



Ludic Language Pedagogy Special Issue Article: The Ludic You Love

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Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

James York* (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1667-7107>)

Meiji University

Item Details

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Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** Super Smash Bros. Ultimate
- **Type/genre/theme:** Fighting game
- **Intended audience age** 🧑: 10+, CEFR A1 and up¹
- **Typical time to play** ⏳: A few minutes
- **Number of players** 👤: 1 to 8

Microblog synopsis

With many ways to play, Smash Bros. is an accessible yet deep fighting game with a vibrant online community which can be tapped into for language learning goals. GAME! Who's your main? #smash #affinityspaces #TBLT

View at the LLP Site: <https://www.llpjournal.org/2026/07/01/llp-special-edition-the-ludic-you-love.html>

¹ *Crucial observation:* The educational potential resides not within the ludic artifact itself, but rather in the pedagogical implementation facilitated by the instructor. That's why I set this as CEFR A1 and up.

* Corresponding author. Email address: york@meiji.ac.jp (Dr. James York)



Prologue

Before I outline the ludic object that I love: Smash Bros., I want to pose a question to you, reader. As you read each section below which explains the details of and ways to play Smash Bros., think to yourself, “How does this relate to language learning?” and, “How could this be used as a language learning experience?” These questions underlie my pedagogical approach to using games in education -- not only looking at the obvious, but looking for ways in which instructor support could bring out learning by leveraging the game, its community, and associated media.

What is Smash Bros.?

Smash Bros. is a long-running fighting game franchise developed by Nintendo, notable for bringing together characters from across the company’s intellectual properties as well as selected third-party franchises. The most recent instalment, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (abbreviated to SSBU, and often just called “Smash” unless a distinction between this game and the other popular title *Super Smash Bros. Melee* is called for), released for the Nintendo Switch in 2018, has a roster of over 80 characters². As mentioned, there are characters from across the Nintendo franchise (Zelda, Inkling, Mario, etc.) as well as non-Nintendo games like Sonic the Hedgehog (SEGA, 1991), Snake from *Metal Gear* (Konami, 1987) and other fighting games like Ryu and Ken from *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1987) and Terry from *Fatal Fury* (SNK, 1991) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The complete roster of SSBU.



Unlike traditional one-on-one fighting games that emphasize complex input sequences (such as having to input a quarter circle rotation plus a punch or kick button to unleash a special move), in Smash Bros. all special moves are available to players by pressing the B button on their control stick and a direction (Table 1).

² There are so many characters, that the game could be used as a source for a game literacy class.

Table 1

Typical fighting game inputs vs Smash Bros. simple inputs

Traditional Fighting Game Commands	Smash Bros. Simple Commands
↓↘→ + 🖊️ (Fireball)	B (Neutral Special)
→↓↘ + 🖊️ (Rising Dragon Punch)	↑ + B (Up Special)
↓↙← + 🦶 (Hurricane Kick)	← or → + B (Side Special)
Charge ←, then → + 🖊️ (Sonic Boom)	↓ + B (Down Special)

Smash Bros. also does away with typical health bars, meaning that a player is not automatically defeated when their health reaches zero. Instead, the Smash Bros. series employs a distinctive ruleset in which players accumulate “damage percentages.” As damage increases, characters are knocked back further by opponents’ attacks, with the primary objective being to launch rivals off the stage rather than deplete a life gauge. Figure 2 represents a typical 2D fighting game where once one of the players’ health bars drops to 0%, they lose.

