

# **Well Played**

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**WELL PLAYED**

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## A Journal on Video Games, Values, and Meaning

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# AUTHENTIC PORTRAYALS OF GAME CULTURE? A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE CROWD-FUNDED YOUTUBE DOCUMENTARY THE SMASH BROTHERS

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Ahmed Elmezeny, Jeffrey Wimmer

## **Abstract**

Using the case example of the crowd-funded YouTube documentary *The Smash Brothers*, this study explores how digital game culture is currently represented in social media. The units for a qualitative content analysis, as described by Krippendorff (2004), are defined through thematic distinction. The results refer to four major categories that represent digital game culture as a whole: game, gamer, gameplay and game community. The interaction between gamer and game (gameplay) is the most stressed element of game culture. Gameplay was depicted to be of varying nature and in opposition, considered both a sport and an art. The portrayal of the culture in our sample stresses both negative and positive aspects, remarking on features that increase the popularity of the game.

## **Introduction**

Digital game cultures come in a variety of forms and sizes; one vivid example is the *Super Smash Brothers Melee (SSBM)* 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 *SSBM* title in 2001. Gamers 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.

Until recently, this game culture enjoyed little mass media attention; the surge in popularity occurred after a crowd-funded documentary was released in 2012. Since the release of *The Smash Brothers* series on YouTube, the community has enjoyed massive attention from gamers, mainstream media and even Nintendo (Nintendo, 2014). While the company has been known to shun competitive gaming and its communities (Beauchamp, 2013), after the release of the documentary, Nintendo thanked the competitive *Smash Brothers* community (Business Wire, 2014) and has even begun catering to (and involving) the community in several promotional events for the game's sequel (ibid).

While game companies are discovering the value of documentaries, independently produced documentaries represent an important part of the game culture, with several digital communities having their own. The creation, as well as the free distribution, of gamer documentaries characterizes them as vital social media products. Analysing social media communication of game cultures is essential, since it can provide insight on which elements of game culture participants feel most passionate about. Not only is this important for game development and understanding gaming communities, but it also highlights how media products can achieve cultural significance, becoming interwoven in our daily lives. The documentary medium can provide a mixture of aspects such as information, point of view, aesthetics and entertainment (Schwab, 2010). *The Smash Brothers* could be perceived as an expository documentary, addressing the viewer directly and proposing a perspective or recounting history (Nichols 2001, p. 105).

## **Literature Overview: Game cultures in press and academia**

In both academia and mainstream press, digital game culture is portrayed and framed very heterogeneously, often defined as something separate from popular culture (Shaw, 2010, p. 417). Game cultures can be understood as subcultures (people sharing the same values, interests and practices) that form a separate group within a larger population (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 13). In addition to having a shared space, these subcultures also share the same language and rituals, while valuing similar artefacts and memorabilia (ibid).

Following the contextual framework of Du Gay et al. (1995), Hepp argues that the articulation of meaning in media cultures can be understood as a complex circuit, that consists of different, strongly intertwined domains: production, representation, appropriation, identification and regulation (2011, 72). Building on this, Mitgutsch et al. (2013) suggest this framework for the study of digital games and their cultures. For our case study we are mostly concerned with the context of representation, because media representations contribute heavily to “cultural meaning production” in current media ecology (Wimmer, 2012, p. 532).

Our analysis evaluates how a digital game culture is represented in social media, since a growing number of studies show YouTube as an appropriate platform for engagement, community formation (Burgess/Green, 2009, p. 53) and the mediation of identities (Light et al., 2012, p. 352). YouTube can provide a greater sense of ‘authenticity’ than traditional broadcasting, through providing “transparent amateurishness” and “conversational responses” (Tolson, 2010, p. 286). In addition to increasing popular interest (ibid, 279), this authenticity might assist in providing a more detailed depiction of the *SSBM* culture.

Digital games have a history of being depicted negatively in popular discourse: usually as something troublesome or devoid of value (Consalvo, 2003, p. 320). McKernan (2010) analyses the portrayal of digital games in *The New York Times* and finds

that there are several phases of representation, improving with time, as digital games become a larger part of popular culture. Sørensen (2013) states that multiple identities are given to digital games in German press (p. 976), from portraying them as political, technical or civil objects, to depicting them as sport, through stressing team play and strategy elements (p. 971). Positive media portrayals usually praise the socialization, learning possibilities and professional sport like aspects of games (Wimmer, 2012, p. 537).

