

Female Fighters: Perceptions of Femininity in the Super Smash Bros. Community

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Abstract

This study takes on a qualitative analysis of the online forum, SmashBoards, to examine the way gender is perceived and acted upon in the community surrounding the *Super Smash Bros.* series. A total of 284 comments on the forum were analyzed using the concepts of gender performativity and symbolic interactionism to determine the perceptions of femininity, reactions to female players, and the understanding of masculinity within the community. Ultimately, although hypermasculine performances were present, a focus on the technical aspects of the game tended to take priority over any understanding of gender, resulting in a generally ambiguous approach to femininity.

Keywords

Nintendo; Super Smash Bros; gender performativity; symbolic interactionism; sexualization; hypermasculinity



Introduction

Examinations of gender in mainstream gaming circles typically follow communities surrounding hypermasculine games, in which members harass those who do not conform to hegemonic gender norms (Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2011; Pulos, 2011), but do not tend to reach communities surrounding other types of games, wherein their less hypermasculine nature shapes the community. The *Super Smash Bros.* franchise stands as an example of this less examined type of game community, with considerably more representation of women and a colorful, simplified, and gore-free style.

Existing research regarding *Super Smash Bros.* focuses on older games in the series, primarily *Super Smash Bros. Melee* (HAL Laboratory, 2001), and tends to focus on individual player interactions rather than the community and the role of gender within it (Hung, 2007; Khanolkar & McLean, 2012). Given that recent games have nearly tripled the number of playable female characters from *Melee*, there is a compelling reason to give the series another examination.

This paper takes a qualitative approach to analyzing the *Super Smash Bros.* community. Through a content analysis of interactions on the online forum SmashBoards¹, it will determine the perception of femininity, the treatment of female players, and the performances of gender within the community, in order to determine whether the degree of hypermasculinity within the game is a predictor of the hypermasculinity within the community.

Literature Review

Within gaming culture, masculinity acts as a pervasive force. Since games are seen as masculine—partially inspired by the marketing of games primarily to men (Kirkpatrick, 2015)—femininity is seen as incompatible with the majority of games, resulting in the exclusion of women from gaming communities (Lien, 2013). Statistics from the Entertainment Software Association show that women make up nearly half (48%) of video game players in the US (2014), despite the beliefs of those who attempt to keep women away from gaming communities.

Women are further excluded within the game industry, with an estimated 10-15% of game developers being female on average and team leaders being less likely to hire women (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2006). This has improved in more recent years, with 19% of workers in the UK game industry being female in 2015 according to Creative Skillset (2016), but this still leaves a dearth of women involved in game creation. Those who manage to make it into gaming communities are often left to face toxic, misogynistic views, further alienating them (Consalvo, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). This also manifests in the harassment and threatening of prominent women in

¹ SmashBoards: <http://smashboards.com/forums/>

gaming culture, such as Anita Sarkeesian and Jennifer Hepler, wherein their comments are ignored and met with harmful speech such as rape jokes. Not only are their opinions and experiences ignored, but they are responded to so overwhelmingly with hatred and threats that it pushes them out of communities and keeps other women from taking part, fearing similar responses. In individual gaming communities, specifically in the Xbox Live community, this same hostility has been observed (Gray, 2011). Furthermore, research has found negative responses to games and consoles that have attracted more women to gaming (Consalvo, 2012).

This illustrates generally harmful and hostile reactions toward femininity and women in mainstream gaming culture. The current research lacks examination of attitudes within communities that are less outwardly hostile toward women, although the existence of performances of masculinity that are less “hyper” has been discussed (Bell, Kampe, & Taylor, 2015), and these performances will be further explored in this paper. There has also been little examination of the *Super Smash Bros.* community. This paper seeks to find out what attitudes exist toward femininity and women and how gender is performed in a community formed around a less hypermasculine game.