Figure 2

Typical fighting game where characters have health bars that decrease

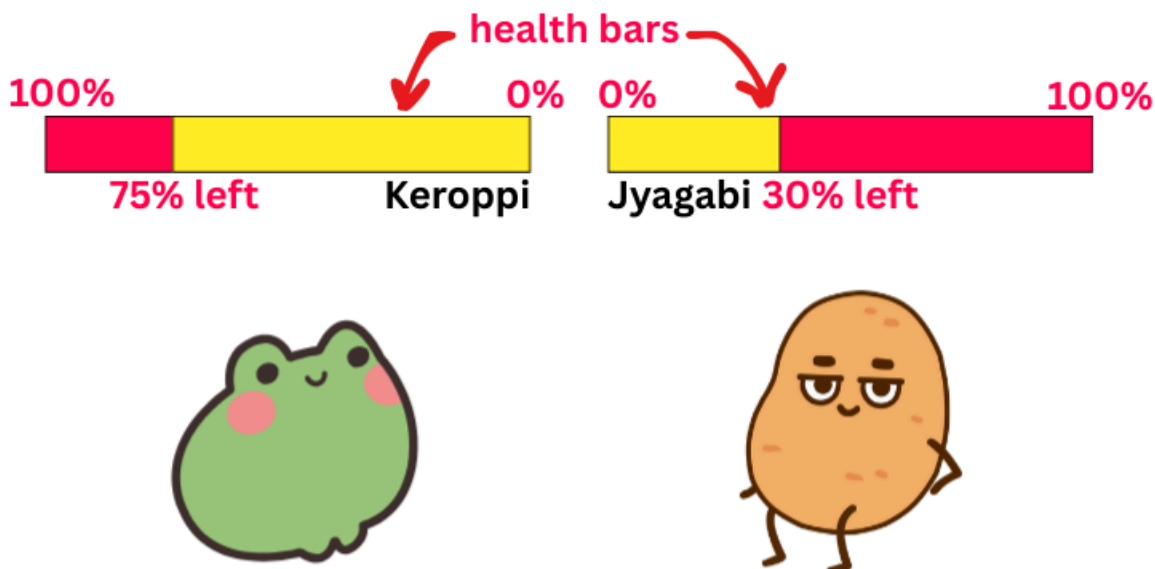


Figure 3, on the other hand, shows the health bars in the *Smash* series where the percentages represent how much damage you have accumulated. If the large dragon-like character towards the top of the screen (Kristel, playing Ridley) is hit by one of the other characters in that position, because of their high knockback percentage (159%), they stand a good chance of being hit off the screen, and losing one of their lives (called “stocks” in *Smash Bros.*).

Figure 3

An example 8-player match, with characters at varying degrees of damage percentage. Source:

<https://www.tomsguide.com/us/super-smash-bros-ultimate,review-5943.html>



These changes, from complex to simple, open up the fighting game genre to a wider, more casual audience, leading to a lower barrier to entry for new players, a more dynamic and unpredictable gameplay experience, and a greater emphasis on strategic positioning and character matchups over rote memorization of complex commands. SSBU has thus been praised for its accessibility to casual players while also sustaining a competitive scene, supported by tournament play worldwide. Its hybrid status as both a mainstream party game and a respected esports underscores its cultural significance and positions it as one of the most commercially successful and widely recognized fighting games. On Metacritic, for example, the game has a rating of 93 (out of 100), making it the highest rated fighting game on the site (Metacritic, 2025).

Why is it the ludic I love?