Gamers were also previously represented negatively in mainstream media (Consalvo, 2003, p.312). Simons and Newman (2003, 2) conclude that by positioning gameplay as a solitary and last resort activity, gamers appear as reclusive and socially inept. These assumptions (in public discourse and mainstream media) lead to the gamer stereotype: where all gamers are labelled as male, socially incompetent, hard-core 'nerds'. While gamers are the first to parody this representation (ibid, p. 3), certain fan activities, or works of *fan scholarship* (ibid), strengthen the stereotype to some degree. However, gamers do not always fit the physical stereotype. Instead of malnourished or obese and playing away in their mother's dimly lit basement, Ferrari (2013, p. 7) states that, "some of the South Korean StarCraft pros could have been heartthrob pop stars in another life". Additionally combating the male only label, Jakobsson (2007) notes that during his study of a console club playing *SSBM*, the gender-diverse environment surprised him. 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, p. 29).

In his study of the World Cyber Games (WCG) in Cologne, Wimmer (2012) finds that even though the media occasionally portrays gamers stereotypically, they are beginning to show

them as athletes and celebrities. This was done through how the public relations personnel handled negative media attention, eliminating “the cliché that computer gamers represent a homogenous group of male teenagers with behavioural disorders” (ibid, p. 534). In another study of the WCG, Hutchins (2008) pinpoints clear parallels between traditional sport and eSport, strengthening the image of gamers as athletes (p. 857). Jakobsson (2007, p. 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.” This comparison is only made stronger through eSport spectatorship. Kaytoue et al. (2001, p. 1181) find that some gamers prefer watching professionals rather than play themselves, much like many traditional sport fans.

Gamers who play *SSBM* can be considered fighting gamers; they typically reject the eSport label (however *SSBM* players have now embraced the label). This is because fight gamers’ communities existed long before the eSport phenomena (Ferrari, 2013, p. 3) or it could possibly be “a distaste for the outward aesthetic standards of gentlemanly sport” (ibid). Smashers, like other fight gamers, stress “style and swagger,” decorating their controllers and exuding “body English,” or unconscious movements made in order to influence the progress of an object during gameplay (ibid, p. 7).

As seen from their use of online tools, digital gaming communities tend to be very media proficient. Church (2013, p. 100) states that gamers practice media blackouts to prevent spoilers, while Jakobsson (2007) was provided with a “collective treasure” of video and image material, recorded by the club during his ethnography (2007, p. 386). One activity that stresses the importance of digital media, especially for the *SSBM* community, is the broadcasting and spectating of competitive gameplay. Gameplay spectatorship is on the rise (Kaytoue et al., 2011, p. 1181f.) and one 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).

### **Method: Design and sample**

The method used in this study is a qualitative content analysis as described by Krippendorff (2004), which will be applied to all episodes of *The Smash Brothers* documentary. The advantage of this method is that it allows for scholars to contextualize content through the use of existing literature and articulate new meaning to content based on its assumed context (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 88). Moreover, by providing supporting quotations from the content itself and triangulations of data, a qualitative content analysis provides results that are noteworthy and “compelling for readers who are interested in the contexts of the analysed texts” (ibid., p. 88). Unlike quantitative content analysis, this method is less systematic and provides less validity (ibid., p. 88).

The units of analysis are defined through thematic distinction. When a specific segment in the documentary is coded, it is done so because it fits a theme proposed by the researchers. Unlike categorical or propositional distinctions for units, thematic units prove to be beneficial for academics interested in the study of representation (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 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 replication of this study, the thematic units were developed by means of a codebook. The codes are attributed to certain phenomena and refer to four major categories, which – as highlighted by previous research (Mäyra, 2008; Wimmer, 2008) -represent digital game culture as a whole. Under the categories of gamer, game, gameplay and community are several sub-codes describing a distinct phenomenon.

