The Role of Music in Character Identification in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

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I. Introduction

In my opinion, fighting games have brought some of the most memorable characters in gaming history. For me, the game lore is embedded in its characters. There is a lot to tell about the characters: in the way they look, how they engage in battle, their form, and even their soundtracks. Yet, there is enough room for players to imagine and wonder beyond what you can see and hear. An interesting element of the fighting games genre in comparison to other genres is that the story usually isn't essential to the gaming experience. This piqued my interest: is this curiosity for fighting game lore in characters shared by the people who feel they belong to the fighting game community? How do they experience this? And how does this relate to how gamers identify with the characters? What role does music play in this?

In the last decade or so, the study of video games has finally become an acknowledged field of its own, reflected in a corresponding increase in scientific publications on the subject. Since video games are nowadays considered a respected medium of (artistic) entertainment and storytelling, more and more emphasis is placed on the participatory aspect of game culture. Until recently, video game studies have mostly been attuned to the assumption that gameplay interactivity, practice, and process is separate from players' everyday lives.[1] However, as Kiri Miller suggests, 'A performance-oriented approach grounded in ethnographic methodology brings different perspectives to this burgeoning field of cultural production and criticism: that is, the perspectives of players and producers, as well as the analytical insights they inspire'.[2] This development has many implications. For one, it puts emphasis on the player of the game. Questions like: what do players do, and what drives them to take certain actions within the game, become important and will also be an essential topic within this thesis.

With the rise of video game studies, the study of sound and music in video games has blossomed too. In particular, music has been extensively studied within the field of musicology as a means to explain processes of identification.[3] Music is woven into our society and plays a role in the day-to-day life of many people. This is partly due to the multifunctional nature of music, the enormous technological development, and the progressive commercialization and economic strength of the music industry. Because of this, it is no surprise that music itself is considered an acknowledged medium through which

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[1] Kiri Miller, *Playing Along* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.
[2] Miller, *Playing Along*, 6.
[3] Simon Frith, *Music and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996).

people identify. Although music lends itself to identity construction, little attention has been given to a link between the deployment of sound and music in fighting games. Music is an easily overlooked, but surprisingly engaging element to fighting games that is worth researching.

All in all, in this thesis, I have chosen to focus on Super Smash Bros. Ultimate (hereafter: SSBU) for the Nintendo Switch (2018). The series has gained widespread popularity both as a party- and a fighting game. The big appeal of SSBU, and an essential part of its formula is the inclusion of a wide array of characters from game series new and old alike, making it a celebration of video game history, and thus, a celebration of historical video game music.

Accordingly, the leading question of this thesis is as follows: How do gamers identify with the characters they play through music? Through a thorough case study of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, I aim to outline the meaning of the characters as both derived and determined by the nature of the game itself and by its players. The accompanying sub-questions can therefore be described in fourfold:

- What is Super Smash Bros. Ultimate and what are its characters?
- How does the music in the game function?
- How do players identify with the character they choose to play?
- What is the role of music in response to an existing cultural memory among players?

In addressing these questions, I draw on qualitative and descriptive methodology – in the form of interviews, through audio-visual analysis, and descriptive analysis by SSBU's audience. The collaborative nature of these practices evoke and lend themselves for participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork.

To further illuminate the course of this thesis, the first section will unfold some of my key methods. In particular, I will delve into– and emphasize the importance of concepts like 'narratology' and 'ludology', and Stuart Hall's 'encoding' and 'decoding', in order to make sense of the ambiguity between game and gamer, through distinguishing how meanings and messages are being created and conveyed. The second section will lay down the foundation for my research field. As my research field essentially extends along the lines of 'virtual' (SSBU) and 'real' (SSBU's participatory culture), this section investigates the Super Smash franchise as a whole, its history and its community. In this section I will also briefly assign my own research population. An explanation of these fields is important, for they are

ultimately places for cultivating shared experiences and common knowledge. Additionally, in the third section I will outline my results. Through in-game discourse and the participants' discourse, on the one hand I will discuss how the game works, how it has created the universe that is known as Smash and I will delve into its characters and music, while on the other hand I will explore how players interact with the game and how they create and derive meaning from this interaction. The former is generally done by descriptive, audio-visual analysis, and internet-based research. The latter I expand on through participant observation, non-formal interviewing and shared online experiences communicated through popular fora and social media. To thoroughly elaborate on processes between player and character, I mostly rely on studies by Kiri Miller, Karen Collins, William Cheng and Chris Tonelli. By bringing together their cases I essentially frame how players experience and interact with the characters they play, and define how music contributes or does not contribute to this. Fundamentally, I aim to outline SSBU's complex network of musical influences that tie its universe and the player's experiences together. Ultimately, the discussion of the music in SSBU will shine a light on the implications of music in fighting games.

II. Methods

To elaborate what is, and what isn't a video game can sometimes be ambiguous, as we tend to frame or label ideas without valuing the complexity of such subjects. First of all, to broaden our understanding of the game central to this thesis, I will opt for critical theories surrounding video games. In an attempt to understand the medium of video games (SSBU) through a critical view, the concepts of ludology and narratology are key concepts, often used within the discourse of game studies.

2.1 Ludology and Narratology

The concepts of ludology and narratology can essentially be traced back to formalist and non-formalist ideas. On the one hand, formalism primarily supports the notion that all someone ever needs in order to understand an artwork is right there within the work itself. For example: a formalist would look to the relationship enacted by the work, the colors or the objects. It excludes all outside contexts like culture, politics, history and focuses purely on the meaning of materiality rather than aesthetic movement in which an artwork emerges.[4] Within the study of games, games have their own tradition of formalism. Typically this is known as ludology, which means the study of game or play. Ludologists are interested in the systems of games, in how gameplay itself works and how it is made possible.[5] On the other hand, the counterpart to ludology and therefore formalism, would be the narratological perspective, which is generally related to non-formalist ideas. A non-formalist approach would look into the cultural movement, historical and/or political trends that provoked a certain artwork to be as it is. Within the discourse of games this typically refers to narratology, the study of narrative or story. This is concerned with things like branching paths and branching choices and outlines in what ways the specific presentation (aesthetics on the basis of visuals and sound design) of the game are motivated.[6] Although there are arguments to be made that some games can succeed being heavily framed within the realm of either ludology (game) or narratology (story), in this thesis I particularly opt for a ludonarrative perspective. According to a study by Jesper Juul, this approach is more and more endorsed by

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[4] Jesper Juul, "A Brief History of Anti-Formalism in Video Games," The Ludologist, February 11, 2015, https://www.jesperjuul.net/ludologist/2015/02/11/a-brief-history-of-anti-formalism-in-video-games/.
[5] Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories? - A Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1, no.1 (July 2001), http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.
[6] Juul, "Games Telling Stories?".

scholars within this field.[7] Ultimately, to define what is and what isn't a video game, both ludology and narratology will prove essential in displaying the nature of the game that is Smash Bros. Ultimate in its most adequate form.

2.2 Encoding and Decoding

Other essential key concepts within this discourse of media studies are coined by Stuart Hall and are called: 'encoding and decoding'.[8] Essentially, Hall's idea of encoding and decoding is formed as a model of communication. According to Hall, the idea of encoding and decoding is the process of meaning and messages being organized through codes. In this process of organizing meanings and messages there are two moments where the underlying meaning is determined. Hall calls these moments encoding and decoding. At these moments, the meaning embedded in a message is in discursive form, in other words meaning, that meaning and/or message is being constructed within a discourse. On the one hand, in the process of encoding there are frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, technical infrastructure that comprise the discourse within which a particular message is encoded. At the same time in decoding, the decoded is also constructed within a discourse. Hall's main statement here is that meaning is constructed within a discourse at both ends of the process, although the discourse may not be the same at both ends.

Both methods are important because they contribute to our understanding on how to approach video games and their participatory culture. In a way we can exemplify narratologist perspective as closely overlapping with encoding. As the encoder, the game developers formulate the narrative and setting through in-game properties. As the decoder, the consumer derives and creates their own interpretation and meaning of what the developer attempted to set out. The goal of this thesis is to unfold these discourses and to find out how they communicate with each other. These methods will ultimately aid in defining how players identify with the characters they play.

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[7] Juul, "Games Telling Stories?".
[8] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 129-130.

III. Field

This section will dissect the fields in which I conducted my research. Since the nature of the ethnographic field is qualitative, descriptive and analytical, and the topic of my research is Super Smash Bros. Ultimate and its participatory culture, I draw on numerous fields. These fields are localized in the virtual and in the real. Only then am I able to accurately analyze the world of Smash as presented by its creators, and in addition focus on how participants interact, share experiences and give meaning to the games' characters. Furthermore, remaining analysis in this chapter is mainly based on descriptive and empirical observations of the in-game properties itself.

The structure of this section is as follows: First, I will briefly discuss the Super Smash Franchise to provide information about (the history of) the game series. Second, I focus on the entirety of the Smash community. This includes a short introduction of Smash' participatory culture by essentially explaining who the people are that play Smash. Additionally, I will also delve into tournament culture. The third section will provide the necessary information about my research population.