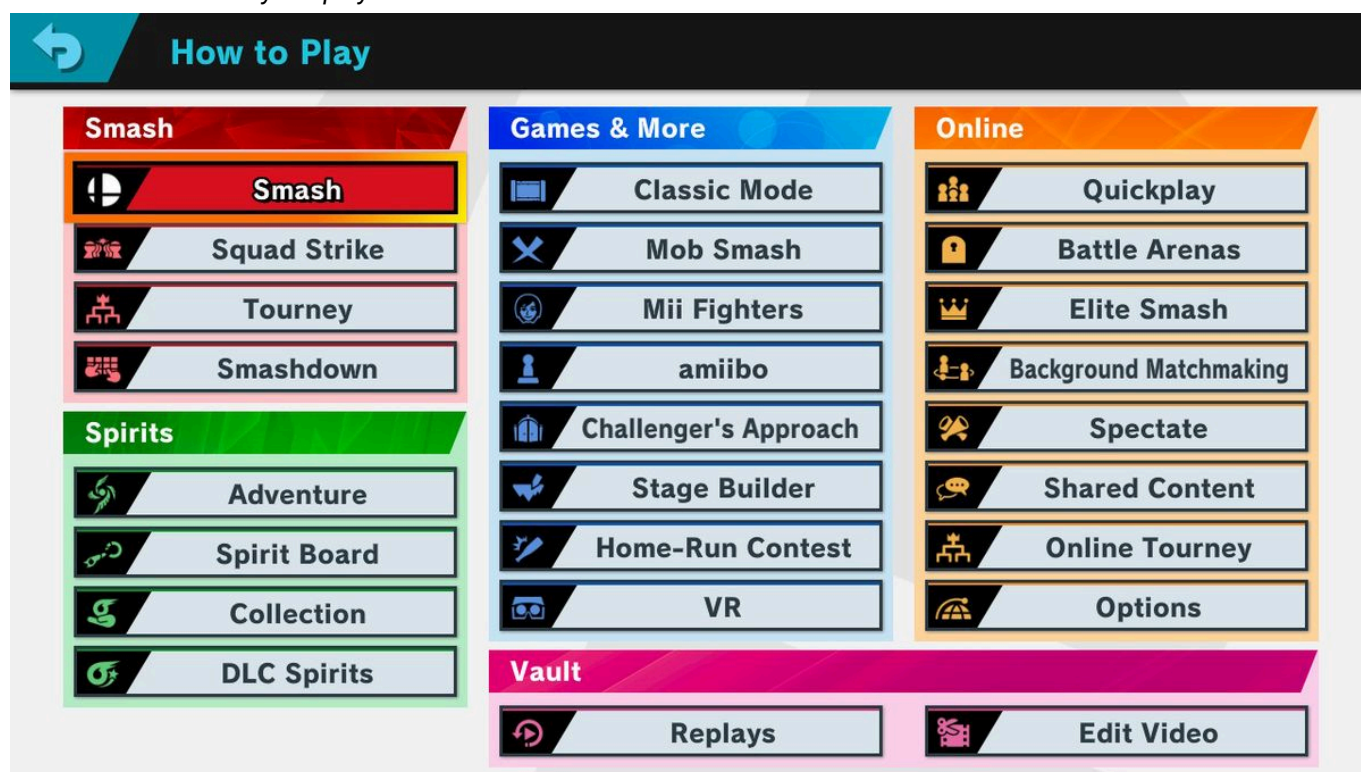
For this section, I'll focus on the game in the Smash Bros. series that I have played the most: *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, the latest in the series, which runs on the Switch and Switch 2 consoles.

Many ways to play

In the submenu of the Help page of SSBU, you can find all the different ways to play (Figure 4). I will not be focusing on all of them, but the figure alone shows that players are spoiled for choice when it comes to game modes.

Figure 4

All of the different “ways to play” SSBU.



As **single player** modes, you have the option of playing *classic mode*, where you fight through multiple characters before facing the last boss, or there is the RPG-like *Spirits* mode, where you unlock characters and spirits, which imbue your unlocked characters with various powers and items. In typical RPG fashion, you fight ever more difficult opponents in a variety of interesting ways (double gravity, items, multiple foes at once, etc.) and level up your characters and spirits as you go. There are also various **mini games** and oddities, such as the *home run contest*, where players try to hit a sandbag as far as they can with a baseball bat; Training mode (which is surprisingly absent in the above figure), where you can hone your combo skills, and even make your own stages to fight on with friends.

The mode that gets the most attention from fans and casual players alike is the **Smash mode** (or ‘versus mode’). This is available as a single-player mode, where you can fight any other character on the roster as a non-player character, but most frequently this mode is utilized as a place to battle friends. It’s worth noting here that, compared to other fighting games, SSBU allows players to set up the conditions for how you fight. How many minutes, how many stocks (lives) or just raw percentage, the option to use certain items and special moves (known as “Final Smash”), and whether stage hazards are on or off³. This is where the game shows off its party game core as random elements and big flashy moves can be added for chaotic action. As well as one-on-one fighting, multiplayer mode allows for up to eight players, and team mode allows two-on-two up to four-on-four (or 2-on-2-on-2-on-2!).

However, for people like me, who want to emulate tournament conditions, there really is only one way to set up the Smash mode: seven minutes on the clock, three stocks, no items, no Final Smash, no stage hazards. In other words, cut out all the elements of randomness and rely solely on player skill. Now we are ready to play!

³ Certain stages transform, posing hazards to the players such as rotating, spinning, including wind, etc.

What's so good about Smash mode in SSBU?

Remember how I mentioned that there are over 80 characters on the roster? For me, that's one of the biggest reasons I keep coming back to SSBU again and again (and again).