Individually, these sub-codes have been generated in one of two ways. Deductive codes are based on themes that were

already detected by research, such as the comparison of eSport to traditional sport (Witkowski, 2009). During the analysis, when an individual states something comparing gameplay to sport, or when imagery assists in making a similar association (actions shots of controllers mixed with gameplay footage), they will be coded within the same sub-code. It is important to note that the coding of segments sometimes overlapped, with certain segments being coded as representations of more than one major category (gamer and gameplay or community and gamer). Examples of this are segments where gameplay is represented as a sport, which also portray gamers as athletes. Inductive codes, on the other hand, are based on observations of the content. An example inductive code is the influence an individual has on the identity of a game. While the game's influence on an individual's identity is considered a deductive code (Jakobsson, 2007; Toivonen et. al, 2011) the counter-code is inductive as it is based on the researchers' observations.

*The Smash Brothers* is a crowd-funded documentary project dealing with the game's community. It is a nine-part series, with each episode focusing on a *SSBM* professional player, and their rise to the top of the competitive community. The series is available for free on YouTube, with each episode averaging around 100,000 views (when the research began in 2013) and with the first episode having the most views (560,000). In total, the documentary provides 257 minutes of content to be coded. This sample was selected because as a YouTube series, the documentary is regarded as a form of social communication. Additionally, due to its length, the series paints a more detailed portrait of a gaming community than other individual documentaries. Finally, this series is one of the few gaming documentaries that is immensely well received, both within and outside of the *SSBM* community (Hernandez, 2013).

Due to the nature of the sample, special attention is given not only to dialogue but also to imagery and sound. So, the sport comparison code addresses discussion surrounding videogame

play as sport, as well as imagery and video footage alluding to the same comparison. Footage that is dedicated to gameplay with accompanying sport-like commentary or (music) is coded accordingly since it is very similar to how traditional sports are presented in broadcast television. Finally, it is important to note that the documentary episodes were coded in their original order, taking in consideration narrative importance.

## **Findings**

The most coded category was gameplay (216 codes), followed by gamers (197), community (165) and game (75). The most commonly overlapping codes are ones comparing gamers to athletes, which overlap with comparing gameplay to sport. Since this study is qualitative, the total number of codes does not affect the results presented below. Each dimension appears to be equally important, and the number of codes serves simply to systematize results. Furthermore, the order of which the thematic units are presented in this paper does not follow quantitative importance.

### *Representations of game*

One common depiction, based on its recurrence within the narrative, is the games influence on individuals and vice versa. The influence the game has on individual identity (Jakobsson, 2007; Toivonen et. al., 2011) is showcased in several ways. Initially, there is a segment dedicated to gamer-tags, where gamers are asked about theirs why they chose them. Gamer-tag creation is a form of identity construction, as put by one gamer,

“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. 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”)

On the other hand, individuals are also shown to have an influence on the identity of the game, which was not identified by any literature surveyed. Throughout the episodes, individuals name pro-gamers, like Ken, Chu Dat and Mango, who used specific characters, paving the way for others by showcasing how they should be used. In one of the episodes focusing on Ken, the “King of Smash,” it is explained how he pioneered several techniques with his character, which have become commonplace in today’s *SSBM* gameplay.

Mäyrä (2008) argues that a game’s identity is defined through its rules. The rules of *SSBM* are certainly one of a kind, and contribute to its image as a unique or distinct object. The documentary features a dedicated portion in the first episode explaining the constituent rules and how they differ from other 2D fighting games. Players go on to differentiate *SSBM* more by mentioning the absence of pre-set combos. A female pro-gamer (Milktea) states, “There’s just a fluidity to it that normal 2D fighters don’t have.” (Beauchamp, 2011, “Show Me Your Moves”) This fluidity or sandbox nature of the game is shown to be the main distinguishing factor from other fighting games, making it unique. So while certain academics feel that the constituent rules of a game do not necessarily define it (Jakobssen, 2007; Mäyrä, 2008), *SSBM*’s core rules do contribute to its image as a unique game.