3.1 The Super Smash Franchise

To start off, since Super Smash Bros. Ultimate is essentially the core subject of this thesis, I will briefly inform you about the history of the game series. The basis will consist of an overview of the primal releases and SSBU's reception. This will add to our understanding of how it came to be one of Nintendo's most popular franchises and a staple in professional fighting game tournaments as well as it will help us realize the impact and position in the fighting game culture. In the end, Smash Bros' history will display how each release affected the nature of Ultimate, its fifth and latest release. Ultimately, this is especially important due to it impacting the way the game is played.

Super Smash Bros. is a popular fighting game franchise developed by Masahiro Sakurai and released by Nintendo. The series began as an experiment by Sakurai to create a fighting game that was accessible to casual gamers. The first installment, Super Smash Bros. for Nintendo 64, was released in 1999 and became a hit for its multiplayer adaptation and simple learning curve. The second game in the series, Super Smash Bros. Melee (SSBM), was released for the Nintendo Gamecube in 2001 and became one of the most successful

games of its era, with a large competitive scene that is still active today. Super Smash Bros. Brawl (SSBB), the third game in the series, was released for the Wii in 2008 and introduced characters from other franchises, such as Solid Snake and Sonic the Hedgehog. The game received universal praise, but was also controversial among fans due to its new features and more casual gameplay. Super Smash Bros. for Nintendo 3DS and Wii U (SSB4) was released in 2014 and brought back features from earlier games in the series while also introducing new characters and gameplay mechanics. The latest game in the series, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, was released in 2018 and includes all characters from previous games in the series, as well as new characters and stages. Each release has had an impact on the nature of the series and how the games are played.[9]

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's character roster contains a total of 89 playable characters. The original cast of characters that were made available contains 74, which means that since the Ultimate's release Nintendo has added an extra 15 DLC (downloadable content) characters. Since the release of Brawl in 2008, the Super Smash series have strayed away from exclusively first party characters and joined forces with many third party game franchises.[10] Super Smash Bros. Ultimate is considered a huge crossover event. Within the universe of Smash Ultimate, franchises are collectively represented by its characters, stages, music, items, assist trophies, spirits and mii costumes. While characters, stages and music are being considered the most notable representations, it is important not to understate how the sheer amount of other crossover properties have created additional thematic value to the game. To add, the appendix at the end of this thesis contains overviews of all represented franchises with accompanying characters and music.[11]

3.2 The Goal of Smash

From a ludological perspective, the objective in Super Smash Bros. is to knock your opponent off the stage rather than reducing their health to zero, as is common in other fighting games. When a player is hit, their damage, represented by a percentage, increases. The higher the percentage, the farther they will be knocked back when hit. Although the

[9] Joshua Bury, "The Story of Super Smash Bros: The Story of Nintendo's Premier Fighting Franchise," accessed June 14, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmqbRcmZeMU&ab_channel=theScoreesports.
[10] Jason M. Gallagher, "Super Smash Bros: The Story of Nintendo's Premier Fighting Franchise," accessed June 14, 2022, https://www.denofgeek.com/games/super-smash-bros-nintendo-history/.
[11] See "Appendix 1".

percentage can technically go above 100, most attacks will be able to knock out an opponent at that point. There are two main variations of matches in the game: time and stock. In time matches, players have a certain amount of time to defeat their opponent, and points are awarded for knocking them out of the stage and deducted for falling out or self-inflicted eliminations. The player with the most points at the end of the match wins. However, in stock matches, each player is given a specific number of lives, or stocks, and the goal is to be the last player remaining.

The main idea is that, starting from a mindset of casual gameplay, players may use items frequently and play on stages with environmental interference or exploits, in four player free-for-all matches. The Super Smash Bros. series heavily incorporates items as a crucial aspect of gameplay, especially in a casual setting where the emphasis is on having a good time rather than winning. Items are characterized by their randomness. Out of the 128 items, each item is highly unique and comes with their own powers.[12] However, items can create issues when playing at a competitive level and, with a few exceptions, are typically not allowed in tournaments. Casual players may also play on large stages with enough room to evade fighting, may turn off the 'team attack' setting for 2v2 team matches, which ignores friendly fire, and may play two minute games with items and no stocks. On the contrary, from a competitive mindset, often two (or more) characters appear on the screen in which each is controlled by a player. Players may play 1v1 or 2v2 matches, carefully select characters based on their tier rankings, use little to no items, and play on neutral stages like Final Destination or Small Battlefield (neutral stages are stages when no player has a situational advantage over the other). They may also play as if their win/loss record is being kept track of, enable the 'team attack' setting for team battles, use a timer for every mode, and play in person without going easy on their opponents unless they are using unfamiliar characters.

The movement system is more similar to an action/platformer game than a traditional fighting game, and combos are performed by chaining movements with basic attacks rather than inputting specific button and directional combinations. Based on the player's input, sometimes button presses or sometimes a more complex combination of joystick movement and button presses, will result in the two characters engaging in combat. In the most basic state, players can perform movements like dashing, jumping and double jumping. On the offensive, players can perform light attacks, grabs, smash (heavy) attacks, aerial attacks and special attacks. Each character has the same basic moves, which can be performed using the

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[12] Todd Harper, *Culture of Digital Fighting Games: Performance and Practice* (New York, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 50-54.

A and B buttons and combined with control stick directions. Players can defend using the L and R buttons and grab and throw opponents using the L/R and A buttons. In the most fundamental terms, the fight boils down to a game of striking, blocking or throwing. Strikes are beaten by 'blocking', blocking is beaten by 'throws', and throws are beaten by 'strikes'. The controls for the Super Smash series play a big part in its accessibility. The controls are precise and accurate. There aren't any complicated combos to learn for each fighter, almost every move for each fighter is executed in the same way as others. Each character is highly unique with their moves coming from their respective games.

3.3 The Super Smash Community

There are many ways to get involved with the Smash community. For instance, Smash tournaments provide great possibilities - in real life or online - to both improve your ability as a player and get acquainted with its participants and culture. Needless to say, real-life tournaments provide an environment for fans to come together and play. Both hardcore- and casual players join these events. Generally, tournament matches are divided by the competitive bracket matches, and the friendly, non-tournament games. Information on local or online tournaments are communicated through social media and popular Smash forums like Smashboard, Discord, Youtube, Twitch and so forth. Many of these services contribute to the educational content about the world of Smash, list weekly or monthly tournaments, as well as inform you about local rulesets as these might slightly differ depending on where you're from.

From a top-down perspective, the Smash community can be broken down by: top players (professional players/hardcore players), tournament commentators and content creators, tournament organizers, and the average gamer (casual player). The top players have the largest influence within the community since they are considered the most knowledgeable, but foremost the most recognizable. Below them are the commentators and content creators. While content creators do a great job at bringing in new faces to the scene, the top players also do this and also have a great influence on the existing community members. Interesting to note is that many professional top players from previous Smash communities have now become acknowledged content creators on platforms like Youtube and Twitch. Below them stand the tournament organizers. Even though they are considered to have the most direct power in the community, their opinions and actions are usually

influenced by the people above them. Lastly, we have the average gamers. While the average player has the least influence on others in the community, they are the most populated group and thus the group that forms consensus opinions.

Tournament matches typically use a best-of-three set format with 3 stocks (lives), a timer between 6-8 minutes, and no items. The process usually goes as follows: both players select their characters and work together to choose a stage from a list of approved stages for the first game of the set. There is often a 'stage striking' process for the first game, where players take turns eliminating stages they do not want to play on until only one stage remains. After the first game, the winner bans stages they do not want to play on, and the loser selects a stage from the remaining options. The winner can then change their character, followed by the loser changing their character. This process is repeated if necessary for the third game. For the specific rules and stage lists, players can ask the tournament organizer or check the event page on social media or other platforms. After a set is finished, the winner usually reports the result to the tournament organizer. Tournaments typically use a double elimination bracket format, where a player must lose two sets to be eliminated. This means that a player can still participate after losing a set, but must win all subsequent sets to continue. The double elimination bracket ensures all players get multiple matches and that the ultimate winner is the most skilled. The conventions when playing friendlies often prescribe the winner-stays-in, and the loser will rotate with the next player in line. Although in some cases, there is an equal amount of rotations for each player.

3.3 Research Population

This research focuses on the musical influence related to the identification with certain characters, by gamers who are part of the Smash Bros. Ultimate experience. The degree in which gamers are familiar with the Super Smash Bros. series differs. Some players consider themselves casual, some pro's, and some place themselves somewhere in between. There are many different ways in which you could interpret these classifications, may it be skillswise, the amount of spent hours in-game, the years of Smash experience, or the degree in which one is involved and up-to-date with current Smash events. However, this information will not prove essential in order for me to study how gamers identify with the character through the means of music.

The total of my research population consists of five respondents. All of them have spent a considerate amount of hours in either offline or online gameplay. Additional information is shown in the diagram below.