I've always been a fan of **roguelike** and **roguelite** games, games where you start with basic gear and gradually grow stronger as you go, picking up random items and facing random enemies or bosses. Of course, SSBU is not a roguelike by any means, but it gives me a similar pleasure: the sense of unpredictability. I never quite know what's going to happen in any given match. Who will my next opponent play? Who will I play? What will happen in the next round? How do these two characters match up? These questions, and the uncertainty they bring, remind me of the feeling I get when playing something like *The Binding of Isaac* or *Hades*. What items will I get this run? How will they synergize? Which bosses will appear? How far can I make it? Because of SSBU's massive roster, the possible matchups are, for all intents and purposes, endless. I never get bored. I can pick a "weak" character just for fun or grind with a "strong" one to push my skills further. Sometimes I play against my son (where one of us inevitably gets annoyed that the other keeps winning), or we team up online for some chaotic co-op battles.⁴ Either way, there's always something new waiting each time we play.

Also, matches are, generally, only seven minutes long, so the game can be played extremely casually. A few matches before dinner or bath time, a few matches on a Saturday morning, or after finishing chores, homework, or other work⁵. And, if I lose a match, the time I have invested in the game is so short that even if I'm annoyed at a loss, the amount of time I dedicated to that single game is so insignificant, that any lingering annoyance soon disappears as I either start again or just turn off the Switch and go about my day.

The esports' scene around the game

As with other fighting games, SSBU has a vibrant, active community of players, teams, commentators, and tournament organizers. And, this is one of the things that keeps me interested in the *Smash Bros.* series⁶. I spend as much time watching the game as I do playing it, as there are tournaments in parts of the world nearly every weekend.

The pinnacle of competitive Smash Bros. is often represented by **major** and **supermajor** tournaments. While there isn't a strict, universally agreed-upon definition, these events are generally characterized by:

1. large prize pools,
2. high number of entrants,
3. top-ranked player attendance (from around the world).

Supermajors, in particular, draw an even more elite field and are often considered the most prestigious events of the year, significantly impacting player rankings like the **Smash Power Rankings (Smash PGR)**. Players are ranked based on how well they perform in tournaments, where winning larger tournaments has a larger influence on players' ranks. Thus, success at these higher-tier tournaments is crucial for a player's professional standing and visibility within the esports scene. This visibility can secure sponsors and esports team rosters.

These tournaments attract the most attention from fans of the scene, with top players from around the world in attendance. I have favorite players and esports teams that I follow and cheer for, much like regular sporting events.



⁴ Which I really could write another paper on...!

⁵ Like between writing paragraphs of this paper!


⁶ I say Smash Bros. here and not SSBU because I also enjoy watching the Melee tournaments, too.

Clips and montages

My engagement with SSBU as a player and tournament spectator deepened my appreciation for the talent of players. And similar to traditional sports (and increasingly, esports) highlight reels of top plays from a season serve as a valuable recruitment tool, akin to those used in college sports like football, basketball, or lacrosse. Consequently, highly skilled players frequently produce montage videos to showcase their abilities. What might appear unremarkable to the casual observer often demands split-second decision-making, exceptional dexterity, thorough knowledge of matchups, and countless hours of practice to execute successfully. These “clips” can happen during matches, too, causing the audience and commentators to ~~lose their shit~~, become incredibly excited and vocal. It's these moments of flair, showmanship, and hype-generation that give me goosebumps, making me feel as though I'm part of the audience alongside the players. As examples of excellently edited montage videos of some absolutely wonderful plays (with killer BGM, too), consider the following.

-  [【SSBU】Nebula // FE Blucas Lucas Montage](#)
-  [This Wii Fit Trainer's Gameplay is a Work of Art...](#)

And for a collection of incredible players:

-  [Most Replayed Moments In Competitive Smash Ultimate #2](#)

What about the language of the game?

Like most gaming communities, SSBU, and Smash in general, is completely full of jargon that is largely incomprehensible to outside audiences (though, fighting game fans will be able to pick up on it quickly). Some examples include *fair* which is short for forwards air, *bair* for backwards air, *dair* for downwards air and *nair* for neutral air. *Edge guarding*, *ledge trapping* and *baiting* are common tactics, as well as performing an *empty short hop* into a *tomahawk grab*. And you must *D.I.* correctly when being hit backwards, or you might just be hit into the blast zone. These terms can be heard throughout commentary of the game, which I have provided a section of below:

Just falling full chested into the floor. Ledge trap situation. Kola stuck in the corner. Reverse hit of nair connecting onto the quick attack. And there we go. Oh, I thought we were going to see the jab to fair. Unfortunately not. Up throw. Up throw. And it was D.I.ed correctly, but it was still enough.