Theoretical Framework

Butler (1990) has suggested that gender identity is not derived from biological factors, but is socially constructed through performance. Gender is not a binary—rather, it is fluid (West & Zimmerman, 1987)—but a person will adopt tasks and appearances according to socially constructed ideas about what constitutes an appropriate gender performance. This behavior is taught and reinforced in games through a juxtaposition of men versus women, wherein men predominantly act as heroes and women are side characters or are absent altogether (Dietz, 1998; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). However, games can also offer a safe space in which players can experiment with non-normative performances of gender (Kennedy, 2002; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008). The dichotomy of men versus women is also reinforced through the culture of harassment present within video game communities (Gray, 2011), as women are encouraged to exist in spaces strictly associated with femininity. This starts with fewer women being allowed on developing teams (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2006), resulting in the development of games through the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). It is therefore taught that a female performance might be passive, whereas a male performance leans toward strength and aggression.

Gender performance can be further understood through symbolic interactionism, which is based on the idea that society gains structure and people form meaning through interaction. It rests on three basic premises: individuals act toward things based on the meanings they

have for them, these meanings come from social interactions, and they are dealt with and shaped through an interpretive process when things are encountered (Blumer, 1969). It is then, as a result of the meaning that a person gets from the world around them, that they play out their performance of gender. A person's environment and what they are exposed to becomes a part of their performance, and the type of community a person is involved with will affect their perception of the world and how they act within it. Symbolic interactionism has been used previously to explore the performance of gender as video games have come to portray it and how this comes to impact a person's perception of gender and self (Dietz, 1998).

Together, these theories create a better understanding of the gender dynamics of the SmashBoards community. The concept of gender performance brings context to many of the actions that community members have taken, while symbolic interactionism serves to explain how the community has come to understand what gender performance is in the first place. Given the assertion that "gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes" (Butler, 1990, p. 6), gender itself is clearly established through symbolic interactionism, and so the two theories together serve to shed light on gendered interactions. This converging of theory can help to contextualize how the members of SmashBoards interacted with one another and interpreted the game's characters.

Methodology

This paper constructs a portrait of the *Super Smash Bros.* community through interactions examined between members of the community via the online forum, SmashBoards. Research focused on the sub-forums for *Super Smash Bros. for 3DS* (Sora Ltd. & Bandai Namco Games, 2015) and *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U* (Sora Ltd. & Bandai Namco Games, 2015), since these are the newest and most prominent games in the community. Particular attention was paid to the "General Discussion" sub-forums for each game, as well as the "Character Discussion" sub-forums for the female characters (the discussion of both games' characters is combined, since the characters are identical in both games), a total of thirteen sub-forums overall. This excludes the characters from the *Pokémon* series, a series of games that includes a wide variety of fantastical, animal-like creatures, as none of the representatives in the titles being examined are specified as female. This examination also excludes Mii fighters, which are created using a player's custom-created avatar characters, as each player's experiences with these characters could be drastically different from another's due to the limitless possibilities in character creation. Finally, the examination does not include the purchasable characters Corrin and Bayonetta, as they are not part of the base game and perceptions of them may be skewed based on which players decide or are able to play as or against them in the first place.

The analysis focused on finding patterns among posts by looking for threads of discussion that would have room for the expression of attitudes toward femininity, whether overtly or subtly. Reactions to comments were also examined to see whether comments of positive and negative natures were supported or not. Relevant comments were gathered (a total of 284) and then categorized based on the major themes identified.

The Characters

Before analyzing the interactions, it is first pertinent to establish the design and relevant background of the female characters of the game. The characters and their designs are identical in both games being examined and therefore will be described on the basis that this goes for this character in both of the games.

Lucina

Originally from *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems & Nintendo SPD, 2012), Lucina carries a sword and sports an outfit and set of equipment typical of a male warrior, with a tunic, a cape, and armor and clothing that cover almost all of her skin. In her original appearance, Lucina originally disguised herself as a man, which gives context to why her appearance is not particularly feminized.

Robin

Robin also originates from *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems & Nintendo SPD, 2012). Drawing from their original role as a customizable avatar character, the costume choices allow players to choose between four male and four female Robin costumes (although the default costume is one of the male costumes). These alternate costumes are purely aesthetic and do not affect character abilities at all. The only difference between the two genders is that male Robin has short, messy hair, while female Robin has long pigtails and a slightly kinder affect in her face.