Respondent	Age	Date of interview	Interview duration (minutes)
1. Erik	28	11/04/2022	51:38
2. Daan	25	13/04/2022	33:41
3. Semuel	21	01/05/2022	56:04
4. Marijn	28	26/05/2022	48:03
5. Mitchel	27	05/06/2022	54:49

3.4 Emic and Etic

Furthermore, an ethnographic work naturally involves the interpretation of cultures. As a researcher, the aim is to substantiate observations as objectively and critically as possible. It is therefore important to be aware of the researchers' perspective as assumptions and interpretations have an impact on the knowledge that is produced about a particular culture. This is illustrated by the emic and etic debate in the book Shadows in the Field, compiled by Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (2008). On the one hand, the emic perspective places the researcher as a member of the studied community (insider). On the other hand, the etic perspective places the researcher as an outsider of the studied community. According to Barz and Cooley there is no hard line between insiders and outsiders. Every researcher is in some ways considered an insider, and in other ways considered an outsider. These positions are in constant flux. Each individual contains multiple identities, personal or collective, and these change and overlap depending on the context. An individual can even change identities over the course of a conversation. As a result, becoming aware of insider and outsider perspectives becomes blurred. Barz and Cooley do not specifically have a preference for insider or outsider. Nevertheless, it is important to indicate what the researchers' methodology entails.[13]

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[13] Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 50-52.

The Smash community is a huge community, with its influence reaching worldwide scales. Because I consider myself a part of the Smash community, and had the pleasure to join some local events, I could easily and rather quickly get in contact with other participants. In this regard, I consider myself an insider. Obviously, this proved convenient in making contact. Also, since I am part of the community, I might also be better equipped to follow assumptions and interpretations. Nevertheless, there's also danger to be noted, because the interviewee can assume that I always know what they are talking about.

IV. Results: The Universe of Smash

The results section will be roughly divided into two sections: in-game identifications and player identifications. In-game identifications refer to the role of the encoder, and will focus mainly on the narratological side. Questions like: how did the developers of SSBU intend to design the gaming experience, and what are the in-game properties that created the universe of Smash, will lay a foundation for the encoded discourse. To be more precise, this section will outline how the story of SSBU is being told and constructed. Ultimately, this explains how certain character identities are being constructed and conveyed. Player identifications will emphasize the role of the decoder, or the consumer/player. As a reaction to in-game identifications, this section will mainly investigate how players experience these constructions and interpret and create meaning accordingly. How do players make sense of the characters they play, and finally, how do they construct identity by means of music?

As the title indicates, the purpose of this section is to give an impression of the Super Smash Bros. Ultimate universe. By discussing gameplay styles, the tone of the game, character design- and history, and the in-game music, an overall picture of the SSBU universe will be painted. Needless to say, throughout this chapter I will especially emphasize and elaborate on SSBU's characters and its music. Furthermore, remaining information in this chapter is based on descriptive and empirical observations of in-game properties, interpretation of gamers' discourse and respondents' gaming behavior. In addition, I consulted and compiled information found on popular Smash forums such as Smashboard, SSBwiki, discord, reddit, (YouTube) interviews and analyses from fans, professionals and specialists alike. This is important as they reflect how the game is played according to the players themselves and will ultimately shine a light on player behavior and experience.

4.1 In-game Identifications

In its core, fighting games distinguish themselves from other games because the players primarily play to fight and to challenge each other. There is no particular necessity for character development or story. However, characters seemed to add a lot to a game's atmosphere. In order to keep the player hooked to the game, Sakurai initially tended towards the world of Nintendo to construct an atmosphere that seemed more interesting to players.

4.1.1 The Representation of Characters

The visual style of the game is certainly cartoonism. It attempts to appeal to a wide audience, so most characters look rather uniform and family friendly. It is important to notice here how Nintendo redesigned many characters to fit the visual style of Smash Bros., but simultaneously put a large amount of care into preserving the characteristics of those characters. For example Megaman's jumping pose is identical to how it looked in his original NES games. The dog from Duck Hunt will taunt opponents by laughing the same way it did on the NES. Another example would be Ridley, who being a boss from the Metroid series, was in theory much bigger than humans and other characters in the game. However to accommodate this, he was scaled down but in a way so that he still looks imposing and large. There are also characters that are distinctively different visually from the rest, and in their cases it has been done on purpose, because translating their visual style would do a disservice to their original design. For example, Mr. Game and Watch clearly stands out amidst the roster as a stick figure whose animations aren't fluid movements like the rest, but rather jarringly different frames that transition from one to the next. This is done to preserve the faithfulness of the Game and Watch, Nintendo's first portable gaming device, and its graphics. Similarly, Joker looks like he was taken straight out of a Japanese Anime, as his graphical style was preserved from Persona Five.

4.1.2 Smash Ultimate's Characters - Mechanics, Playstyles and Archetypes

In Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, characters have different strengths and weaknesses, which can be understood by classifying them into archetypes based on their unique playstyles. This segment delves into the manner in which the Smash community separates characters into distinct categories, ultimately revealing how the game is played differently depending on a character's mechanics and abilities, such as their movement, speed, and attack types. Each character belongs to at least one archetype, and some may fit into multiple categories due to overlapping characteristics. By understanding the archetypes of each character, players can learn more about their strengths and weaknesses and use this information to plan their strategies and attack their opponents' weaknesses. It's important to note that these archetypes are compiled based on opinions within the Smash community and not everyone agrees on

which archetypes fit certain characters best.[14] However, this classification system can help players understand the different playstyles of Ultimate's characters and how they are played by different players. For the sake of simplicity and overview, I have assigned an appendix in which each character is categorized into a single archetype.[15]

4.1.3 Tier Lists

A tier list is a way of showing someone's personal ranking, often used by gamers. An example would be making a list of their favorite characters in high positions and the ones they like less in lower positions. As such, tier lists can be created for various subjects. Some examples include ranking items, ranking characters based on personal preference, or ranking characters based on their appearance. In the more professional setting, the purpose of creating a tier list is to gain a better understanding of a game, rather than solely identifying the best character. It gives insight into the larger design and meta of the game.[16] High tier characters are often stronger than lower tier characters, like Fox in Melee, who has great statistics and can be used in many situations. However, the value of knowing that Fox is a high tier character is that it provides knowledge about how the game functions and how Fox operates within it. Thus, creating a tier list and striving for its accuracy is not about picking the best character, but rather about gaining a deeper understanding of the game. However, tier lists can change over time as new techniques are discovered or updates are made to the game. In the case of older games like Melee, characters that were overpowered at launch may remain powerful due to lack of updates, while characters that were initially considered weak can improve in later tier lists. The inclusion of new characters or systems can also affect the tier list. The strength of a character is always relative to the other characters in the game, meaning that a strong character in one game may not necessarily be strong in another. This may also shift over time as players find new ways to use less popular characters.[17]

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[14] "Character Archetypes," Smashpedia Ultimate, accessed May 26, 2022, https://supersmashbros.fandom.com/wiki/Character_Archetypes#All-Rounder.
[15] See "Appendix 2".
[16] Harper, *Culture of Digital Fighting Games*, 98.
[17] Idem.

4.1.4 Music in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

This section will explore the music used in SSBU and how it adds to the overall feel of the game. I will examine topics such as: when certain types of music are played and how the game chooses which music to play; the role of music during gameplay, including its connection to different stages and modes; and how the music is designed to enhance the player's experience.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate has the largest music library in the franchise, with a total of 1068 tracks, including new arrangements and titles, and even more tracks available through downloadable content. Almost every old soundtrack from previous games in the series has been included in Ultimate. Without the downloadable content, there are 876 tracks available, with 159 tracks that can be unlocked by playing the game through various methods, such as the vault, the World of Light game mode, and obscure challenges on the Challenge Board. Once a track is unlocked, it is stored in the vault, where players can choose which music and sounds they want to hear while playing.[18]

The vault is an interesting new feature and is exclusive to the Smash Ultimate universe. To discover new music in Ultimate, players can grind the game and save-up an in-game valuta. Accordingly, players head to the vault section where they can buy a (random) assorted array of goodies, including music tracks. Coming back every so often results in seeing different tracks on offer in the vault. The vault contains soundtracks from every franchise represented in the series and is categorized accordingly. Each game franchise has a select amount of listenable soundtracks spread over different editions within their series. An example below is shown through the Star Fox series, where both old (64, Melee, Brawl), and newly arranged soundtracks of the Star Fox series are represented (Star Fox - Main Theme). Additionally, the vault allows players to create playlists with their favorite tracks from each game in the series and listen to them while navigating the main menu. However, players are not able to listen to these playlists while actually playing the game, as each playable stage is associated with a specific franchise and its corresponding soundtrack. This means that when a player chooses a particular stage, they will always play the music associated with that franchise.