Source: <https://youtu.be/m9PcOAtt5-Y>

Like any game or ludic object that appears in this special issue, the language used *while playing* is only one domain of language use. The game, as object, can be talked about in a variety of ways. Live commentary of play by play is the most direct example of language use around the Smash Bros. series, but we can also talk about our favourite characters, discuss or review the outcomes of a recent tournament, trash talk other players on X/Bluesky, explain how to execute specific combos, and make tier lists of the game's characters, players, and legendary matches. All of these activities are mediated by language use. And, due to these various platforms and modes of communication here, you may find more or less specialized language use. Consider, for example the following ways in which fans can interact with the wider Smash community:

- Reddit threads about
 - recent tournament results ([example](#))
 - the terminology of the game (e.g. edgeguard vs ledgeguard) ([example](#))
- Podcasts (Tweek Talks, Lights Out with Light and EE) ([example](#))
- YouTube video tutorials on how to do combos with various characters ([example](#))

Another fascinating part of the smash community in terms of language is how diverse the backgrounds of the commentators are. Mexican, American, French, British, and so on. With multiple varieties of English available,

⁷ So called because of the Twitch feature to record a quick clip of livestreams to be shared with others.


students could be exposed to global Englishes, or be inspired that someone from their country is able to commentate in English, too.

How can it be used in language teaching?

Games can be used in a variety of different ways. As the centerpiece of a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach (see below), as the springboard towards participatory projects (deHaan, 2019; deHaan et al., 2025), as the inspiration for a portfolio assessment criteria (York, 2023) or as the domain for students to practice language forms in a PPP class (see Spano et al., 2021), among others. Whatever the approach, the teacher's role is essential in promoting learning (Molin, 2017): choosing methods and materials, and mediating student interactions with each other and course work. Below, I outline some of the ways in which I have used Smash Bros. in my teaching practices towards language learning goals.

In a TBLT oral communication class





I have had students use Smash Bros. as part of my English communication class, which utilizes my TBLT gaming framework, but not in the way that you might think. In order to outline this point, I should give a brief overview of the framework.

 **TEACHING TIP**
A worksheet for using the TBLT Gaming project in your classroom is available in the Appendix



















In 2015 I created a second and foreign language learning framework (Table 2) around board game play based on how board games have particularly good affordances for language learning. Before playing, board games require players to learn the rules, which, from a TBLT perspective, can be considered a priming activity. Board game play itself requires players to interact and speak with each other, and thus gameplay may be considered the task itself (Long, 2014). In the framework, I also ask students to record and transcribe their gameplay, which they analyse in a subsequent lesson, forming the post-task, accuracy-focused activity. There is more to the framework, but that is the basic concept. Read more about it in York, (2019, 2020, 2023). The framework I developed in 2015 leveraged the inherent affordances of board games for language acquisition. From a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) perspective, the framework unfolds in three stages⁸:

- **Priming:** Before gameplay, students learn the rules, an activity that serves as a crucial priming stage.
- **Task:** The gameplay itself acts as the primary task, requiring players to interact and communicate with each other.
- **Post-task:** Following gameplay, students record and transcribe their interactions, analyzing them in a subsequent lesson to focus on accuracy.

Table 2
Outline of my TBLT gaming framework

Stage	What students do	Main skills	Focus
 Pre-play: Learn (1 lesson)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read English rulebook ● Watch rules videos ● Write questions ● Test play key parts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Reading  Listening  Writing 	Connect receptive → productive skills, key vocabulary

