

A screenshot from the Super Smash Bros. series showing Pikachu and Falco in a battle. Pikachu is on the left, looking surprised with its mouth open. Falco is on the right, holding a sword. The background is a colorful, abstract arena with blue and pink sections.

Nintendo's Legacy of Sequel Supremacy: A Case Study of Super Smash Bros. and Super Smash Bros. Melee

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In 1985, Nintendo introduced the world to the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), accompanying its inception with the release of a game about a courageous plumber attempting to save a beautiful princess from the clutches of an evil monster. Over the next seventeen years, Nintendo would go on to release hundreds of popular games in support of its cutting edge systems, solidifying its position as a powerhouse in the video game industry. Through its games, Nintendo established marquee characters in classic titles that displayed how unique premises and dynamic game-play could produce a compelling entertainment experience. These marquee characters have been at the heart of Nintendo's success. Names such as Samus, Link, and Mario have undoubtedly become synonymous with Nintendo's franchise. Nintendo was able to turn video game characters into celebrities, resulting in a huge consumer fan-base that eagerly anticipated sequels and other games involving their favorite characters. One fact that most clearly illustrates this point is found in the sales figures for Super Mario Bros. and its second sequel, Super Mario Bros. 3. It is a common misconception that Super Mario Bros. is the best-selling game of all time as it catapulted both Mario and Nintendo to mainstream stardom, but in fact, Super Mario Bros. 3 is actually the best-selling game with over 11 million copies sold (Sheff 4). Nintendo's success with sequels is further proven in a recent issue of *Electronic Gaming Monthly* that featured an article regarding the 100 greatest games of all time. Nintendo's top eight placing games in the countdown were all sequels with Super Metroid, the Super Nintendo sequel to the original NES game, Metroid, being crowned the greatest game of all time (EGM staff 124-152). Nintendo's success with its characters through various games can be attributed to a sincere

dedication to outdo previous installments and construct games that don't just rehash their predecessors, but tremendously improve upon them.

Most recently, Nintendo introduced a new gaming system into a market fraught with massive corporate competitors that threaten the company's very existence in the console world. The Nintendo GameCube was released in November of 2001 along with Microsoft's Xbox, both attempting to gain some market power from Sony's impressive year-old Playstation 2 console. Nintendo has always utilized sequels and established characters to sell new systems, as was the case with Super Mario World for the Super Nintendo and Super Mario 64 for the Nintendo 64. Nintendo's strategy of using celebrated characters in new games to woo consumers to purchase new systems helped make both the Super Nintendo and Nintendo 64 very successful consoles. With the GameCube, however, the first sequel to be released by Nintendo was not a Mario game, but rather Super Smash Bros. Melee. Released in early December of 2001, Melee is the sequel to Super Smash Bros., a highly addictive cult classic fighting game that was released for the Nintendo 64 in early 1999.

This case study will critically analyze Super Smash Bros. and its sequel, Super Smash Bros. Melee, primarily focusing on the differences between the games. The evolution in gaming represented by the sequel over its predecessor will be put in a greater context as well, giving a preliminary vision of Nintendo's future and the direction that it can take its most well-known characters. It remains to be seen whether the Nintendo GameCube will best its competitors and re-establish Nintendo as the premiere company in the console market. However, if history is any lesson, then it will be the next-

generation titles featuring the established names associated with the Nintendo brand that will determine the console's success.

In March of 1999, Nintendo released Super Smash Bros. for the Nintendo 64 console. It immediately became one of Nintendo's most successful titles selling nearly 2 million copies in Japan alone and achieving stellar sales in the U.S. as well ("Super Smash Bros. Record"). The premise behind the game was remarkably simple. Super Smash Bros. brought together twelve of Nintendo's most beloved characters from some of its greatest games to square off in four-player combat. It was a groundbreaking effort in the genre of fighting games due to the fact that the idea of a four-player simultaneous fighting game was unproven and unprecedented. The game immediately captured the imaginations of younger gamers with its familiar characters and simplistic control functions, but remarkably the game managed to find a niche among older gamers as well. This more sophisticated appeal was due to its superbly balanced game-play and engrossing four-player combat mode. This unusual penetration of both demographics undoubtedly contributed to the game's success and ultimately led Nintendo to begin production on a sequel that would fully utilize the power of its next-generation console.