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[18] "Music," Super Smash Bros, Ultimate Wiki, accessed December 15, 2022, https://supersmashbros.fandom.com/wiki/Music_(SSBU).
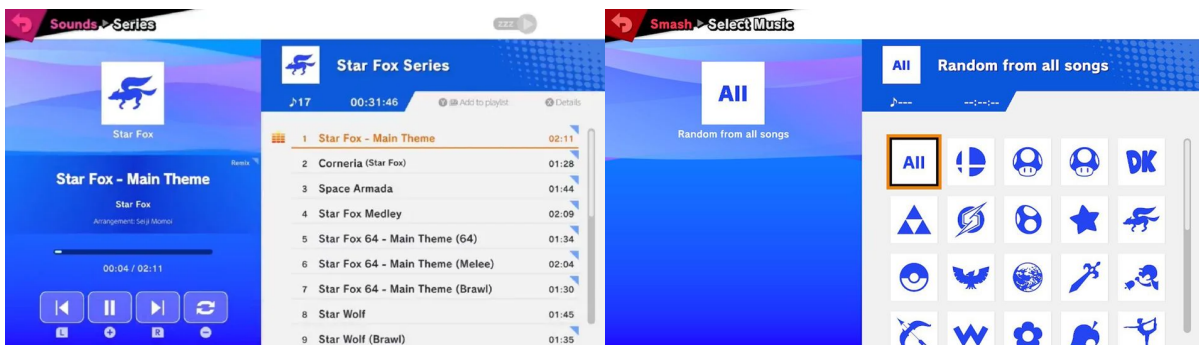
Screenshot 4.1 is an example of the music from the Star Fox series.
Screenshot 4.2 shows the vault menu, which organizes the music by franchise.

4.1   4.2

All Super Smash Bros. games are known for their unique soundtracks. The main menu of the game, where players can access different modes, customization options, and vaults, is where players first experience the music. Each soundtrack has its own distinct character through different interpretations, styles, arrangements, and musical elements that ultimately add to the game's theme and atmosphere. Through analysis and interpretation of web discourse the following descriptions fit the theme songs.[19] The theme song of the first game, Super Smash Bros. for the Nintendo 64, is an upbeat and energetic melody that captures the game's fast-paced, chaotic, goofy, and casual gameplay. On the contrary, the theme for Melee is somewhat more epic and orchestral, reflecting the game's more refined and serious competitive gameplay. As for Super Smash Bros. Brawl for the Wii, the theme song titled "Main Theme" evokes a sense of epic grandeur and adventure, fitting the game's larger scale and cinematic presentation. It features a powerful, soaring melody, accompanied by orchestral instruments such as strings and brass, and a prominent use of choral elements, adding a sense of grandeur and majesty to the piece. Throughout my interviews I would ask respondents what their perfect match would look like. One of the respondents would especially mention on the theme song from Brawl:

> 'Voor mij is het een match op Final Destination en dan de Brawl theme song. Zo fucking episch. [Begint met het neuriën van de theme song] Het is orkestraal, groots, bombastisch, echt de meest epische soundtrack ooit! Past perfect bij Final

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[19] "Super Smash Bros. - All Main Themes (1999-2018)," This Channel is Pointless, accessed December 15, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5oWoKqXNaE&ab_channel=ThisChannelispointless.

Destination: vlakke stage, er staat niets tussen jou en je tegenstander in. Het is alleen maar op elkaar klappen.' (Daan, NL)

"For me, it's a match on Final Destination and then the Brawl theme song. So fucking epic. [Starts humming the theme song] It's orchestral, grand, bombastic, really the most epic soundtrack ever! Fits perfectly with Final Destination: flat stage, nothing stands between you and your opponent. It's just bashing each other." (Daan, ENG)

In contrast to the grandeur of Brawl, the theme song of Super Smash Bros. for Wii U and 3DS takes on an electronic and futuristic style, fitting for the game's more technological theme. The game is considered more technological due to its updated graphics and visual effects, new gameplay mechanics, online play, as well as the incorporation of various technological elements that came with the implementation of the WiiU as a nextgen console.

The theme of SSBU has a twist that stands out from the earlier games and features a more complex and layered arrangement. This is mainly expressed through incorporating elements of different musical styles. For example, there are elements of rock, pop, and electronic music, which can be heard throughout the theme song, reflecting the game's wide inclusion of characters and stages from various franchises. Overall, SSBU's theme song is a grand and epic piece. Like Brawl it features a powerful, soaring melody, accompanied by a full orchestra, contains lots of choral elements, as well as lyrics that add to the emotional component of the piece.[20]

Furthermore, there are different layers to the sounds you hear while playing Super Smash Bros. Ultimate: in-game music and SFX (special effects). SFX refers to sound effects created by ambient noises, shots, hits, splashes, and menu sounds, among others. Players have the option to enable or disable either the music or SFX. If players choose to randomize stages, the game will also randomly select the music. The in-game music is mainly responsible for creating a sense of atmosphere within the game's franchise, while SFX can contribute to the player's understanding and experience of gameplay. For example, characters like Peach and Daisy have the same move set and Side Special attack, but only Peach has a distinct sound during the startup, which can make it easier for some players to react to.

Victory poses, which are short animations that each character has after winning a match individually or as part of a team, are an important part of Super Smash Bros. games and are integral to the franchise. During a victory pose, the winning character or team

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[20] "How Super Smash Bros. Music Sets a Tone for the Series," 8-bit Music Theory, Youtube, accessed December 15, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGj1Gr4KfC8&ab_channel=8-bitMusicTheory.

performs one of three different animations, while the losing characters stand in the background applauding. These poses are usually accompanied by theme music from the character's franchise. Most characters have three different victory pose animations that can be set manually or chosen randomly if left unchanged.

In this section, we have examined the role of music in Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. Music is an important part of the Smash universe, as demonstrated by its presence in the opening screen, the vault, victory poses, and SFX during gameplay. Every character is represented by music from their original franchise, has their own unique SFX, and has specific victory pose animations. Stages are closely tied to their franchises and therefore their associated music. The music played during victory poses is an example of how the developers create and establish a character's identity, drawing on themes from the character's franchise as represented in the game.

4.2 Player identifications

The primary objective of this section is to outline various theories concerning how players identify with the characters they (choose to) play. Subsequently, the reviewed articles acknowledge that music is a suitable medium to investigate the relationship between identity construction and video game characters. Thus, to be able to expand on how gamers identify with SSBU characters through the means of music, I will rely on various academics that have conducted theories applicable to in-game identification and its associated role of music.

4.2.1 Identification

Despite the fact that the word identity is part of the day-to-day discourse, it still proves difficult to give identity a nuanced meaning. Precisely because this topic includes so many opinions, meanings and interpretations, there seem to be no definite answers on the issue of identity. However, identity has been a popular academic topic for some time. Some of the earlier studies concerning identity and its connection to music have been written by academics like Stuart Hall and Simon Frith.[21] According to Hall, identity can be constructed by looking at the other, or 'other'. We construct identity by looking at what the subject (self) lacks in relation to the other.[22] This interaction refers to the ongoing process in which we, as

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[21] Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (Washington DC: Sage Publications Ltd, 1996), 14-15.
[22] Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 15.

individuals, determine what distinguishes us from the world around us. These processes of identification are therefore in constant development.

Furthermore, Frith states that identity is a process in which the musical experience is a means for constructing identity. He argues that we are always in a state of becoming, either on an individual or collective level. Thus, affording musical experiences is considered an important part of that process.[23] Music has the power to satisfy certain ideas and needs that we have acquired during that process, but also to form new ideas and needs that we have not yet acquired in the process. We listen to certain music because we are part of a group, and we are part of a group because we listen to certain music.

4.2.2 Identification with Characters

There are many different ways in which gamers identify with the avatars they play. But what does it mean to identify *with* or *as* a fictional character at all? Karen Collins has elaborated on this matter in her book *Playing With Sound* (2008). As Collins suggests, identification (in the context of identification with a character) appeals to feelings of affinity, empathy, similarity, and liking for a character.[24] To clarify, Collins cites Cassandra Amesley and James Paul Gee. Amesley suggests a 'double viewing', in which the characters we perceive and experience are simultaneously both real and constructed in our minds. As much as these characters have their own beliefs and tastes, we (as the audience) tend to project and transfer our own beliefs about that character onto that character.[25] In a sense, this is in line with game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's concept of 'double consciousness'. This entails a process in which a player may identify with an avatar or character and yet remain 'fully aware of the character as an artificial construct'.[26]

However, with video games there is an extra dimension to be taken into account. James Paul Gee argues that gamers acquire three simultaneous identities during gameplay. Respectively they are; the players' perspective (the real world), the characters' perspective (the virtual world), and the so-called 'projective world', an interface in which beliefs and assumptions of the real and the virtual collide. According to Gee, the projective identity is a

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[23] Frith, *Music and Identity*, 109-111, 124.
[24] Karen Collins, *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 40.
[25] Collins, *Playing with Sound*, 40.
[26] William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

combination of the character's and the player's belief about the character's personality.[27] All the above aim to describe a process of blending real and imagined personality traits, tastes, and preferences in which the characters we perceive and experience ultimately become us as much as we become them.

In addition to this concept of the projective identity, Gee's theory is also exemplified by the way players describe their favorite characters in the game. When I asked players "how would you describe your favorite characters of the game?" Many of the responses reflected this idea of blending real and imagined personality traits, tastes, and preferences. For example, one player, named Erik, said of the character Captain Falcon:

> "Ik vind dat Captain Falcon eer heeft. Het is geen bullshit character, het is geen broken character.. Tegelijkertijd heeft hij geen projectiles, geen over-de-top hitboxen, geen wapens, hij heeft niks. Hij is een man die vecht met zijn blote vuisten tegen demonen, draken, characters met hightech-alien armor met plasma lasers en shit. En Captain Falcon komt daar met zijn kracht van wilskracht. Het is prachtig." (Erik, NL)

> "I think Captain Falcon has honor. He's not a bullshit character, he's not a broken character. At the same time, he doesn't have projectiles, no over-the-top hitboxes, no weapons, he has nothing. He is a man who fights with his bare fists against demons, dragons, characters with high-tech alien armor with plasma lasers and shit. And Captain Falcon comes there with his power of willpower. It's beautiful." (Erik, ENG)

This quote in particular illustrates how players can identify with and feel a connection to a virtual character through their perceived traits, abilities and motivation, becoming a part of the player's identity.

