity that requires dedication, practice and persistence. Both current (and previous) pro-gamers state in interviews the need for dedicated practice to improve their skill, especially before major tournaments. Wife also compares the free nature of *SSBM gameplay as being extremely similar to sports*; "you can compare it to basketball or football where a person has control of every movement of their body." (Beauchamp 2011, "Show Me Your Moves")

Competitive gaming is especially depicted as sharing a lot of similar processes and institutions as classical sport. Tournaments are held regularly and are the heart of the

competitive *SSBM* scene. In the documentary, tournaments are shown much like sporting events; original gameplay footage or graphical renderings of the bracket accompany the recounts of these events. The top pro-gamers for *SSBM* are also ranked based on their performance at local and international tournaments (similar to sporting teams). Furthermore, *SSBM* is stated to have been part of the MLG, an eSport company that presents and manages gaming events almost identically to sport. Segments in the documentary that recount the MLG, feature post-match interviews with winning gamers, as well as sports casters and individuals providing commentary. Live commentary is a sport-like aspect that is stressed as being of extreme importance to competitive *SSBM* gameplay. Much like professional sports, commentary in *SSBM* is used to explain the strategy of players and more intricate or complicated forms of play.

The actual act of gameplay is also filmed extremely similarly to sport in this series. Gamers are captured with quick action shots as they play. These shots are interwoven together with original gameplay footage or dramatized still-shots. Visual focus is sometimes given to the game controller, and the gamer's use of it, stressing the importance of execution or the physicality of play. Whether recounting iconic matches or discussing the prowess of a certain gamer, there are several parts of the documentary dedicated solely to gameplay footage. As mentioned before, this footage is either accompanied with in-game music, energizing music or live commentary. All these ways of presenting gameplay are extremely similar to the presentation and broadcast of sports, whether in highlight-reels or during live events.

However, again true to the surveyed literature, gameplay in the documentary is also depicted as *art or an expressive performance*. A majority of the in-game footage used contains various, complex techniques and distinct styles. However, only the avid gamer understands the beauty of these forms and so to the general viewer, gameplay may seem to be more of a *sport* than an *expressive performance*. Still, the documentary managed to communicate the message of *SSBM* as an art form. Commenting about watching two leading pro-gamers compete, DOH states, "it was these two people, who are so above us mere mortals, putting on an exhibition." (Beauchamp 2011, "Don't Get Hit")

The existence of different gameplay styles also adds to the comparison *to expressive performance*. Wife states that each gamer has his own style, "everybody looks different. I can watch a video of a Marth and I can tell you if it's Ken or Neo or Azen. You can see the style in a person's character and that to me, is incredible" (Beauchamp, 2011, "Show Me Your Moves"). Other pro-gamers are credited throughout the documentary for their unique or distinct styles. One specific pro-gamer (Isai) is described as competing not for the sake of winning but to please the crowd (Beauchamp 2011, "Don't Get Hit"). During the final episode, while summing up *SSBM*, Caotic states "Smash brothers is like an art form it actually isn't about being the best, it isn't about winning (...) it's about turning up at a venue with a game you all love and care about and playing it really cool, making it an art form. Just perform kick-ass, awesome [things]. Do awesome combos, invent stuff [and] be creative." (Beauchamp 2011, "Game")

Representations of the game community

The accepting atmosphere of the community is well represented, and so is the ability for any individual to earn respect through their gaming skill. However, regardless of this accepting atmosphere, the community is shown as lacking female gamers. Aside from a couple of female gamers interviewed, or those appearing in older photos, there are no women to be seen in the pro-gaming spectrum. At one point Chillindude829 even states

that *SSBM* attracts people from all walks of life, except for girls (Beauchamp 2011, "Game"). While girls certainly exist in the *SSBM* culture, the community is still represented as clearly dominated by male gamers.

True to what the literature highlighted, the gaming community is depicted as a structured and organized scene. There is a clear hierarchy of gamers shown in the documentary and PC Chris mentions at one point that he felt he should not be mingling with top players because of his dismal placing in certain tournaments (Beauchamp 2011, "Revolution"). The episode "Revolution" is dedicated to how three pro-gamers (M2K, PC Chris and KDJ) overthrew Ken, the reigning champion. The community is also portrayed as an orderly scene with a specific code of conduct. During one tournament, an organizer is shown advising and addressing gamers about their behavior at the venue (Beauchamp 2011, "The Natural").

Nevertheless, the community itself is still depicted as being somewhat segmented and divided along certain lines. The most evident division is that between the East Coast and the West Coast. Throughout the documentary, gamers recount the fierce rivalry between the coasts and how representatives competed to determine which side of the country was the best. Each coast is then divided into smaller scenes by state or city. This segmentation is refined even more, where some gamers run in crews or groups of four or more players. This segmentation is primarily due to the fact that the game cannot be played online and players have to be in each other's physical presence to compete. The lack of online play gave birth to local, national and international tournament scenes, each with their own respective gamers.

The Smash Brothers depicts language as a particularly important characteristic of the *SSBM* community. Gamers in this community take care of what language they use, as well as create an array of new terminology for gameplay. One episode has a dedicated segment, entitled "The Definitive 30 Second Symposium on Gaming Terminology," where gamers discuss the derogatory use of terms such as "rape" or "gay" and Milktea, states that using such terms discourages girls from joining the gaming community. One gamer (DOH) also dislikes the use of gay as a derogatory term stating, "people [classifying] me as a sexual minority, like as a negative, is really disheartening especially when gamers as a whole [are] generally more progressive. 'Cause we're all sort of weird" (Beauchamp 2011, "The Natural").