As Nintendo announced its lineup of games that would be released for the GameCube before the end of the 2001 holiday season, Super Smash Bros. Melee was one of the most eagerly anticipated titles mentioned. Nintendo once again collaborated on the project with HAL Laboratories, the developer for the original Super Smash Bros. HAL Laboratories was established in 1980 as a second-party video game development company for Nintendo and has seen its personnel count increase over the last two decades to a tight-knit group of 83 employees dedicated to producing top quality video games.

HAL Laboratories' longstanding exclusive relationship with Nintendo dates back to the mid-80's when the development house created Japan-only titles for the original Japanese Nintendo Entertainment System (called the Famicom). From 1993 to 2000 under the leadership of company president, Satoru Iwata, HAL began developing games for the American market. Eventually, the company became one of Nintendo's top developers by producing such best-selling American titles as the Kirby's Dreamland series and Super Smash Bros. for the Nintendo 64. In fact, after the worldwide success of Super Smash Bros., Iwata was brought to Nintendo in 2000 to become the new Director and General Manager of Nintendo's Corporate Planning Division ("Nintendo Luminaries"). Masahiro Sakurai, the Game Director of the original Super Smash Bros. and the man credited with creating the lovable Kirby character, placed Ryuki Kuraoka in charge of the sequel that began production in early 2000 ("Developer Interview"). With essentially the same development team on board, HAL Laboratories and Nintendo were intent on producing a game that would bring all of Nintendo's best-known characters to life on its most advanced system to date. As Nintendo had done with its previous sequels for other established characters, the production protocol for HAL Laboratories was strictly one of outperforming and outdoing its predecessor in as many aspects as possible. This perfectionist attitude has served Nintendo well in the past, accounting for its multitude of successful sequels including Super Mario Bros. 3, Super Metroid, and StarFox 64. An in-depth analysis of Super Smash Bros. Melee in comparison with its predecessor reveals that this same attitude is still very much a part of the Nintendo production process, resulting in a next-generation sequel that is in every aspect a leap forward from the original.

In both Super Smash Bros. and its sequel, there are two distinct modes of play: a single player mode and a multiplayer mode. In single player mode, one can choose a character and play through a series of static stages, fighting against other characters and ultimately arriving at the final battle with the game's boss figure, the Master Hand. One tremendous improvement that Melee achieved over the original is expanding the single player mode to include intermittent side-scrolling levels reminiscent of Super Mario Bros. in addition to the regular battle stages, making the one player experience more epic and engrossing. Furthermore, Melee improved upon the original by including special "Event Matches" which placed the single player in unique fighting situations with certain special rules against specific opponents. As for the multiplayer mode, the original game allowed four players to square off in combat either on teams or in a free-for-all manner. The sequel has completely overhauled the multiplayer mode providing an almost endless variety of different matches that can be constructed to suit the players' tastes. Players can choose to have matches with invisible characters to matches in slow-motion, among many other options. One of the most interesting of these options is the ability to play a match in what is called "camera mode." This mode allows up to three users to fight normally while a fourth user controls the camera, zooming in and out, rotating shots, and shifting viewpoints, essentially giving the fourth player a chance to be the director of a film-like dramatic battle. One can even choose to save snapshots from these matches to the GameCube memory card so as to show friends some highlights from the battle. Such varied options as these, combined with more engrossing modes of play, greatly increase the sequel's replayability beyond that of the original.