Other players choose characters based on their emotional connection to them. This sentimental value can come from two sources. Firstly, it can be rooted in the history of the Smash series, with players having fond memories of playing the first versions of the game, such as SSB for the Nintendo 64, Melee, and Brawl. This sentimental value is strengthened by the inclusion of stages, characters and music exclusive to these early games in Ultimate. Secondly, sentimental value can come from the inclusion of characters and stages from various third-party franchises, which hold personal significance for some players. This sentiment is shared by a number of those who were surveyed:

> "Ik speel voornamelijk Link en Steve. Zowel Breath of the Wild en Minecraft zijn sentimenteel voor mij. Het is zo vet dat Ultimate twee spellen samen brengt die ik zo erg waardeer, waar ik geschiedenis mee heb." (Sem, NL)

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[27] Collins, *Playing with Sound*, 40.

"I mainly play Link and Steve. Both Breath of the Wild and Minecraft are sentimental to me. It's so cool that Ultimate brings together two games that I value so much, that I have history with." (Sem, ENG)

"Toen Kazuya van Tekken aangekondigd werd, was dat echt compleet onverwachts. Het is zo vet hoe Smash trouw blijft aan de gerepresenteerde franchises." (Marijn, NL)

"When Kazuya from Tekken was announced, that was really completely unexpected. It's so cool how Smash stays true to the represented franchises." (Marijn, ENG)

This shows how players can have emotional connection to a virtual character and feel a sense of loyalty and attachment to them, these characters are not only limited to the game but also the player's personal history and life experience.

Moreover, other motivations why players pick certain characters relate to the in-game identifications described earlier in this chapter, and can be roughly broken down into three main domains: A. a player likes the character (personality, visual design, its history etc.), B. a player likes how the character performs (mechanics, playstyle), C. the character is considered strong (tier lists). These are exemplified by many of the respondents. For one, Erik highlights the character's background as a motivation:

"Sephiroth is my man. Sephiroth is heel erg leuk omdat ik graag de villain wil zijn die iemand in maakt zonder moeite te doen. Dat idee vind ik erg leuk." (Erik, NL)

"Sephiroth is my guy. Sephiroth is very fun because I like being the villain who takes someone down without any effort. I find that idea very appealing." (Erik, ENG)

He also accentuates that Sephiroth's demeanor, his unusually long sword, and his moves being named "Hells Gate" add to the feeling of being a villain. He continues

"Maar Captain Falcon is mijn character. Hij is stylish én agressief. Captain Falcon speelt niet echt neutral, maar speelt om jouw neutral heen en kapitaliseert op jouw fouten. Ik vind dat iets heel moois, om iemand echt compleet te kunnen vernederen. Deze speelstijl past bij mij, want ik speel niet om te winnen, ik speel om mooie plays te maken. Hoe flashy zijn moves wel niet zijn. Live hard, die hard, [laughter]." (Erik, NL)

"But Captain Falcon is my character. He's stylish and aggressive. Captain Falcon doesn't play neutral, but plays around your neutral and capitalizes on your mistakes. I find that something very beautiful, to be able to completely humiliate someone. This

playstyle suits me, because I don't play to win, I play to make beautiful plays. How flashy his moves are. Live hard, die hard, [laughter]." (Erik, ENG)

"Ik hou van veel agressie en weinig nadenken. In Smash hou ik er van om er gewoon met een character in te springen, en ze vervolgens te punishen. Roy kan dat erg goed. Alhoewel ik iets meer zou moeten nadenken. Roy speelt eenmaal zo snel en agressief, dus dat valt misschien een beetje weg." (Mitchel, NL)

"I love a lot of aggression and little thinking. In Smash, I like to just jump in with a character, and then punish them. Roy can do that very well. Although I should think a bit more. Roy plays so fast and aggressive, so that might fall away a bit." (Mitchel, ENG)

"Snake is een coole character want er is niemand in het spel zoals Snake. Ik weet niet van welke game die is, maar ik zie hem als een soort ninja. Hij maakt de setting gewoon zo vet als ik met hem speel." (Sem, NL)

"Snake is a cool character because there's nobody in the game like Snake. I don't know from which game he is, but I see him as a kind of ninja. He just makes the setting so cool when I play with him." (Sem, ENG)

All these quotes from the players further illustrate how these motivations are present in their personal experiences and preferences of choosing characters. For example, Erik mentions how he likes Sephiroth's character design, his villainous history and complementary moves, which all contribute to the idea of feeling like a villain. Sem also mentions how he likes Snake's design, and how he imagines himself to be a ninja. Erik also mentions that he likes Captain Falcon's aggressive fighting style, how the character capitalizes on his opponent's mistakes, which illustrates the second motivation: how the character performs. This is the same for Mitchell. He likes the character Roy because he is fast and aggressive. This also illustrates how the character's performance matters when choosing a character.

4.2.3 Avatar identification through music

In her book *Playing Along* (2007), Kiri Miller shows that digital media and embodied knowledge have the ability to bring together diverse human experiences from different locations and time periods. She is particularly interested in how digital media transmit embodied knowledge. One of her particular cases is focused on the Grand Theft Auto series. Specifically, Miller's article *Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in Grand Theft Auto* (2007) explicates various ways of how players interact with- and experience the GTA

universe through its music. In particular, Miller is interested in how the in-game radio system affects the player's gaming experience while adopting the listing persona of a young black gang member in 1992 fictitious San Andreas (Los Angeles). While the in-game radio system is inherently specific to the world of GTA, and facilitates the process of GTA's experimental freedom - players can control their degree of identification with local characters, choose their own preferred depth of immersion - there's much to be said on how music can impact a player's ability to identify with an avatar of a different race, gender, class, or historical moment with the world around it. In addition, she is specifically interested in what it means to imagine listening with those characters' ears.

First of all, the player will acquire CJ's (the main character of GTA San Andreas) taste and preference for the sake of deeper immersion. Players will attempt to play music they consider as appropriate when taking into account CJ's immediate social environment, history, and perception of reality. However, Miller's study also shows that players employ music in a way that contradicts these realities as a result of striving for a form of surrealism. As is stated by Miller, 'they enjoy being able to choose whether to comply with those norms or to create a sense of cognitive dissonance.'[28] Another noteworthy feat is that players also use the GTA dial to listen to music that they themselves as individuals would listen to. The process in which the playable character is able to adopt your personal preferences and tastes ultimately enables players to identify more closely to the characters as well. In the end, the world of San Andreas creates a sense of what constitutes appropriate music for particular places and activities, players are in a position to either pursue those associations or subvert them. On the one hand music functions as an extension of the player's preferences and is projected onto the character in-game, and on the other hand music functions as an extension of the characters' preferences and is projected onto the player.

Meanwhile, the GTA dial in San Andreas does not appear to be completely random. A second essential theme is that the in-game radio system seems to correspond with different parts of the gameworld. Music will occur accordingly depending on where CJ is, or in what vehicle he drives. According to Miller, the dial's distinctive character derives mainly from oppositional tones created within the world of San Andreas. These binaries are depicted as black/white, urban/rural, young/old, and classic/contemporary. This ultimately shows that

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[28] Kiri Miller, "Jacking the Dial: Radio, Race, and Place in *Grand Theft Auto*," *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 3 (2007): 425.

one's identification with an avatar is also dependent on the localization within the gameworld. Music functions as an important signifier for these localizations.[29]

In the case of SSBU, this is reflected in the way that music is chosen and played in the game. The music is predetermined for each stage and franchise represented in the game, with some liberty for players to choose which particular song they would like to hear. For example, playing as any character on a Mario stage will automatically play Mario theme songs, but players can choose which specific Mario song they want to hear. In other cases, the game conforms to playing as Ryu from the Street Fighter franchise on Suzaku Castle, players have the liberty to choose Ryu's theme song from the first entries of the series or older versions. Although the freedom and the choices players can make to formulate their desired match rules, stages and music in Ultimate, players that grew up on older entries of the Smash series, would have set stages with their accompanying theme songs. For them, these in-game localizations, or stages, are inseparable to their music.

Other players like to create a sense of dissonance by subverting the typical associations of certain stages with their respective music and playable characters. For example, by only choosing villains (such as Ganondorf, who is the villain of the Zelda franchise) to play against each other on an Animal Crossing stage, with its quirky music playing in the background. This creates a humorous and satirical setting, in which the game embraces the randomness of these villainous characters appearing in such an unexpected place.