The *SSBM* community is also credited with the creation of a wide range of terminology for both technical, in-game terms and gameplay itself. "Wavedashing" and "Dash dancing" are both terms developed by the *SSBM* community to describe in-game character movements. Other terms like "Sandbagging" (losing intentionally) or "Johns" (excuses made after losing) describe the behavior of the gamer instead (Beauchamp 2011, "No Johns"). While the most commonly used terms are explained in the documentary, several other community-specific phrases (or jargon) are left unexplained. This constant and liberal use of their own language depicts the importance of game-specific terminology in the *SSBM* community.

Media plays a very important role in the *SSBM* community. Aside from the obvious use of the gaming medium, Smashers employ an entire spectrum of media tools and products. Documentation is of extreme significance in the *SSBM* community and there exists a lot of real-life tournament footage and recorded gameplay footage, both of which are used heavily in the episodes. The documentary also discusses the role of camera and

production crews in documenting the *SSBM* scene, and how the process has developed over the years (Beauchamp 2011, "The King of Smash"). The activity of recording matches (and making and distributing DVDs) shows the importance of media in the process of information sharing and learning. One specific match is mentioned in the documentary ("Match 4") is credited for being the most viewed match of all time and reviving the community when it was on the verge of dying (Beauchamp 2011, "The Robot").

Even as an offline game the *SSBM* community still partially exists on the Internet. Several interviewed pro-gamers recount events that occurred only on smashboards.com, the online hub for *SSBM*. Smashboards.com proved to be so important to the community that MLG purchased it (Beauchamp 2011, "The Robot") and currently use it as a promotional outlet. Several others interviewed stress the importance of Smashboards.com to the community, discussing various online events or personalities of certain gamers.

The documentary also portrays the community as heavily relying on social media. Smashers are shown as very organized and capable users of social media when they were able to raise almost 95 thousand dollars for breast cancer. The pledge drive was part of a competition to be included in the EVO tournament 2013 lineup. Later, after Nintendo denied them streaming rights, the community used social media again to rally people against the company, which reinstated its decision only five hours later. The whole process is presented in the documentary as a montage of Facebook and Twitter statuses, stream and YouTube footage, with inspiring music accompanying the rallying effort (Beauchamp 2011, "Game").

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study analyses how digital game culture is portrayed in YouTube documentaries, a form of social media. The selected case example portrays the *SSBM* game culture as a complex and detailed entity. The culture cares deeply, not only about the game being played, but also about how it is being played, and the gamers playing it. The interaction between gamer and game (gameplay) is the most featured element in the documentary. Considerably prominent; with diversified ways of play being compared to art and sport, competitive gameplay is seen as the pivotal ritual on which the culture is based. Language is also portrayed as being equally important for the community, strengthening its categorization as a culture. Gamers and their gameplay are depicted and framed in a variety of ways, other than just conventional athletes and sport. Gamers were shown to be individuals, performers, celebrities and artists. Gameplay was also depicted to be of varying nature and in opposition, considered both a sport and an art.

The YouTube documentary portrays the *SSBM* digital gaming culture as a competitive sport-like culture (with some expressive performance features), where individuals can earn fame, respect and friendships based on their gaming skill and capital. From an academic perspective, noting considerable game studies literature, the documentary representation strongly depicts the *SSBM* gaming community as a specific media culture by giving significance to certain thematic attributes. While the *SSBM* community is always pleased with any mention in mass media and publicity, it seems they are overjoyed with *The Smash Brothers* documentary, feeling that it captures their passion and purpose for play. Perhaps the more culturally detailed image provided by the documentary, is the reason behind the extensive popularity and acceptance of the series in the community. Regardless, the approval and admiration of *The Smash Brothers* in its respective gaming community leads to the idea that the image provided by the film-series

(and to a certain degree mass media) is accurate in depicting a dense and complicated gaming culture. The various representations of these elements of digital game culture provide a comprehensive image of the *SSBM* culture. This image is exceptionally in-depth, laden with information about the game, its players, gameplay and the community. Interestingly, the documentary only focuses on the US; hence, aspects of the international community (and its influence on *SSBM* culture) are not included. Consequently, the US scene is credited as being the most developed. The representations in the documentary give insight on the gendered nature of the culture, as well as its US focus (Taylor 2011). Unfortunately, due to a limited word count, the intricacies of these aspects could not be discussed in this paper and favour was given to more common findings. Ultimately, using original footage when available, the community-funded project tries to act as a historical record of the events that contributed to the growth of the community and its best players.

It is important to note that there were a few limitations to this study. Initially, only two coders conducted the content analysis after an intercoder reliability test was held. In regards to sampling, the selected sample was purposive and hence, generalizations towards all of YouTube communication, regarding digital game cultures, cannot be made.

There is still much to be done in the academic area where media and video game studies meet. Studying the representation of digital game cultures in a community-funded, YouTube documentary proved beneficial in collecting various portrayals of the essential pillars of digital game culture (game, gamer, gameplay and community). From this study a codebook can be created (and tailored) to study the representations of digital game cultures in both other forms of social media, as well as mass media and public discourse. Future studies can be quantitative in methodology, using a larger sample and comparing several different gaming cultures, in order to provide a comprehensive and numerically sound result. These studies can also assist in helping define which of the four dimensions can be considered the most important or essential for digital game cultures. Additionally, future studies should be conducted comparing social media and user generated content of game cultures to official communication from gaming companies. A look at how the representation and communication differs can provide insight on which form is more successful in promoting and extending the relevance (and shelf life) of a specific game and its culture.

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