Complimenting the changes in the games' modes, other game-play features have been improved upon from the original to the sequel, resulting in a superior playing experience. One of the most noticeable changes in Super Smash Bros. Melee is the increased number of combatants. Players can now choose from twenty-five characters to fight with, whereas the original only had a cast of twelve. The twelve fighters retained from the original include Mario, Luigi, Donkey Kong, Kirby, Samus Aran from the Metroid series, Link from the Zelda series, Fox from the StarFox series, and Pikachu and Jigglypuff, both from Nintendo's wildly popular Pokémon franchise. New characters added in the sequel range from Mario and Luigi's evil nemesis, Bowser to Mario's love interest, Princess Peach. For Nintendo nostalgia lovers, two characters from the early 1980's make an appearance in the sequel after more than a decade in absence; the original Ice Climbers from the early NES hit game that bears their name and Mr. Game and Watch from Nintendo's 1980 handheld LCD collaboration with Tiger electronics. The new characters added in the sequel not only increase the roster of combatants, but also increase the variability of fighting styles, allowing players to employ new creative methods to engage enemies. For instance, the Ice Climbers are chosen as a single character, but are actually two distinct fighters with a single player being able to use them together to overpower enemies as a team. Another good example of the unique fighting styles of the new characters is Princess Zelda, Link's constantly-in-peril love interest. Princess Zelda can actually transform mid-match into her ninja alter-ego Sheik, possessing completely different attributes and moves. Such innovative character designs indicate how much painstaking effort was undertaken to create a sequel that did not

simply continue with the traditional designs presented in the original title, but instead prominently includes imaginative and ingenious new fighter schematics.

In addition to the new characters, there are new moves as well as new items for all the characters to employ in combat. In addition to the standard assortment of moves and attacks from the original game, the GameCube sequel adds an evade move that allows the fighter to momentarily side-step in the air or on the ground any attack that would otherwise strike him and cause damage. While all characters can employ this very useful evasive tactic, the characters from the original game have been augmented with additional new moves to put them on par with the new versatile characters added to the sequel. These new moves like Link's bow-and-arrow projectile and Samus Aran's heat-seeking missile give the original characters more depth and help achieve more balanced gameplay overall. Furthermore, in the sequel, all characters are now able to pick up items in mid-air while in the original they were only able to grab these valuable power-ups when on the ground, resulting in faster gameplay. On the topic of items, the number of these magical power-ups that players can retrieve has increased from sixteen in the original, to more than thirty in the sequel. The items serve an integral role in combat as they can give combatants extraordinary powers or can be used simply as weapons with which to destroy enemy players. In the original game, the items were mostly simple weapons like guns, bats, and hammers, but in the sequel, new items are introduced that can grant amazing powers. These new powers include the ability to cloak, to become a giant version of the character, to have the character incased in a metal shield, and to jump extraordinarily high. Mirroring the nostalgic feel of the characters in the game, the items

also have a link to Nintendo's past with size-increasing mushrooms and invincible stars from the Mario series among many others that add to the familiar feel of the game.

As the number of characters and items in the game have increased dramatically, so too have the number of battle arena stages. The stages are appropriately derived from the characters' respective backgrounds with arenas ranging from Link's Hyrule homeland to Fox's gigantic spaceship. In the original, there were only nine battle stages while in the sequel there are twenty-eight levels on which to fight. Not only has the number of stages increased, but also, more importantly, the amount of interactivity in stages has been improved dramatically. One new stage in particular pits fighters against each other on a futuristic racetrack as hover-cars zoom around, often striking down combatants mid-game. The stages in the sequel, while being increasingly interactive, are also much more dynamic than the original and react to the combatants' actions, adding to the sequel's enjoyable variable gameplay. For example, one of the new stages is set against a Metroid backdrop where molten lava ebbs and flows scalding unsuspecting players, but in addition to this hazard, the battleground itself is a biosynthetic material that can take damage from players' attacks, and can split and fall apart in numerous precarious ways. Made possible by the heightened processing power of the GameCube, a new type of stage is also introduced in the sequel that was not technologically feasible in the original Nintendo 64 title. These new stages are actually constantly moving, forcing players to repeatedly change position while fighting or else be killed. Perhaps the most frantic of these levels is one inspired by the Ice Climbers and the early NES Ice Climbers game that saw the duo frenziedly scaling an ice-riddled cliff. The Melee level finds combatants continually forced to move up a snow-covered mountain, complete with rocks and