Furthermore, Miller also sets out the relation between the player and the mood. While enjoying in-game activities and/or missions, music has the capabilities as a mood enhancer. This is exemplified by one of Miller's own experiences in which she would find that the dub/reggae station helped her relax during high-speed car chases. Additionally, she argues that these performance-enhancing choices are based on the player's own tastes and histories, creating an even stronger connection between particular music and game activities. Gamers would also mention that mood-enhancing music would often help them clear difficult parts of missions.[30] In the end, the diverse nature of GTA's dial ensures once more the depth to which one can choose to immerse or identify themselves with the playable character. As we have seen in the examples above, music functions as an important signifier for identification based on taste and preferences, localization, and the general mood depending on the mission or activity.

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[29] Miller, "Jacking the Dial," 422-423.
[30] Ibid, 424.

How music functions as an important signifier for the general mood is illustrated by Mitchel, someone who organizes monthly SSBU tournaments in Wageningen. Mitchel holds the music of SSBU in very high regard. He would even claim that he'd won the tournament and maintained his number one spot due to the music. Mitchel describes his process of music picking whilst playing in a professional setting as follows:

> 'Er is een Tekken nummer die ik heel fijn vind om te horen. Het heet Karma, een soort remix. Het klinkt gewoon heel hype. In het toernooi dat ik organiseer mag de persoon die de stage uitkiest ook het nummer bepalen. Dat is een soort ongeschreven regel. En iedere keer pick ik hetzelfde nummer. Gewoon hard gaan. Ik heb altijd het geluid aan staan, en bij voorkeur dus Karma. Het zorgt ervoor dat ik in de zone zit, of in ieder geval sneller in de zone zit. nu is het moment, nu moet jij het doen. Vind ik heel fijn. Geen lyrics.' 'Ik wil een nummer dat van mij is. Die ik altijd voor elke match kan gebruiken.' (Mitchel, NL)

> 'There's a Tekken song that I really like to hear. It's called Karma, a sort of remix. It just sounds really hype. In the tournament that I organize, the person who chooses the stage can also choose the song. That's a sort of unwritten rule. And every time I pick the same song. Just going hard. I always have the sound on, and preferably Karma. It makes me get in the zone, or at least gets me in the zone faster. Now is the moment, now you have to do it. I like that a lot. No lyrics. 'I want a song that is mine. That I can use for every match.' (Mitchel, ENG)

While listening to the audio in SSBU can improve focus, increase your immersion in the game, and help you match the rhythm and tempo of the game, at tournaments the excitement and passion can sometimes make it difficult to concentrate. Many professional players use headphones to block out distractions and focus more on the game. It's also worth noting that some professional players prefer to play their own music over the music from the game itself, and therefore don't necessarily rely on the in-game audio.

However, most respondents may use sound effects to confirm their hits on opponents, or to determine the strength and weakness of their character's attacks. This can be especially important for sword fight characters, who rely heavily on hitstun (the moment when a character is unable to move or take action after being hit by an attack) and combos, and for whom the aural cues provide a more direct and clear indication of what they have hit: depending on sour (weak part of the sword) or sweet (strong part of the sword) one could follow-up with corresponding combo's or reactions. For Mitchell in particular, sound effects highly contribute to him playing sword characters to the best of his ability.

'De sound effects dragen ook bij aan mijn reactie. Ik heb het gevoel dat ik beter kan reageren als ik de muziek van de game zelf aan heb staan als ik een game speel. Als je iemand spiked [sending an opponent downward], moet je gewoon dat geluidje erbij hebben. Het geeft meer impact, aan de hits enz. Zeker omdat ik Roy speel, zijn attack hebben sweet en sour spots, dus ik moet horen wat ik gehit heb om mijn combos te kunnen doen. Bovendien klinken sweet spot Hit Effects gewoon heel fijn.' (Mitchel, NL)

"The sound effects also contribute to my reaction. I feel like I can react better when I have the game's music on while I'm playing. When you spike someone [sending an opponent downward], you just have to have that sound effect with it. It gives more impact to the hits, etc. Especially because I play Roy, his attacks have sweet and sour spots, so I have to hear what I hit to be able to do my combos. Also sweet spot hit effects just sound really nice." (Mitchel, ENG)

Another example is mentioned earlier on in this thesis, with characters Peach and Daisy who have the same moveset and use the same Side Special attack, but Peach has a distinct sound during the startup, which makes it easier for some players to react to.

To follow up on Kiri Miller and the examples made above, Karen Collins has extensively examined the complexity of game audio in regards to the player's experience. Like Miller in *Jacking the Dial*, in *Playing with Sound* (2015), Collins draws on the function of audio in games from the perspective of the player. But unlike Miller, Collins is essentially focused on the negotiating and renegotiating role of music as an embodied practice. Among other things, her study explicates ways in which sound effects (nonmusical sounds), the voice and music increases the immersion of the player and aids to the identification with the main player-character. In a sense, Collins point of departure stems from the idea that processes of sound effects, voice and music facilitates role-play, encourages engagement, and promotes identification with the player's character.[31]

Essentially, Collins delves into the role of the voice with regards to character identification. According to Collins, the voice is a sound that can exist within the borders of the real and the virtual. By engaging the physical body, players are better able to identify with the virtual body. This is because bodily engagement or embodied listening - the mimicking of posture and gesture - is interrelated to empathy, and affects the ways in which we are able to relate to characters through role-playing.[32]

Erik's portrayal of Sephiroth, the villain from Final Fantasy VII, was particularly noteworthy. After winning a match, he would imitate Sephiroth's victory pose, which stands

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[31] Collins, *Playing with Sound*, 60.
[32] Idem.

out from the rest of the characters roster. This pose is engulfed in flames and plays the choir chant of Sephiroth's theme song from the game. Erik would also imitate the theme with his voice. What he particularly liked about this setup was that it did not resemble a regular victory pose, but rather a game-over screen, where the villain walks away after defeating the opponent. The fact that there is no regular victory music playing in the background, only the crackling of fire, further emphasizes Sephiroth's menacing nature and how he leaves destruction everywhere he goes. Erik clearly shows affection for this aspect of the character, as it adds to the feeling of despair and villainess.

Collins further exemplifies this bodily engagement according to the various ways in which games utilize voice. For one, in games with avatar customization options, players tend to select avatars that show similarities in terms of appearance and voice to their own.[33] Another example comes with games where the main character does not have a voice of its own. In these games, the power lies in the fact that players can construct their own voice, leaving room for players to change or to fill in the entire conception of the main character. In addition, Collins cites Young, who states that by eliminating the voice of the main character, players will construct the main character's voice in their own head. Ultimately, this adds to the immersion, as the player's voice actually becomes the main character's voice. On the contrary, Collins is also aware of the fact that some players, rather than playing a character, want to feel as though they themselves are in the game. They do not want to role-play someone else but want to role-play the game as themselves being the character.[34]

Additionally, some players prefer to role-play themselves as the character in the game, and the example of Marijn is provided as an illustration of this. Marijn is a passionate martial artist, considers himself obsessed with the practice of fighting, a game in which people constantly try to trump each other. In particular, Marijn shows preference for the Shōtō (fighting style) characters as their moves are influenced by existing fighting styles. Marijn picks characters in the game that resemble him the most while fighting.

> "Super Smash is net martial arts, alleen dan zonder de fysieke consequenties ervan. Geen echte verwondingen, slechts je eer die aangetast kan worden. Daarom kies ik graag voor characters zoals Terry, Kazuya en Captain Falcon. Vuist op vuist." (Marijn, NL)

> "Super Smash is like martial arts, but without the physical consequences. No real

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[33] Collins, *Playing with Sound*, 71.
[34] Ibid, 76.

injuries, just your honor that can be damaged. That's why I like to choose characters like Terry, Kazuya and Captain Falcon. Fist to fist." (Marijn, ENG)

In the above I have briefly demonstrated how players can use audio in games to enhance their role-playing experience and their identification with the character.

Lastly, another leading article within the discourse of video game identification and music is written by Chris Tonelli. In his article *Game Music and Identity*, Tonelli specifically discusses identification in terms of how we construct meaning afforded by the sounds we hear. However, Tonelli states that we must be wary of the complexity and implications that come when game designers project musical ideas in order to complement or create a certain tone of the game. Accordingly, this is exemplified by discussing the music in the game *Civilization IV*. Basically, *Civilization IV* associates musical cues linked to civilization as Europeanness music, and relates primitiveness to non-Europeanness music.[35] Players have different ways in which they engage. For example, Tonelli sets out ways in which players remain aware and critical of the designed in-game music. They approach the music as satirical, ironic, or sarcastic. Other players mute the in-game music, or replace them with music of their liking. All of these exemplify ways how players afford meaning to the sounds they hear in-game and therefore aid in constructing identity.