Wii Fit Trainer

The same system of costumes is used with Wii Fit Trainer from the *Wii Fit* series. The Wii Fit Trainer possesses literally white skin, like that of a mannequin, due to the character's creation as an example of how to perform various yoga poses. The female costume is the default, and the only significant difference between the design of the male and female costumes is that the female costumes wear a tank top that expose some of their midriff.

Villager

Originating from the *Animal Crossing* series, Villager is the third and final character with costumes of different genders, with four costumes representing the female Villager. All of these costumes consist of a short-sleeved dress with shorts underneath, as well as long socks and

sneakers. As a whole, Villager is a very cartoonish and childlike character. However, the character's age is unclear, as in the source material, the player lives by themselves in a house that they own, suggesting an age above the one portrayed by the character's aesthetic. Like Robin, the default costume for Villager is male.

Palutena

Palutena comes from the *Kid Icarus* series and sports a more feminine and revealing outfit than some of the other characters, with a strapless dress and somewhat-defined breasts. Although Palutena is a goddess, her original appearance in *Kid Icarus* (Nintendo R&D1, 1986) has her imprisoned, with the player's goal being to rescue her. However, the most recent title in the series, *Kid Icarus: Uprising* (Project Sora, 2012) has her taking a more active role as a support to the main character.

Peach

Princess Peach from the *Super Mario Bros.* series has a very feminine, infantilized appearance, and wears a puffy pink dress. Within her own series, she has been playable in a handful of titles, including *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo R&D4, 1988), *Super Princess Peach* (Tose, 2005), and *Super Mario 3D World* (Nintendo EAD Tokyo & 1-UP Studio, 2013), as well as numerous spin-off games, but primarily exists as a romantic interest for the protagonist, Mario, and as a "damsel in distress."

Rosalina & Luma

Rosalina & Luma come from the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise as well, originating specifically from *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo EAD Tokyo, 2007). Rosalina bears an overall appearance somewhat similar to Peach, resembling the stereotypical concept of a princess. Despite this similarity, Rosalina has a more active role within the franchise, acting as a guide within her original appearance and being playable in *Super Mario 3D World* (Nintendo EAD Tokyo & 1-UP Studio, 2013), as well as a handful of spin-off games. Luma has no defined gender and is a helper figure to Rosalina; in the source material, Rosalina acts as a mother to the Luma species, establishing her as a maternal figure.

Samus

Samus, from the *Metroid* series, fills two slots: one in her power suit ("Samus") and one outside of this suit ("Zero Suit Samus"). Samus in her original suit can almost be seen as genderless; she is covered by a full-body suit with an armor-like appearance that is equipped with a blaster on its right arm. It is worth noting that the first game in the series, *Metroid* (Nintendo R&D1 & Intelligent Systems, 1987), intended to present Samus as masculine within this suit, with her gender being revealed as a surprise to those who beat the game in a certain amount of time, meaning that this suit was originally designed to appear at least androgynous, if not masculine.

Zero Suit Samus

Despite the existence of Samus as a character since *Metroid* (Nintendo R&D1 & Intelligent Systems, 1987), this rendition of Samus in a bodysuit did not come about until *Metroid: Zero Mission* (Nintendo R&D1, 2004). Though only her face is uncovered, the skin-tight suit emphasizes her breasts and her buttocks. The suit also has raised heels on her feet that do not exist in her traditional power suit. Though most of her alternate costumes simply change the color of her suit, her last two costumes display her in a blue and an orange bikini as she appeared at the end of *Metroid Fusion* (Nintendo R&D1, 2002) and *Metroid: Zero Mission* (Nintendo R&D1, 2004), respectively. Both of them consist of a top that covers Samus's neck, breasts, and the upper half of her back, but leaves her midriff and arms completely exposed, and even exposes a small part of the side of her breasts. The orange one also has a small triangle exposed above her breasts. The bottom of the bikini consists of small shorts that cover her upper thighs, but leave the rest of her legs exposed down until her shins, which are then covered by boots. Zero Suit Samus's design indicates that, like other playable female characters such as Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series, she was created for the purpose of men having "mastery and control of a body coded as female within a safe and unthreatening context" (Kennedy, 2002).