slippery ice to impede their ascent. Upon rigorous examination of levels like these, it is clear that the production team responsible for Melee chose not just to include more levels than the original, but also decided to strengthen every aspect of level design possible and the wondrous stages included in the sequel attest to this remarkable production ethic.

Such amazing new stages could not be realized, however, without the power of the Nintendo GameCube that makes possible both richly detailed graphics and incredibly smooth animation. These two aspects, perhaps more than any others, were vastly improved from Super Smash Bros. to Super Smash Bros. Melee. In both games, the characters were computer-rendered in three dimensions, but the graphical disparity between the two titles is literally breathtaking. The character graphics in Melee are so meticulously detailed that one can see the stitches on Mario's signature plumber's overalls, making the graphics in the original seem outdated and blocky. With increased character richness and detail, there is usually a trade-off to a slower frame rate to accommodate the more graphically intense rendered figures. However, the GameCube's processing power combined with the technical ingenuity of the production team at HAL Laboratories have circumvented this traditional paradigm, increasing the frame rate of the sequel well beyond that of the original, creating remarkably fluid graphics. Subtle graphical effects, like Princess Peach's long flowing blonde hair blowing in the wind as Fox's spaceship carries her over his home planet, highlight the effort undertaken to achieve a truly immersing graphical experience. Minor effects such as these give way to more immensely wondrous designs, most notably in the form of a gigantic reptilian monster that broods in the background of one of the Metroid-based levels, spanning the height of nearly fifty characters. When one first views this vividly textured creature rise

from an acidic cesspool to take his place behind the combat in the foreground of the level, one is awe-struck by the breathtaking sight which nearly alone dismisses any comparisons between the original and the sequel graphically. This unique combination of strikingly detailed effects and magnificently grand designs are truly a testament to the game and the new system's graphical prowess.

Adding to the enthralling experience, the sequel's high-definition sound is every bit as masterful as the graphics, with musical themes that build upon the many scores that have become inevitably associated with the Nintendo brand through such titles as Metroid and Zelda. In fact, while the original Super Smash Bros. had a total of nine musical scores to accompany the nine levels, the sequel has nearly forty themes with many levels having both original and alternate soundtracks. These themes range from original scores from games such as Super Mario Bros. 2 to remixed versions of those scores to altogether original music made specifically for Melee. The cartridge-based Nintendo 64 limited much of the sound quality that could be achieved in games like Super Smash Bros., but with the advent of the mini-DVDs used for the Nintendo GameCube, the acoustic richness of Melee is as robust and detailed as any professionally produced compact disc or DVD.

Sweeping technical improvements and stronger, more engaging gameplay are at the center of the evolutionary leap forward from Super Smash Bros. to Super Smash Bros. Melee, but what truly makes both titles so endearing and popular to the game-buying public is the history that goes along with the games. From familiar characters to nostalgic touches, Nintendo packaged its two-decade long history into the original Super Smash Bros. game. Subsequently, the game was applauded by critics and praised by

gamers for its rich sense of the past and its new twist on familiar sights, becoming a huge commercial success. A subtle irony can be seen in a sequel of a game that itself took much of its inspiration from so many games before it, but this irony perhaps is simply a sign that Nintendo realizes the value of its prized franchise characters and understands how lucrative they can be when used effectively in top-quality games. To that end, in its first nine days of release, Super Smash Bros. Melee sold over 250,000 copies in the United States, making it the fastest-selling game for either of the two new consoles released in 2001 (Nintendo Press Release). In addition, sales figures in Japan have already bestowed the game with a platinum plaque as it has sold over one million copies thus far (“Super Smash Bros. Record”). With these favorable early figures, Nintendo’s GameCube will assuredly be successful as long as the company continues to demand perfection from its latest games featuring its most beloved characters. If Nintendo’s work with Super Smash Bros. Melee is any indication, then the eagerly anticipated sequels for Mario, StarFox, Zelda, and Metroid will be well worth the wait and will undoubtedly propel the ultimate success of the console.