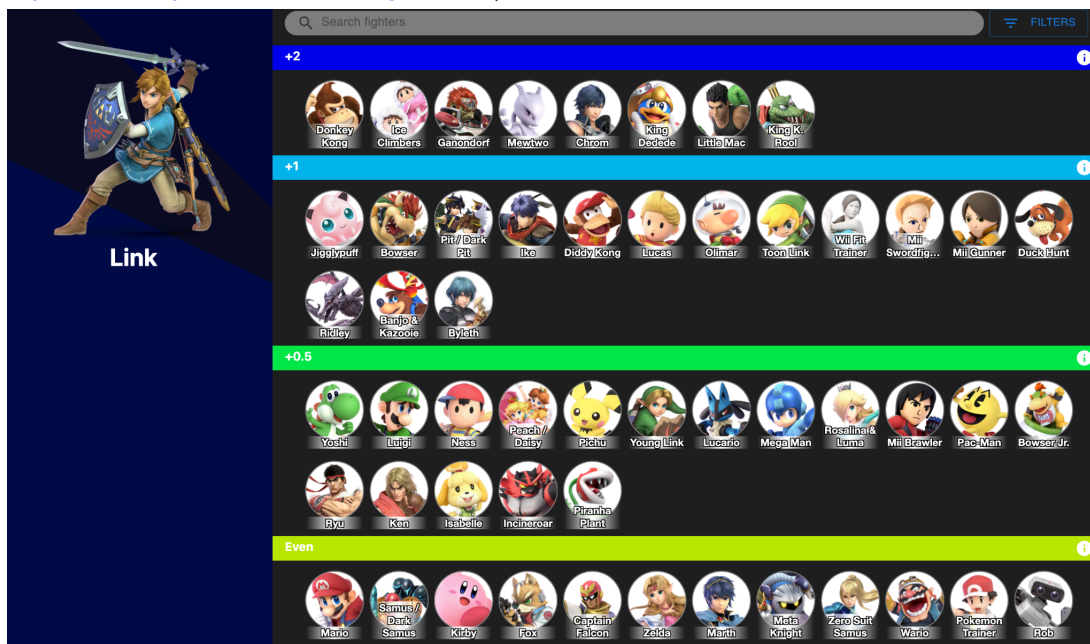
⁸ While this outlines the core concept, further details on the framework can be found in York (2019, 2020, 2023).

Stage	What students do	Main skills	Focus
 Play (1 lesson)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play in groups Record gameplay Transcribe short sections 	 Speaking  Writing	Fluency, noticing language, learning by doing
 Analyze (1 lesson)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check transcripts for errors Compare with online play Reflect on performance 	 Writing  Reading  Speaking	Focus on form, grammar awareness
 Replay (1 lesson)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play again Transcribe again 	 Speaking  Listening  Writing	Task repetition, fluency practice
 Reanalyze & Report (1 lesson)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare first vs. second transcripts Write about improvements 	 Writing  Speaking	Accuracy, noticing development
 Final Project (2–3 lessons)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a video or written report based on learning experience 	 Reading  Writing  Speaking	Transfer learning into new format

You might notice that the above outlines a language learning curriculum based originally on **board games**. I have since updated the framework to allow for any kind of game, including digital games such as Smash Bros. However, unlike other games where players are using English to progress the game state (like in *Werewolf* or the aforementioned *Among Us*), Smash Bros. is far too fast for students to be able to output their L2. Still, a group that chose to use Smash Bros. as part of the English communication class were adamant that they wanted to keep their choice. We thus had to improvise. The solution was that **instead of playing the game, the team decided that they would talk about the game** making this the “task” within the TBLT cycle. More specifically, they decided to create a matchup chart for their favourite characters, talking about each opponent’s strengths and weaknesses against their chosen character (Figure 5).

Figure 5

An example matchup chart for Link showing the +2, +1, +0.5 and even matchups (Source: <https://matchupedia.com/ssbu/fighter/link>).



An excerpt of the students' conversation as they talk about Cloud's matchup is provided below (Table 3). Notice the heavy use of Smash Bros. jargon.

Table 3

An excerpt of three students talking about Cloud's matchup potential versus other characters.

H	Ridley is also heavy fighter and Ridley is good at edge-guarding.
M	Fire?
H	Ah...nair and front-air.
M	Ah...okay, okay.
A	Ah, front-air. I see.
H	Ridley also has Ridley Fire? Ridley Breath? ✕Plasma Breath
M	What's Gatch?
H	Mr. Game & Watch...he is good at edge-guarding and...
M	Ah, flying pan.
H	Ah, yeah.
A	Neutral-B.
M	Okay, neutral-B.
H	Neutral-B is very tight... And, Mr. Game & Watch's out of shield is very nice.
M	Uh-huh.
H	Cloud's aerial attacks are very good, but Mr. Game & Watch's up-B hits.

For more details of this particular project, see York (2024). Additionally, a worksheet for conducting the TBLT Gaming model is provided in the appendix.