Zelda

Zelda, like Samus, occupies two slots in the character roster between Zelda and Sheik. Both come from the *Legend of Zelda* series, though Sheik has only appeared in select titles, whereas Zelda is a main character. As a princess, she has a highly feminized appearance, although she also bears armor on her shoulders that makes her design diverge from the look of Peach and Rosalina. She has been playable within the series in *Hyrule Warriors* (Omega Force & Team Ninja, 2014), and has taken on a more active role in games like *The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks* (Nintendo EAD, 2009) and *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (Nintendo EAD, 2011), where she acts in more of a helping role. However, similarly to Peach, she has primarily existed as a "damsel in distress" without much autonomy of her own.

Sheik

In contrast to Zelda, Sheik is presented in a masculine fashion. In her initial appearance in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998), she was Zelda in disguise in order to avoid danger. Her breasts are mostly flat with the appearance of male pectoral muscles. Other than a small part of her face and a braid of hair, she is completely covered by a sleek, thin layer of clothing, with a scarf wrapped around her mouth and bandages wrapped around her head and hands.

Analysis

With these characters in mind, this paper will venture to discuss the observations made and how, within the scope of gender performance,

they shed light on a community formed around these games, how the community viewed these female characters of various presentations, as well as how people in the community viewed femininity as a whole. The following documents the findings from interactions on SmashBoards, examining posts made in the aforementioned sections and using members' gender identity ("male" or "female" as self-identified on their profile pages, if the user opted to display one) as a supplement when relevant.

Vague Positivity

The most common trend found within the analysis was "vague feminine positivity," defined as a positivity expressed toward something feminine without any specification of seeing femininity as a positive or negative aspect. With nearly half (46.64%) of the posts analyzed containing this theme, it seemed that there was not an overwhelming amount of negativity within the community's perception of femininity, nor was there a strong preference for any particular performance of gender. Negative perceptions of femininity and hypermasculine performances of gender were present, but they did not appear to be the driving force of interactions in the community. The rarity of polarized gender performances also supports the idea that these may not have been performances of masculinity at all, and that "there is no reason to assume that genders ought ... to remain as two" (Butler, 1990, p. 6). Even among self-identified males, the performance of gender did not necessarily abide by a traditional understanding of gender.

Most commonly, "vague feminine positivity" consisted of somebody talking about their love for a female character without indication of viewing them in a sexual or romantic manner, particularly with Lucina. One user noted:

I enjoyed playing Fire Emblem: Awakening a lot and I loved Lucina as a character and the role she portrayed in that game. She was my second most wanted newcomer for this game...and I was really excited when she was revealed.

Another user detailed their love for Lucina over seven paragraphs, describing how their affection for her developed and closing by offering positivity for many of the female characters in the game: "[Lucina] is, without a doubt, my favorite female character in all of video gaming alongside the likes of Palutena from Kid Icarus: Uprising and Samus from Metroid." Many players used father-daughter language to refer to Lucina, a result of the fact that certain choices within her original appearance allowed one to become a father figure to Lucina. This allowed for a compassionate performance of masculinity; the players enacted a "social father" role in constructing an understanding of Lucina's character, taking part in a performance that is not hypermasculine (Bell, Kampe, & Taylor, 2015).

This positivity was also present in the community-voted "tier list" for the game, which is a list of characters in order of how useful they are perceived to be in the context of the whole roster. One user created the thread of discussion and established the rules for community voting, and this user tallied up the votes that people made and compiled them into an organized list of characters from best to worst. Personal feelings about characters should not matter in creating a tier list, but it would not be unreasonable to think that would have influenced people's votes. Despite this possibility, there did not seem to be a particular gender preference in the list and it seemed to be based on a character's merits alone. Sheik was placed just one slot below the top of the tier list, with Rosalina & Luma and Zero Suit Samus not far behind. A handful of female characters were near the bottom, but overall they were dispersed fairly evenly, and the presence of three female characters near the top of the list indicates that the community's perceptions of character viability did not appear to be colored by gender.

Many users' reasoning for playing characters reflected this attitude, such as playing as Zero Suit Samus because she is "fun to play as," or playing as Rosalina & Luma because "controlling both her and Luma is tricky, but also surprisingly fun." A large portion of the community seemed to pick their characters based solely on playstyle.