Gallery Section



(A) The evolution in graphics from Super Smash Bros. (left column) to Super Smash Bros. Melee (right) can be strikingly observed from these shots of Link and Samus. The processing power of the Nintendo GameCube coupled with HAL Laboratories graphical expertise makes for an incredible visual experience.

(All pictures shown in gallery are courtesy of Gamespot.com)

Gallery Section (Continued)

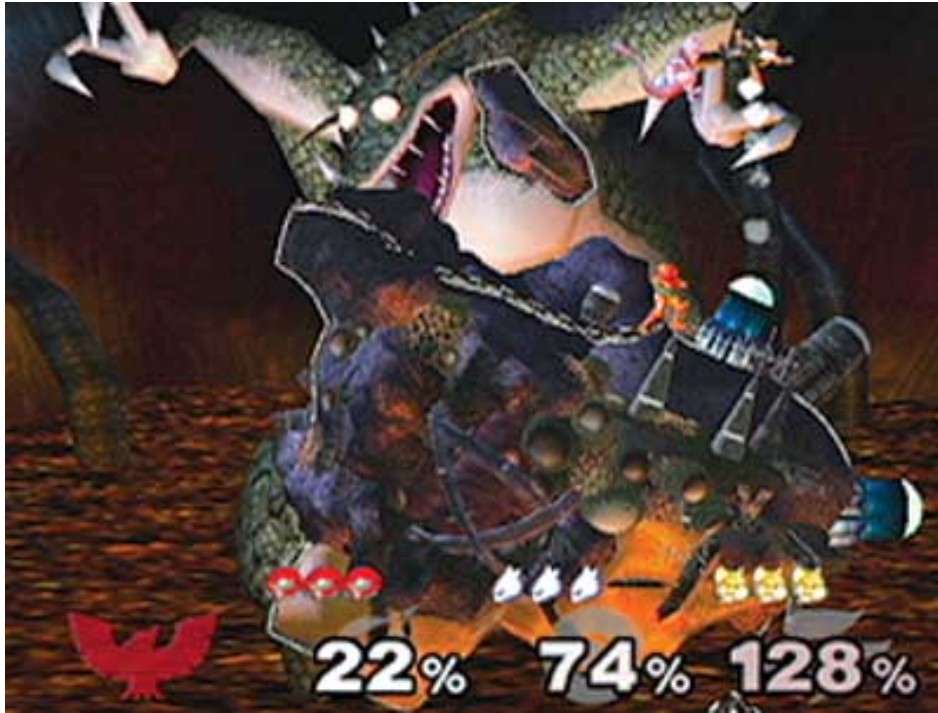


(B) Subtle graphical effects such as the Princess Peach's hair and dress flowing freely in the wind (left) and the detailed stitching on Mario's signature plumber's overalls (right) highlight the meticulous design of the sequel.



(C) The Ice Climbers' snow-mountain level (left) and the F-Zero racetrack level (right) give a sense of the evolutionary leap made in more interactive and dynamic stage development.

Gallery Section (Continued)



(D) The gigantic reptilian monster that guards this Metroid-based level is one of the most amazing graphical displays in Super Smash Bros. Melee with nothing even comparable to it in the original.



(E) From more characters to play as (left) to new moves like the evade sidestep maneuver (right), Super Smash Bros. Melee is a revolutionary sequel that delivers a superior gaming experience.

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