Connecting with other smashers on Reddit

In a similar vein to the paper I wrote about how we might teach languages with *Among Us* (York, 2020b), the language learning potential of any game is not limited to what can be done during gameplay itself. In that paper I wrote that games provide students with communities which may be tapped into towards academic goals. This is achievable if we take a connected, participatory approach to language learning. With such an approach, students may make connections through shared interests in affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), a practice that has become effortless in our network-connected society. Indeed, ultimately, language learning should extend beyond the classroom and be for community engagement, interpreting "community" as the various social practices learners engage in such as those online (Dubreil & Thorne, 2017).

TEACHING TIP

A worksheet for using the Reddit project in your classroom is available in the Appendix

In my 2023 study, I employed a **Connected Learning** (CL) approach within a Japanese university EFL classroom, utilizing Thorne and Reinhardt's (2008) **Bridging Activities** framework. The core concepts of these methods are for students to utilize their interests towards academic achievements. The bridging activities framework has three steps:

1. Observe and collect
2. Guided analysis
3. Creation and participation

For the **first stage**, students consider their interests and join L2 communities around that interest, observing how the community functions, and collecting items for further analysis. These items are analysed in the **second phase** where an instructor helps guide analysis of the collected items. This could be in terms of language, culture, or, more critically, by examining the item through various lenses. Finally, in the **third phase**, once the students have a grasp of the language, culture, and practices of the community, they participate as they wish as a member.

Related to the second point regarding guiding students to understand the language of found items: From a sociocultural perspective, and in terms of teacher **mediation**, this raises the question of how teachers can support interest-driven projects where learners are content experts, but language novices; and teachers the opposite. This challenges the traditional teacher role as the primary content expert (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). In such a classroom, where students explore familiar topics, teachers can prompt learners to leverage the distributed knowledge of their chosen online communities by asking them questions.

The curriculum I designed for this class had students present their findings at the end of the second and third phases so that they told other members of the class about their community's culture/language and then the results of their participation in terms of how the community reacted, and evidencing the things that they had learned through doing the project (Table 4).

Table 4

A simple overview of the bridging activities / connected learning curriculum I employed. For a more detailed overview, see York, (2023).

Lesson	Stage of the intervention
1-3	Introduction and preparation
4-5	Collection and observation
6-7	Guided exploration and analysis
8	Analysis presentation
9-12	Creation and participation
13	Participation presentation
14	Reflection and conclusion

In the connected learning project I conducted, a few groups focused on Smash Bros. as their community of choice. Slides from their week 13 presentation are provided in Figures 6 and 7. Of interest, is that as groups shared their learning with others, they found that they had concentrated on the same aspects such as slang (including cusswords), memes, and connections to Japanese media.

Figure 6

Example slide 1 from students' presentation about what they learned in the smashbros subreddit

Reply and analysis

trunks111 Bowser Jr. 2 points · 6 days ago

I second Rob. He's my "I'm not doing good and I need to step up" character. Top is strong, stays out, is good for setups, can kill off stage, takes space, and is hard to deal with in lag. Lazer is good for slowly racking up damage. Side special is great for punishing people who roll too much. His recovery is great as long as you keep track of how much you've used it. Down throw is usually a kill confirm at high percents. Fair and dtilt come out insanely quick. Uair is a great multihit that can kill. And Nair is... Nair

- He gave some specific reasons to explain why ROB is strong.
- But...
 - I don't understand that word "Top".

My reply

What does that word "Top" mean?

His answer

trunks111 Bowser Jr. 1 point · 15 minutes ago

It's his spinny projectile thing that he can charge up and throw. Can also be called a gyro

"Top"=gyro




Figure 7

Example slide 2 from students' presentation about what they learned in the smashbros subreddit

Reply and analysis

Please show some of the replies you received. What do they mean? Were they surprising?

- The meaning of shit

In this case, shit==thing/stuff
I had a bad image of "shit", but I learned that "shit" has another meaning.

cheapshot Ness 3 points · 7 days ago · edited 6 days ago

I think Ness is strongest because BestNess is winning lots of tournaments recently with Ness

