

Competitive *Super Smash Brothers* Grows in Tampa Bay



The back room of Old School Video Games is a nerd man-cave. Pieces of video game and comic book memorabilia hang all along the walls like modern cave paintings. On August 28, the place was busier than a Richard Scarry picture book as over sixty people showed up to compete against each other in a twelve-year-old game: *Super Smash Bros. Melee*.

Please allow me to catch you up. The first *Super Smash Bros.* came out in 1999 for the N64 gaming console. The game assembled beloved Nintendo characters like Mario, Donkey Kong, and the adorable Pikachu and placed them in an arena to beat the faces off of one another. The first *Smash* was a hit as a party game, but the series hit its stride in 2003 with the release of *Super Smash Bros. Melee* for the Nintendo Gamecube. *Melee* further developed the controls and dramatically expanded the content, an improvement in every way over the original.

If you were a kid in the 2000s, you already know all of this. What you probably didn't know is that the game you played to crush your younger sibling possesses one of the most enduring competitive communities in all of video games.¹

Almost immediately after the release of *Melee*, tournament communities began to pop up all over the U.S. These tournaments encouraged frequent practice: everyone wanted to be the best. That's how players quickly discovered advanced techniques that exploited glitches in the game's code, such as wavedashing² and L-cancelling.³ Over time, they developed standardized rule sets for competition.

With the increasing ubiquity of the Internet at the time, communities connected online and began to exchange ideas for strategies and rules. Soon everyone was on the same wavelength, from the east coast to the west coast. As players grew older, travel became more feasible. Tournaments got bigger and better. Eventually, Major League Gaming added *Smash* to its roster of professional games, sparking an explosion of interest that continues to this day.

The game is now over a decade old. Two improved versions of *Super Smash Bros.* have been released on two subsequent console releases. Major League Gaming has moved on. Yet *Melee* still boasts a rabid fan base, in spite of its outdated graphics, in spite of its limited options for characters and stages.

From 4:00 PM to 2:00 AM, the smashers stared, captivated, at dozens of analog TVs. They fired up the gaming systems scrupulously, like adherents of an unknown religion, playing round after round to determine a winner for this week's Spicy Spot tournament. But they were playing for more than just the monetary prize.

Was it nostalgia? Perhaps. Many people play outdated games to relive an experience that defined their childhood. Many who grew up in the 1980s keep an old Nintendo Entertainment System around so they can play the original *Super Mario*. This was something different. While most of the smashers present at this Spicy Spot played *Melee* when they were younger, they would all tell you that they never *really* played the game until discovering the competitive scene.

That's when the game becomes an obsession. They become infected with a burning desire to get better and better and win, win, win. It drives them to play more than ever before.

Jeromy Hyatt, a local player who was instrumental in organizing the Tampa Bay *Smash* scene, illustrates this attitude perfectly.

"For me, the fun comes from beating someone else. But it's not about putting them down. It's a personal achievement," Hyatt said. "If I beat you, it's because I overcame every obstacle you threw my way. And if you beat me, it just means that you gave me an obstacle I couldn't overcome. If I try harder, it won't work next time."

Hyatt said he practices *Smash* 25 hours a week, usually with a training partner, who he talks with afterward to analyze his performance.

The matches I watched were intense. The players focused intently on the screen, the entire world fading away around them. Crowd noise, a sure factor in matches between the best players, was tuned out. Sweat poured from foreheads.

Reality suddenly reappeared when the last stock (the term used for character lives) was taken, bringing to one player the rush of victory and to the other the sting of defeat. Throughout all this, the atmosphere of camaraderie never left the room.

The Tampa *Smash* community had a humble beginning. It started around 2010 with *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* for the Nintendo Wii. Lade Akiwume, a top Florida player for *Brawl*, hosted friendlies—games for fun—at his house. Only a few players showed up at first, and just as the group started to grow, it went on a hiatus.

Enter Hyatt, who reignited local interest in *Smash* with his Sweet Spot tournament in 2012. Under his leadership, the community swelled to over sixty dedicated players, with a renewed focus on *Melee*.

Today, Chris Bui runs the Spicy Spot tournament in Temple Terrace, the largest in the area. Meanwhile, hard-working smasher Zach Hargis is trying to expand the tournament culture to Brandon. Akiwume and Hyatt remain leaders in the Tampa Smash community.

Florida has been a hotbed for many years, with nationally known players calling Orlando and Miami home. Those communities are the ones to beat, and Tampa believes they are up to the challenge.

“Our community is at a tipping point,” Bui said, “and a lot of our players are reaching personal tipping points. I think that soon we’ll be able to go to Orlando and Miami and put our best players up against theirs and do well.”

Given that every player I spoke to plays hard and practices frequently, I believe they have a real shot.

Don’t think for a second that *Melee* is going anywhere. Even with new versions of the *Smash* formula available, the *Melee* community is here to stay.

“*Melee* is an eSport,” Bui said. “More than that, it’s a spectator sport. The game is beautiful. You watch it and you can appreciate the time and practice it takes to develop real skill.”

Perhaps that’s the factor that gives the game its staying power. At the national level, competitive *Melee* continues to develop, growing and evolving every year.

The game has never been more popular, and there has never been a better time to join in. If you fancy yourself a smasher, follow the recommendation of Matt Greenberg, a freshman at USF and an active local player:

“Just show up to a tournament⁴,” Greenberg said. “Even if you do badly, you’ll still have tons of fun!”

Since he made this comment as he beat me for the fifteenth time in a row, I can say from experience: he couldn’t be more right.

This article was originally published by the now-defunct web magazine *Tampa Bay Scene* in September 2015.

Sources:

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