While the *SSBM* is depicted as entertaining to play, the way it is featured in the documentary represents it as also entertaining to watch. Every episode contains large segments of original gameplay footage, noting some climatic, historic, or dramatic

match important to the narrative. This footage is presented with either recounts by gamers, or sport-like commentary. However, in most instances, footage is shown without any explanation and with either music or the sounds of the crowd. These frequent segments assist in portraying *SSBM* as an enjoyable game to watch, in addition to play. While only pro-gamers can appreciate the forms of competitive gaming (Ferrari, 2013), these long unexplained segments in the sample depict the game as entertaining (and accessible) to the casual or non-gamer.

### *Representations of gamers*

Being community-funded, the documentary is assumed to depict gamers in a non-stereotypical fashion. However, the analysis proves that while some representations attempt to combat the gamer stereotype, something typical of gamers (Simons et. al, 2003), several depictions also enforce it.

Initially, there are a number of pro-gamers presented in the documentary who are valued not only for their skill, but also for their demeanor and outward appearance. When discussing one pro-gamer (PC Chris), the narrator states, “the new champion found instant fame, not only for his technical skills but for being what few pro-gamers had never been before: cool.” (Beauchamp, 2011, “Revolution”) Many statements by interviewees also depict another pro-gamer (Mango) as being popular for his carefree and party attitude. When interviewed, Mango states, “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 presentation of some pro-gamers in our sample is similar to Ferrari’s (2013) statements about Korean pro-gamers appearing as celebrity heartthrobs.

The stereotype is opposed not only through the presentation of these non-conventional gamers, but also through what is being said by the gamers themselves. Chillinclude829 comments that when he began going to tournaments as a high school

student, he was surprised that the people he met were not “basement dwelling nerds” but older and cooler people who did not fit the gamer profile (Beauchamp, 2011, “Show Me Your Moves”). What adds to the stereotype, however, is the portrayal of gamers as mostly male. Throughout all episodes, only four female gamers were presented and just one of the women is interviewed more than once. Milktea, reflects on the absence of female gamers when she mentions the mistreatment she received after first joining the community and being labeled an “attention-whore” (Beauchamp, 2011, “The Natural”). While Jakobsson (2007) found the atmosphere of the Smash console club more accepting, certain statements (and lack of women) in our sample paint a completely different picture of the *SSBM* community.

Even though our sample battles the stereotype, there are also representations of others who fit the gamer stereotype so accurately; they could have probably pioneered it. MewtwoKing (M2K) is one such pro-gamer and his dedicated episode is entitled “The Robot”. He appears socially awkward in both his demeanor (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 represented everything terrible about the smash community (...) I didn’t want this guy to be the face of Smash.” (Beauchamp, 2011, “Paper Cuts”) It seems that even when the stereotype is recognized and parodied within the community (Simons et. al, 2003), it still exists.

Research suggests that gamers are similar to scholars in their work (Simons et al. 2003); however, very few of these comparisons were made. One instance is made of M2K, who is portrayed as very studios in his gameplay, learning frame-rate data and amassing knowledge on the intricacies of *SSBM* (Beauchamp, 2011, “The Robot”). Other gamers, on the other hand, are shown as learning through play. An additional scholar comparison (or work of actual fan scholarship) comes from how

advanced in-game techniques are presented in the documentary. Albeit jokingly, techniques are explained in the *SSBM* laboratory, where two scientists introduce the hypothetical physics behind certain advanced techniques (Beauchamp, 2011, “Show Me Your Moves”).

*SSBM* gamers are shown more as fighting gamers than eSport individuals. As characteristic of fighting gamers (Ferrari, 2013), 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 or stylize their controllers. More importantly, trash talking during gameplay is a common occurrence that many players discuss in interviews. While some players dislike it, others 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”). This form of taunting communication (is considered strategic (Drachen, 2011), where players interact to further personal goals.

Portraying gamers as athletes is very common in our sample, just as the literature predicted (Hutchins, 2008; Jakobsson, 2007; Wimmer, 2012). Several pro-gamers are compared to traditional athletes: M2K is 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 states, “he’s a sprinter, I’m a marathon runner.” (Beauchamp, 2011, “The Natural”) Another player interviewed states, “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 state their need for extensive practice, or a conscious effort to improve. Additionally, the sample mentions pro-gamers acting as representatives of their state (or country) during tournaments.