In earlier examples I have shown how players have approached the music of SSBU to create a sense of dissonance, sometimes in the form of humor or satire. However, to further illuminate how players establish a feeling of epicness during gameplay I want to emphasize ways in which players afford meaning with music of their liking. An example of this is given by Sem:

"Ik had op een gegeven moment ook een 'battle music playlist' voor Super Smash aangemaakt. Er zit allemaal van die film muziek muziek in, van die harmonische, epische shit maar dan ook echt wel voor battle. De playlist heet ook *every night's alright for fighting*. Er zit voornamelijk veel rock in. Het idee was dat iedereen waarmee ik speelde dat dan ook kon luisteren. Ik dacht altijd wel na over wat ik dan bij de fight wilde horen. Bijvoorbeeld, *Dual of the Faiths* van Star Wars, en dan vochten we tegen elkaar. Of die track van Anakin vs Obi-Wan, die staat ook in de battle muziek lijst. Soms voegde ik minecraft speed run muziek toe, of epische draken missies uit Skyrim, Lord of the Rings battle muziek, gewoonweg om het episch te maken." (Sem, NL)

"I had created a 'battle music playlist' for Super Smash at one point. It's got all that

[35] Chris Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," in *the Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music*, eds. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 331.

movie music, like epic, harmonious stuff but specifically for battles. The playlist is called 'Every Night's Alright for Fighting.' It mostly has rock in it. The idea was that whoever I played with could also listen to it. I always thought about what I wanted to hear during the fight. For example, 'Dual of the Faiths' from Star Wars, and then we'd fight against each other. Or that track from Anakin vs Obi-Wan, that's also in the battle music list. Sometimes I added Minecraft speed run music or epic dragon missions from Skyrim, Lord of the Rings battle music, just to make it epic." (Sem, ENG)

Another important way in which players afford meaning to the sounds they hear appeals to our memory. For example, memories can trigger feelings of nostalgia. Although the concept of nostalgia is mainly understood as a kind of longing for a return to the past, in this context it refers primarily to a broader variety of feelings of connectedness to past experiences we have had. This is mainly exemplified through players' experiences of the gaming systems' start-up cues. As Tonelli explains further, - '*if we strongly value those experiences, these memories may afford a feeling of connectedness to experiences we feel have played a role in defining us; they may trigger feelings that inform our sense of personal identity.*'[36] Additionally, in the case of Sem above, the music of these movies appeal to a collective shared memory. The fact that these memories are shared among the friends that he plays with, ultimately adds to the feeling of epicness. As is stated in the above, feelings of nostalgia appeal to demonstrate how players afford meaning to the sounds we hear in-game.

To elaborate, victory poses also appeal to feelings of nostalgia, as players may have personal connections to specific characters, such as Marijn's preference for fighting game characters, specifically Kazuya from the Tekken series which had a great impact on him during his childhood. Marijn also notes that the inclusion of certain elements from the original game, such as the in-your-face character selection screen music and the "you win" voice with the victory pose, adds to the nostalgia. The fact that the game stays true to the original franchises in terms of music, victory announcement, looks, and move set, is appreciated by the players.

Moreover, through a thorough examination of *the Last of Us* (TLOU), Tonelli also sets out how meaning is afforded through the so-called intersubjective encounter. In regards to identity-related processes; when playing video games as a certain character, the intersubjective encounter is a term for the illusory sensation that we are sensing, feeling and thinking from the position of another subject.[37] It enables us to act according to - and imagine

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[36] Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," 340.
[37] Ibid, 332.

from the perspective of the playable character. As I quote from Tonelli: '*The intersubjective encounter, when it occurs across lines of (dis)identification, might give us temporary imaginary access to identities we do not feel entitled to occupy at any other time.*'[38] An example that displays identificatory dynamics involves encounters with the playable character and game music. In combination with melodic, timbral and instrumental guitar motifs we construct the identity of Joel (the main character of TLOU) as our hero, a white working-class Southern (Texan) male protagonist. Thus, music plays a role in affording and encouraging these associations. These affording articulations are constructed to various degrees depending on general ideas of the players' perception of culture and/or history. However, it is due to the visual and musical design of the game that these components prompt us to associate feelings with Joel and ultimately help us understand the extent to which game music functions to make identities manifest that players embrace during gameplay.[39]

In this chapter I have aimed to outline various ways in which music acts as a medium in regards to identity-related processes. One the one hand music functions as an extension of the player's preferences and is projected onto the character in-game, and on the other hand music functions as an extension of the characters' preferences and is projected onto the player. At the same time music functions as a signifier for localization in which characters appear within the game world. Additionally, music also has abilities to enhance mood depending on the mission or activity. Other points of departure stem from the idea that sound effects, voice and music facilitate role-play, encourages in-game character engagement, and ultimately promotes identification with the player's character. Through interactive sounds like the voice players are allowed to adopt, and are encouraged to act out the identity of the character. Lastly, I have explicated ways in which players afford meaning through the sounds we hear in-game. In the end, how we afford meaning defines how we identify in accordance to the characters we play.

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[38] Tonelli, "Game Music and Identity," 332.
[39] Ibid, 338.

V. Conclusion

In this thesis I have investigated how gamers identify with SSBU characters through music. To do this I have made a distinction between 'encoding' and 'decoding', in which I focus on both in-game identifications and player identification. On one hand, the in-game identifications focus on how the developers of SSBU intended to create and convey their idea about the universe that is known as Super Smash Bros. Ultimate. On the other hand, player identification focuses more on the experience of its consumers, the players, and how they create and convey meaning to the world that is presented to them. According to an analysis of the discourses from both sides, the following observations have been made:

In general, I have explicated how players can identify with and feel a connection to virtual characters in SSBU. The process of blending real and imagined personality traits, tastes, and preferences allows the characters we perceive and experience to ultimately become a part of our own identities. The way players describe their favorite characters also reflects this idea, as they often cite specific traits, abilities, and motivations that they identify with and admire. Additionally, players can also have emotional connections to characters, whether it be rooted in the history of the game or history of personal significance. Furthermore, players also choose characters based on their preferences, playstyle and strengths. This illustrates how players can have a variety of different reasons for choosing a certain character and how it becomes an integral part of their gaming experience.

There are also many ways in which music contributes to their degree and experience of character identification. Firstly, the music in SSBU is used to set the tone and atmosphere of the game. Each stage in the game has its own unique music connected to their particular franchise, which aids in creating a certain sense of place and atmosphere. This choice of music in the game evokes feelings of nostalgia and recognition to the players, as they are familiar with many of the franchises represented. They are part of the cultural memory that players have with these games, and hearing these tracks in SSBU can bring back memories and emotions from when they played those games in the past. Additionally, the use of these familiar tracks can also provide a sense of continuity and connection to the larger gaming culture. Many players will have memories and emotional connections to these tracks from different games, it allows players to connect with each other through shared memories and cultural references, even outside the realm of the Super Smash Bros. series. The inclusion of certain elements from the original game, such as the 'in-your-face character selection screen

music' or the voices accompanied with victory poses, and the fact that the game stays true to the original franchises in terms of music, audio design, victory poses, looks, and move set complements the feelings of nostalgia and strongly indicate a shared past, which is highly appreciated by the players. Furthermore, the music in SSBU is also used to create a sense of excitement and tension during battles. Music and sound effects in SSBU play an important role in the gameplay experience for some players. Respondents have reported that the audio in the game can help them get into the right state of mind, create a sense of epicness, enhance their focus and immersion in the game, and contribute to their overall enjoyment of the game. Additionally, this deep appreciation is displayed through how players like to role-play either as their favorite character, or to role-play as themselves with the character they play, to further enhance their identification with the character. This is further enhanced by the interface of SSBU, how the system enables the players to create a sense of personalization, how players can create custom playlists of their favorite tracks and listen to them while playing the game or in the background. Overall, by allowing this sense of personalization, by setting the tone and atmosphere of the game, evoking feelings of nostalgia, creating excitement and tension during battles, the music in SSBU plays a significant role in the way players identify with the characters they use.

While I have presented the results of my research, it is important to note that there are some discrepancies that should be acknowledged. The literature that forms the basis of my theoretical framework primarily corresponds with the results I have shown, however, there are some discrepancies that are evident. Specifically, the level of engagement that players have with the avatars they play varies greatly. In my research, I did not distinguish between the different levels of engagement, which may have resulted in some respondents providing less detailed information. Additionally, as there are many unique characters in the game, I focused more on the similarities among them, rather than the differences. However, it would be interesting to further explore the motivations of players who engage with the game differently.

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VII. Appendix

1. Reference to section 3.1 - The roster of Super Smash Bros. Ultimate's characters displayed in their respective Game Franchises.