It has been argued that character choices like this can be made purely through a pragmatic approach, such as in boys' decision to play as Princess Peach in *Super Mario Bros. 2* (Nintendo R&D4, 1988) for her ability to float in the air for a very short amount of time (Newman, 2002). This approach would seem to argue that this lack of negativity toward the female characters in this context is not influenced by the community's perceptions of gender at all, but simply by an objective viewing of gameplay mechanics. It's difficult to determine if this was indeed the primary factor, but since these discussions were centered around the characters' utility, it brings into question whether this indicates any more positive perception of femininity.

Waifus and Wanton Women

The most significant hypermasculine performances of gender manifested as a focus on appearance, indicating a view of women as existing solely for male consumption. Blatant expressions of these attitudes did not dominate the posts analyzed, but were a recurring theme. Nearly a third (30.04%) of the posts analyzed commented on a woman's appearance in an aesthetic manner, and about a sixth (13.73%) of the posts sexualized women in some way, placing some importance on appearance as a part of women's worth.

Appearance came up significantly when discussing why one chooses to play as a certain character, particularly in the threads in Robin, Wii Fit Trainer, and Villager's sub-forums asking which gender players chose to play as. The thread discussing Wii Fit Trainer had a poll made by the

thread creator, and the option for the female version described her as “sexy” and made note of her “nice booty.” This was not received uncritically; one user expressed discomfort with that being the only option for the female costumes, and another user responded to a post sexualizing her in a similar fashion by questioning why she would be considered hot, noting that any attractiveness was probably unintended. There were comments in the thread that focused on the more sexualized nature of the character, such as a post by a male user that simply stated his choice as “Female because boobs,” though multiple users choosing the female version cited her status as the default outfit, or described her as the “iconic” version of the character.

Discussion of which gender Robin players chose was more varied than discussion for Wii Fit Trainer. In general, less sexualized language was used for Robin, with multiple users describing the female Robin as “cute.” Perceived strength also came into play, even though costume changes are solely aesthetic. A male player said that female Robin felt “like a stronger character in her own right,” while another male player said he chose male Robin because men are typically stronger, showing two contrasting views of women.

Commentary on the Villager was less directed toward aesthetics, although it still played a part in discussion. Despite the Villager’s much more childlike appearance, there were some comments of a sexual nature. However, the comments made, accompanied by screenshots of the female Villager lounging in a “seductive” pose, seemed to be intended as jokes. This still exhibited some view of women existing in a sexual role, and these non-serious comments could be seen as a hypermasculine performance, but they were not viewing her as an object of desire. It is even possible these jokes were made specifically to deride this type of hypermasculine performance, though it was difficult to discern this from the context.

Discussion of Rosalina also had a more non-sexualized focus on appearance, particularly in a thread prompting users to rate her on a scale of 1 to 10 based on how “beautiful” she looks. Users referred to her almost as one would a crush or romantic partner, such as with the comment, “I would give her 42 as she is as beautiful as life itself.”

Romantic discussion took place sparsely among all of the characters, with the term “waifu” arising frequently. “Waifu” is commonly used in anime culture to refer to a female character one finds attractive and sees as an ideal romantic partner. Specifically among otaku, a predominantly male group that is obsessive about anime, this involves a level of commitment to the character (Kincaid, 2014). This “waifuism” does not seem to have been meant seriously within these contexts, but its background and the resulting implication of adopting these characters as true romantic partners is worth noting, particularly given

its derivation from a culture that frequently sees romantic relationships as a fulfillment of a power fantasy (Newitz, 1995).

Of all the characters, the discussion surrounding Zero Suit Samus most blatantly focused around her status as a woman. Even those who were not sexualizing her focused on her sexualized design; some members played into the male gaze, while others merely observed that her design seemed to be designed with the male gaze in mind. One post consisted of nothing but the statement, "Her boobs are god damn enormous." Discussion and positivity of her character did exist outside of sexualization, but only a little over 5% of the posts analyzed were of this nature. The view of Zero Suit Samus as being a wanton female character due to her design existed as such a default that a user casually referred to her as "Zero Suit Sexy" and was not questioned.