## *Representations of gameplay*

One important context of gameplay is that it is defined by its rules (Jakobsson, 2007). Throughout the documentary, various types of play are shown, each different because of given rules. “Money matches” are when gamers put forward an amount of money and the winner takes all. “Crew battles” is a type of battle where gamers pool their lives together and face opponents as a team (Beauchamp, 2011, “Don’t Get Hit”). Competitive *SSBM* is also depicted as being defined by strict rules: four stock matches, an eight-minute time limit and the banning of items. Confirming what Jakobsson (2007) found during his ethnography, rules are shown to be severely important to gameplay, and an instrumental feature in defining the type of play taking place: whether competitive or casual.

Research also suggests that competitive gaming is compared to traditional sport due to a number of similarities between the two (Witkowski, 2009). Based on the occurrence of messages in our sample, this comparison is the most common portrayal of gameplay. Gamer Wife likens the free nature of *SSBM* play to sport when he states, “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”) Moreover, competitive gameplay is depicted as an activity that requires dedication, teamwork, practice and persistence: something characteristic of traditional sport (Witkowski, 2009; Sørensen, 2013). Several pro-gamers interviewed state their need for dedicated practice to improve their skill, especially before major tournaments.

Competitive gaming is shown to share a lot of similar processes and institutions as traditional sport. Tournaments are held regularly and are the heart of the competitive *SSBM* scene. They are presented much like traditional sporting events, with original footage or graphical renderings of the bracket. Additionally, *SSBM* is stated to have been part of the MLG (Major

League gaming), an eSport company that presents and manages gaming events almost identically to traditional sport. Segments recounting the MLG feature post-match interviews with winning gamers, as well as live commentary. This commentary is a traditional sport-like aspect of the *SSBM* community that is stressed as important to competitive gameplay (Beauchamp, 2011). Like televised sports, commentary in *SSBM* is used to explain the strategy of players and more intricate or complicated forms of play that are not obvious to the casual observer (Ferrari, 2013). Furthermore, the act of gameplay is filmed like traditional sport; gamers are captured with quick action shots as they play and these shots are interwoven with original gameplay footage or dramatized in-game stills. 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 (Wikowski, 2009).

Like research suggests (Ferrari, 2013), gameplay is also compared to an expressive performance. A majority of the in-game footage used has complex techniques and because only the avid gamer understands the beauty of these forms, to the general viewer, gameplay may seem more of a sport than an expressive performance. Still, the sample depicts *SSBM* as an art form through several statements. Commenting about watching two 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 expressive performance comparison. Wife states,

"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")

One pro-gamer (Isai) is described as competing not to win, but to please the crowd (Beauchamp 2011, "Don't Get Hit"). When

describing the playing style of HungryBox, several interviewees state that even though he wins tournaments, he is disliked for his defensive style because it is not entertaining (Beauchamp, 2011, “The Natural”). Enjoying one player’s style more than another’s suggests that competitive gaming is not strictly a sport, with only one way of competing or winning. It is more like a performance, where beauty of form (not just function) is taken into account. Finally, addressing this comparison, one gamer 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”)

It is also important to note that competitive gaming is often portrayed as an occupation. All pro-gamers featured in the documentary tend to discuss their “careers” and even mention taking a “hiatus” or “retiring” from the game. Several pro-gamers are described as individuals who game for a living, like M2K, who supports himself with tournament winnings and sponsorship (Beauchamp, 2011, “The Robot”). So, *SSBM* play can also be seen as unpleasant, due to the pressures and responsibilities of competitive gaming, which liken it to a legitimate occupation. Discussing this, Ken states; “It wasn’t fun anymore (...) it became more like a job than actually playing the game and having fun.” (Beauchamp, 2011, “The King”) This portrayal confirms what Taylor (2006) identified in her study, where gaming becomes tedious and more like a full-time job.

### *Representations of game community*

The welcoming and integrative atmosphere of the community is represented through much of what the players say. However, regardless of these statements, the community is still shown as homogenous and lacking female gamers. At one point Chillindude829 even states that *SSBM* attracts people from all

walks of life, except for girls (Beauchamp, 2011, "Game"). This same gamer is seen later at a tournament, gossiping and seemingly disapproving of another friend's choice to team with a woman (Beauchamp, 2011, "Don't Get Hit"). MilkTea, one of the only female gamers interviewed, mentions that members of the *SSBM* community are keeping other female gamers from joining by using offensive terms, such as rape or gay (Beauchamp, 2011, "The Natural"). The strategic and taunting communication (Drachen, 2011) of the community could be one of the factors that alienate women. So, while the community is often stated as being accepting, it still seems to have issues with the inclusion of women (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, 29).