Game Series	Characters	Rating
Super Mario	Mario, Luigi, Peach, Daisy, Bowser, Dr. Mario, Rosalina & Luma, Bowser Jr., Piranha Plant	E
Donkey Kong	Donkey Kong, Diddy Kong, King K. Rool	E
The Legend of Zelda	Link, Sheik, Zelda, Young Link, Ganondorf, Toon Link	E 10+ > T
Metroid	Samus, Dark Samus, Zero Suit Samus, Ridley	E > T
Yoshi	Yoshi	E
Kirby	Kirby, Meta Knight, King Dedede	E
Starfox	Fox, Falco, Wolf	E
Pokemon	Pikachu, Jigglypuff, Pichu, Mewtwo, Pokemon Trainer, Lucario, Greninja, Incineroar	E
Earthbound	Ness, Lucas	E 10+ > T
F-Zero	Captain Falcon	E
Ice Climber	Ice Climbers	E
Fire Emblem	Marth, Lucina, Roy, Chrom, Ike, Corrin, Robin, Byleth	T
Game & Watch	Mr. Game & Watch	E
Kid Icarus	Pit, Dark Pit, Palutena	E
Wario Ware	Wario	E
Metal Gear Solid	Snake	M
Sonic the Hedgehog	Sonic	E
Pikmin	Olimar	E 10+
R.O.B. series	R.O.B.	E
Animal Crossing	Villager, Isabelle	E
Mega Man	Megaman	T
Wii series	Wii Fit Trainer	E
Punch-Out	Little Mac	E
Super Smash Bros.	Mii Swordfighter, Mii Gunner, Mii Brawler	E

series		
Pac-Man	Pac-Man	E
Xenoblade Chronicles	Shulk, Pyra/Mythra	T
Duck Hunt	Duck Hunt	E
Street Fighter	Ryu, Ken	T
Final Fantasy VII	Cloud, Sephiroth	T
Bayonetta	Bayonetta	M
Splatoon	Inkling	E 10+
Castlevania	Simon, Richter	T > M
Persona 5	Joker	M
Dragon Quest XI	Hero	T
Banjo-Kazooie	Banjo & Kazooie	E
Fatal Fury	Terry	T
Arms	Min-Min	E 10+
Minecraft	Steve	E 10+
Tekken	Kazuya	T
Kingdom Hearts	Sora	E 10+

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2. Reference to section 4.1.2 - Smash Ultimate's Characters - Mechanics, Playstyles and Archetypes. The following information contains an overview of SSBU's Archetypes and Playstyles.

Rushdown
Characters: *Fox, Sheik, Greninja, Pichu, Pikachu, Joker, Captain Falcon, Mii Brawler, Zero Suit Samus*
Rushdown characters' goal is to attack by getting into their opponents face. They are always trying to close the gap with their speed, quick mobility, and fast moves. They are considered some of the highest and most oppressive characters on the roster. They often have a good projectile which can be used to create an opening for them to rush in.

Zoner
Characters: *Samus, Dark Samus, Mii Gunner, Megaman, Banjo & Kazooie, Villager, Young Link, Toon Link*

Zoners like to keep a distance during the entire match. The zoner archetype has a great arsenal of projectiles as their main weapons. The main aspect of their game plan entails outspacing their opponent and limiting their options from a distance.

Bait and Punish

Characters: *Ganondorf, Donkey Kong, Diddy Kong, Ridley, Incineroar, Luigi, Steve*

These are usually defined as heavy characters, but they are not necessarily limited to heavies. Since they typically lack strong approach options their goal is basically to bait out their opponent, wait for them to make a mistake and capitalize by fishing for grabs. Because they have unique grab capabilities, they subsequently deal huge amounts of damage.

Subcategories:

All-Rounder

Characters: *Mario, Yoshi, Dr Mario, Kirby, Pit, Dark Pit*

The All-Rounder archetype consists of characters that do well in all different facets of the game. As the name implies, these are the most balanced characters in the game. However, they do not excel in one ability. Their biggest strengths are the fundamentals of the game itself.

Hit and Run

Characters: *Sonic, Jiggly Puff, Meta Knight, Wii Fit Trainer, Inkling, Bowser, Mr Game & Watch*

Hit and run characters are considered a subsection of rushdown characters. Due to their quickness and efficient mobility they like to rush in, hit the opponent and get away before opponents counteract. A notable difference from rushdown archetypes is that when the opponent becomes free, hit and run characters essentially run away to wait for another opening. They do not have great combo game, which is why they rely on quick hits. They only attack when it is in their advantage.

Mix-Up

Characters: *R.O.B. Ness, Lucas, Wolf, Palutena, Sora*

Mix-up characters are considered offspring of the rushdown archetype. These characters depend on a variety of tools in their movesets. Their strength is to leave the opponent clueless of what the next move might be. Since their moveset is quite versatile, they are able to switch up between aggressive, punishing and zoning playstyles. For example, they will use their strong projectiles forcing the opponent to approach and catch them off guard with their up close-range attacks.

Footsie

Characters: *Ryu, Ken, Terry, Kazuya, Little Mac, Roy, Chrom*

Generally footsies are considered to be brawlers. They like to keep their feet on the ground as their strength lies in heavy punches and kicks. Footsie characters are those that have the ability to outspace their opponent by properly spacing their own body in and out of dangerous ranges to bait out attacks and punish accordingly. They have explosive power, although they are considered much weaker in the air.

Glass Cannons

Characters: *Lucario, Mewtwo, King Dedede*

Glass canons are considered to be really strong, as well as really light weighted. They have powerful moves to kill the opponent quickly. But they are usually very vulnerable as they tend to die at a low percentage.

Combo

Characters: *Bayonetta, Falco, Peach, Daisy, Wario*

The next characters are regarded as combo characters. This group, however ambiguous, have a far better combo game than most characters in smash. They usually open up with one of two moves to create an opening in which they employ long and damaging combos.

Variability (Dynamic)

Characters: *Shulk, Pokemon Trainer, Pyra/Mythra, Hero*

Dynamic characters share traits of all-rounders in the sense that they can do basically anything. However, the difference is that dynamic characters switch between their strengths and weaknesses. This usually involves transforming your character to swap between what you need under different circumstances. These characters have either multiple playable characters or an ability to alter their base stats. It puts these characters in multiple different archetypes at the same time.

Trapper

Characters: *Snake, Isabelle, Piranha Plant, Zelda, Bowser Jr. Duck Hunt, Simon, Richter, Robin, Pac-man, King K. Rool*

As the name implies, characters in this archetype try to lead their opponent to specific places on the platform in order to give them the most optimal punishment. They apply versatile projectiles and use them for getting your opponent to places where you want them. Their main strength is in controlling the stage and capitalizing after calculating where the opponent is going to end up.

Turtle

Characters: *Link, Villager, Olimar, Sephiroth, Min-Min, Byleth*

The turtle archetype is generally characterized by its long range tools to poke enemies from afar. Their game plan usually doesn't revolve around applying pressure, but instead likes to maintain distance, build up defensive walls and wait for an opportunity to strike.

Spacing

Characters: *Marth, Lucina, Ike, Cloud, Mii Swordfighter, Corrin*

These characters use their sword to outspace their opponents to get proper hitboxes for more rewards per hit and keep themselves safe in the process.

Puppeteers

Characters: *Ice Climbers, Rosalina & Luma*

The puppeteer relies on using two characters at once. They always consist of a main character and a supportive secondary character that is partially controlled by the player and partially the game AI. Sometimes they use the CPU to attack opponents and sometimes they might allow the CPU to take the hit for them. However, if the additional character goes down, the main character is at a significant disadvantage.
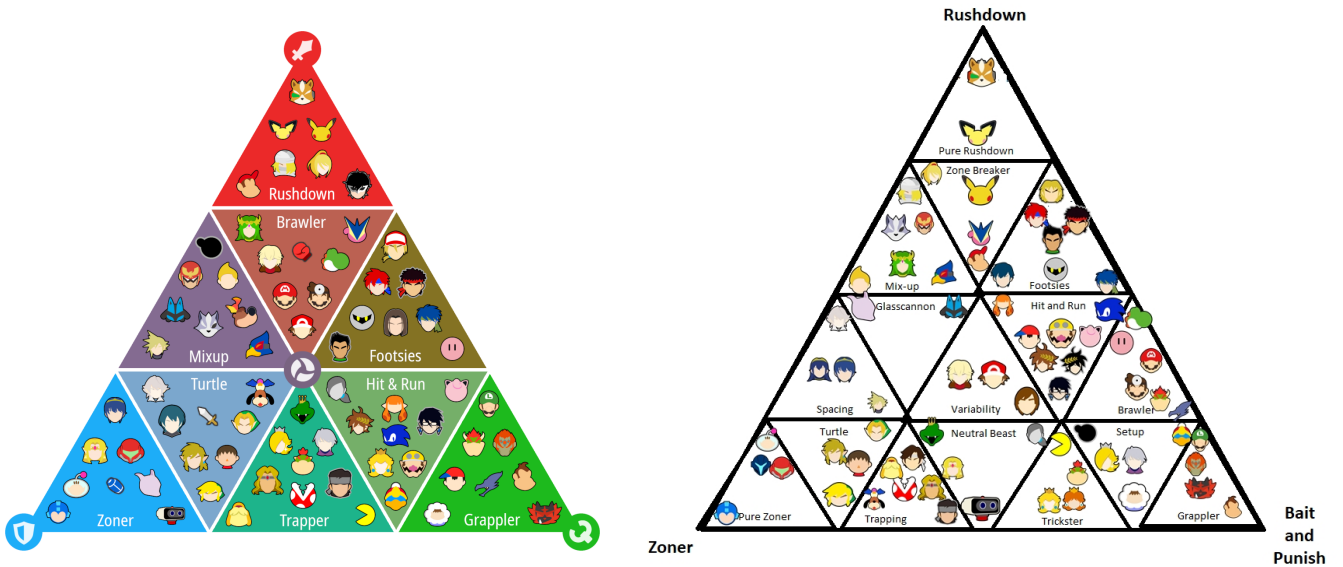
Figure above - "The Famous (Infamous?) Archetype Triangle, Revamped," Smash Labs, last modified May 3, 2020, https://smashlabs.design.blog/2020/05/03/archetype-triangle/