As with all of these comments, this hypersexual discussion took place in a group dynamic. Not only does this increase the likelihood of members working to perform gender in an acceptable way, but it means that their understanding of acceptable behavior was impacted by the group dynamic, as "any particular action is formed in light of the situation in which it takes place" (Blumer, 1969, p. 85). A member observing this behavior would have learned that this is acceptable and normal, and that they could gain acceptance through acting this way as well. It may have been an attempt to perform in a group environment that enforced this objectifying mentality on an individual level.

The rules of the forum did limit this behavior to an extent. SmashBoards is intended to be "family-friendly," and the rules declare a disallowance of "content that is excessively vulgar, profane, graphic, or violent in nature." Furthermore, a thread for adding funny captions to pictures from both games had a disclaimer of "No Inappropriate Content" in the title. When users began posting pictures of Rosalina and discussing the size of her breasts and buttocks, a moderator told them the discussion was "crossing the 'no inappropriate content' line." The rules cannot speak for the whole community or alter attitudes, particularly since there was no such moderation in the more vulgar Zero Suit Samus discussions, but the fact that members of the *Super Smash Bros.* community created a space with these rules says something about the environment of the *Super Smash Bros.* community compared to that of other communities, such as Xbox Live, with very few restraints on language and vulgarity. It also means that members of this community are coming by a different meaning of gender than players in other communities, as the interaction taking place indicates that such hypermasculine performances are not acceptable.

However, it is possible as well that users are not learning that these performances are unacceptable as a whole, but rather unacceptable only within this space due to the potential for punishment. Given that one of the posts observed was of a different moderator linking to a video

sexualizing Palutena, it seems that the enforcement of rules is not static across the forums. As a result, it is difficult to say how large of an impact this has on the community.

“What is Sheik?”

Sheik was discussed the least in terms of her appearance. It is possible that this is due to Sheik’s masculine presentation leaving members confused about her gender. In-game content within the *Super Smash Bros.* games in question describes her as female, and she has been officially declared to be female by Nintendo (Riendeau, 2014). However, since her initial appearance revolved around masquerading as a man and she was referred to as such within the game, some confusion remains. A handful of users expressed confusion about Sheik’s gender, referring to her as “she/he” or even asking about her gender.

Despite the proof that Sheik is a woman, one user discussed the lack of pronouns used in some locations and said, “It’s probably up to the individual. I personally view Sheik as a male character,” indicating an association of presentation with gender. However, another user responded by saying, “Well stop that,” and many others spoke up afterward about the evidence that Sheik is female, indicating that the whole community does not necessarily believe in strict gender roles.

In fact, in discussion of Lucina, one user expressed a strong love for her because she is not overly feminine. The user, who self-identified as androgynous, discussed their love of the fact that “her gender identity remains utterly, wholly ambiguous.” This means there are members who are not interested in performing any particular gender themselves and view gender as fluid rather than a static, unchanging picture (Butler, 1990). This also brings back the idea of a non-binary gender performance, wherein this user’s gender identity itself falls outside of the binary and it is expected that their performances would follow (Butler, 1990).

No gender confusion similar to Sheik’s was observed in discussion of Samus, despite being outfitted in a full-body suit. It is likely that this is because Samus’s gender has been well-known in gaming circles since the *Metroid* series increased in popularity, particularly now that her presence in the *Super Smash Bros.* games is accompanied by a version of her outside of her suit. Sheik, on the other hand, has made fewer appearances, and the line between her and Zelda is unclear.

“Girl Gamers”

Although male users on the forum discussed female characters in a sexual and/or romantic nature, women were not absent from SmashBoards, and it was not uncommon to see members identify themselves as female on their profiles despite the option to not identify their gender. There were threads in which women posted, casually and openly mentioning their gender in discussions that did not directly

pertain to it. This is somewhat unexpected, since the harassment of women within gaming circles (Gray, 2011) can act as a deterrent to women identifying their gender. There were no hostile reactions to these female players, in spite of the aforementioned harassment women often receive and the perception that women do not play games or are not any good at them (Lien, 2011), and male users interacted with self-identified female users without condescension or criticism.

One particularly notable example was in a thread created by a self-identified female user in which she expressed frustration with feeling bad at the game and wanted to quit playing. Rather than anybody reinforcing this, or even "jokingly" commenting on her gender as a factor, every single comment was asking about her current playing habits or offering advice for how she could improve, in addition to giving overwhelming support encouraging her not to quit.