The *SSBM* community is shown as having a great socializing influence on individuals, providing a space where gamers can make strong bonds. M2K, the pro-gamer said to be "superficially stereotypical" was able to improve his social skills, PC Chris states:

"I feel like the smash community kind of helped him a little bit (...) if he was playing an online game, he might still be the same. He might not have that communication, like when you're talking and developing real relationships (...) he's gotten plenty of friends from Smash that kind of helped mold him to the person he is now." (Beauchamp, 2011, "The Robot")

This image confirms academic work that shows gaming to increase online and offline social capital (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Williams, 2006; Trepte & Reinecke, 2011). Steinkuehler & Williams (2006) find that online gaming encouraging weak ties, however, bonding in the *SSBM* community appears to be strong, which is partially attributed to the co-located nature of play. Social gaming in the same physical space has been proven to result in less social displacement than online gaming (Kowert et. al, 2011).

Even as an offline game, the *SSBM* community still partially exists on the Internet. Several pro-gamers recount events that occurred only on smashboards.com, the community's online

hub. Others interviewed stress the importance of smashboards.com to the community, discussing various online personas of certain gamers. This aspect characterizes the community as an imagined community: communities that are not based on daily face-to-face interaction between its members due to practical and spatial reasons (Anderson, 2010).

Aside from the use of the gaming equipment and online forums, the community also employs other media tools. Documentation is of extreme importance, as Jakobsson (2007) found, and there exists a lot of real-life tournament footage and recorded gameplay used heavily in the episodes. The series 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 making and distributing DVDs of matches shows the role of media in the process of information sharing and learning. One specific match mentioned (“Match 4”), is credited for being the most viewed match of all time on YouTube and reviving the community when it was on the verge of dying (Beauchamp, 2011, “The Robot”). The community is also shown as very proficient social media users, 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 2013 tournament lineup. When Nintendo denied them streaming rights, the community used social media to rally people against the company, which recalled its decision only five hours later (Beauchamp, 2011, “Game”).

## **Discussion**

This study analyzed how digital game culture is portrayed in a YouTube documentary. This specific form of social media portrays the culture of *SSBM* as detailed and complex. The community cares deeply not only about the game being played, but also about how it is being played and those playing it. Gameplay is the most featured element in our sample, with

diversified ways of play being compared to expressive performance and traditional sport. Competitive gameplay is seen as the pivotal ritual on which the culture is based and language is portrayed as being an essential part of the community, strengthening its categorization as a culture.

The documentary presented both negative and positive aspects of this specific game culture, which was not expected. As a crowd-funded project, the sample was expected to glamourize the subject matter. However, certain negative aspects were also communicated, even if unintentional, such as the homogenous nature of the community and pressures of professional play.

Regardless of negative portrayals, the documentary manages to communicate how important certain elements are in popularizing a game, extending its life even after the release of sequels. Unique constituent rules (and the ability to appropriate them for different kinds of play) prolong the life of *SSBM* and diversify its use. Additionally, a community with a strong socializing effect (and online presence) manages to contribute to this game's longevity. Finally, when gameplay is considered both a sport and an expressive performance, there is room not only for different types of play, but also their appreciation. This leads to *SSBM* being appropriated differently, catering to a multitude of individuals with varying motivations for play and entertainment.

Overall, the representations of the four dimensions (game, gamer, gameplay, community) provide a comprehensive image of *SSBM* culture. Interestingly, the documentary only focuses on the US; hence, aspects of the international community (and its influence on *SSBM* culture) are not included. Still, these representations give insight on the US focus of the culture (Taylor 2011), as well as its gendered nature. Ultimately, using original footage when available, the community-funded project tries to act as a historical record of events that contributed to the growth of the community.

It is important to note a few limitations of this content

analysis. 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 game cultures) cannot be made.

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