Aytrone King K. Rool 2 points · 6 days ago

And Maister with GnW

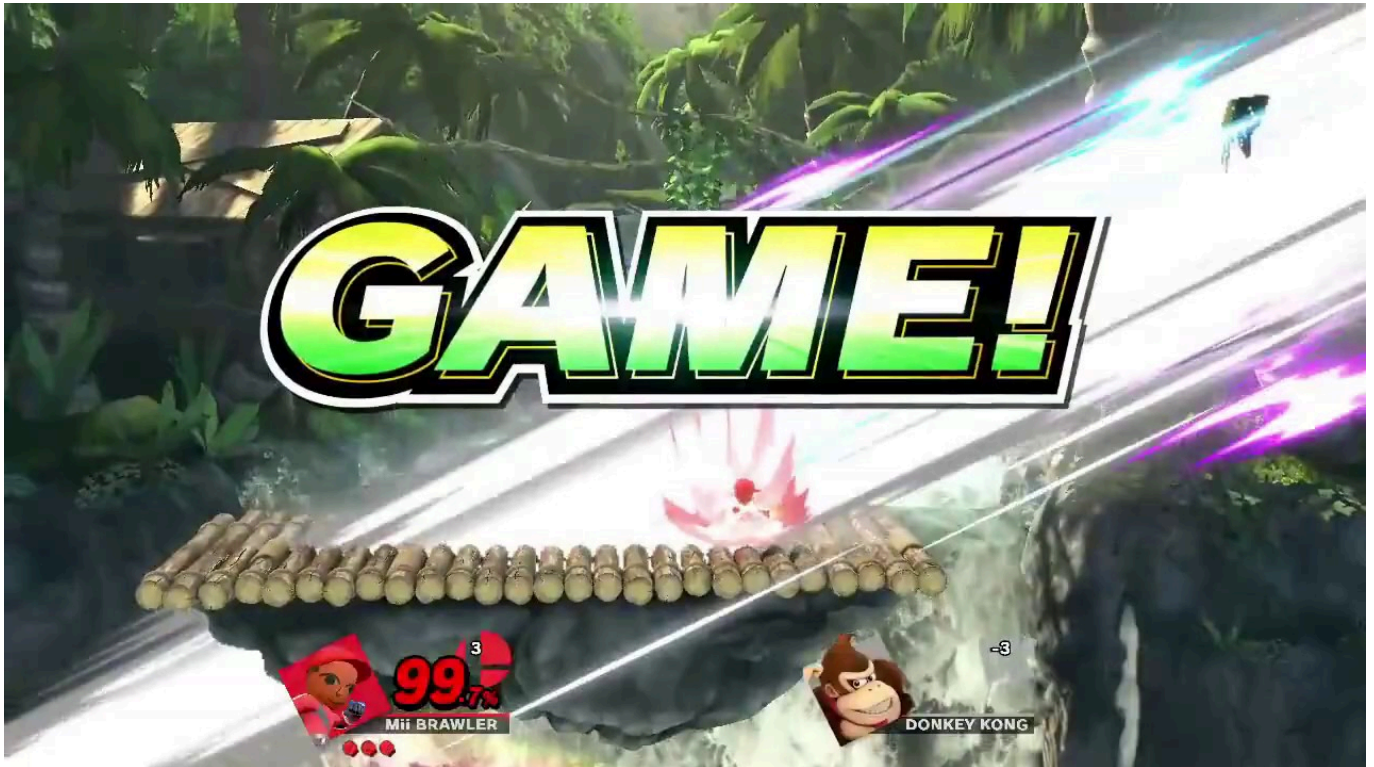
GameandMonkey Mr. Game & Watch 1 point · 6 days ago

I think maister is just really good. No other game and watch can do anything near the shit he does.

GAME!

Figure 8

The splash screen that appears at the end of a game in SSBU. Source: [YouTube](#)



In a true Smash Bros. fashion, I end this paper with the phrase that ends a bout – GAME! (Figure 8). I hope you learned something about this game, and hopefully you learned that the game is more than just a silly party game for kids. It has a vibrant community of players, fan sites and digital media that can be tapped into for language learning. However, unlike some of the other submissions to this volume, Smash Bros. is certainly *not* designed as a language learning game. Teachers and students must think outside the box and utilize non-gameplay elements of the game in order to find the language learning potential. Students must also be familiar with the game in order to understand HOW they can use it towards language learning goals (as in the two projects outlined above). Thus, although this is my favourite game, I cannot recommend it as a tool for language learning in general contexts. But hey, that is not the goal of this volume – it's to showcase the ludic we love, and I hope I did just that.

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Appendix

Group Worksheet for the TBLT Gaming framework

📄 TBLT Gaming 2024 [GAME NAME] Group Worksheet [BEST PLAYS]

Reddit participation worksheet

📄 [REDDIT] Project work TEMPLATE