This lack of negative treatment took place even outside of gameplay discussion, with the most striking example being a conversation in which a self-identified female user discussed her crush on Lucina. When she expressed this without explicitly stating her gender and expressed a jealousy of male Robin in the original game, *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems & Nintendo SPD, 2012), because he can marry Lucina, she received empathy and agreement, with a male user advising her to make Robin look similar to herself. When she explained that she could not do this because she is a woman, the same male user suggested that she could make a male Robin look feminine. No male users made any sexual or fetishizing comments about this circumstance of a woman being attracted to another woman; instead, she was offered support.

Cooperative vs. Competitive

Overall, while discussion relating to gender was present, it was not the most significant topic. The majority of the threads in the examined sub-forums were based purely on gameplay. These threads were focused on self-improvement, analysis of techniques and moves that characters possess, and how to fight against specific characters.

Even within the technically competitive community on SmashBoards, the interactions were not hypermasculine, with users seeking to prove oneself the best. Instead, they functioned more cooperatively and were working to figure out new things about the games and help players improve. This attitude further comes forward in the emphasis on "friendlies," or matches at tournaments that take place outside of the tournament bracket and are merely for the purpose of meeting people, having fun, and improving one's technique. The fact that this cooperativity did not appear to change in the presence of female users is compelling, particularly in light of other gaming communities that react with hostility to female gamers in a hypermasculine performance (Gray, 2011). Taylor (2012) has discussed how "geek" culture is parallel to

“jock” culture in competitive performances of masculinity; on SmashBoards, however, the interactions seemed to fall outside of this binary, with cooperativeness rather than competitiveness driving the community’s performances.

Conclusion

In general, this research appears to indicate that the lesser degree of hypermasculinity within the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise aligns with the nature of the community formed around it. There were no vicious attacks on women and femininity found within the scope of this research. Furthermore, the emphasis on gameplay seemed to dominate all else; when it came to discussion of a character’s moves and abilities, any discussion of their gender was dropped. It is unclear whether this is more indicative of a strong interest in the nuances that go into playing the game or of the community’s view of women, but at the very least, it shows that the community’s perceptions were not entirely colored by gender. The neutral reactions to female players within the community also seemed indicative of a less toxic environment for women, as female players were welcomed and supported.

Nonetheless, the topic of gender came out in non-competitive discussion. Commentary on female characters’ looks frequently arose in casual, social environments. This would seem to indicate that looks played a significant part in the perception of women. Furthermore, the use of romantic language to refer even to fictional female characters indicates that women are viewed as existing for the romantic and sexual fulfillment of men. The jokes and general comments sexualizing the female characters showed that, even if the perceptions of femininity and women within the community are more positive than in other communities (Gray, 2011), negative attitudes still exist.

In terms of gender performances, some of the gender commentary was of a more hypermasculine nature, particularly in the sexualization of even the childlike Villager and the excessive focus on sexual aspects of Zero Suit Samus. However, the more romantic and appearance-focused commentary, while still problematic, played into a less “hyper” masculine performance. This is particularly true when considering the proportion of comments in the “vague feminine positivity” category. The existence of the hypermasculine performances notwithstanding, the community on SmashBoards did not perform gender in any particularly polarizing way.

There are clear limitations to this study due to its very narrow scope, and as such the subject requires more research, including the lack of extreme performances of hypermasculinity due to strict moderation. Analyzing different sub-forums, such as those for the other games in the franchise or those for male characters, would help to give a more complete perspective. Furthermore, examining SmashBoards alone does not allow for definitive conclusions about the whole community, with

other homes for it online, members who are not a part of the online community, and different dynamics that would be present in the community at tournaments.

Still, this study opens up the examination of gaming communities that are less hypermasculine where little seems to exist. The ambiguous attitudes found in this study show that this type of gaming community exists and is different from the hypermasculine communities most frequently examined and discussed. However, it is difficult to determine with certainty if this less toxic behavior was caused by the nature of the game around which the community is formed or some other factor, such as the website on which the conversations are taking place. It would be interesting to investigate the reasons behind this behavior, perhaps using actor-network theory as a means of exploring it.

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