

CISC 3667: Game Design and Development

In-Class Activity 3: Case Study - Players, Rules, and Wobbling in *Super Smash Bros. Melee*

Assigned: Tuesday, September 15

Submission: Brightspace by 11:59 PM (Individual Submission)

Purpose

In this case study, you will examine how players interact with, interpret, and sometimes challenge a game's rules. You will also consider how player communities can influence the rules under which a game is played. Work with a partner. **Read the case study carefully, then answer the questions that follow.**

Case Study: Wobbling in *Super Smash Bros. Melee*



Super Smash Bros. Melee was released for the Nintendo GameCube in 2001. Although it was designed as a fighting game for a broad audience, *Melee* developed a large and highly competitive community. Over time, players discovered techniques, combinations, and strategies that were not necessarily obvious when the game was first released.

One of these techniques became known as **wobbling**.

Wobbling involves the Ice Climbers, a pair of characters who can grab an opponent and, under certain conditions, repeatedly strike them without allowing them to escape. When performed correctly, the sequence can continue until the opponent is knocked out.

The technique does not require modified software, an external program, or a change to the game itself. Players use the Ice Climbers' existing moves and mechanics. However, performing the technique consistently requires knowledge of the game and practice.

As players became more familiar with wobbling, it became a controversial part of competitive *Melee*.

Some players argued that there was nothing inherently wrong with the technique. From their perspective, players had discovered a powerful strategy by learning the game's systems. The opponent still had an opportunity to avoid the initial grab, and other characters also had powerful combinations capable of causing a knockout. From this perspective, preventing Ice Climbers players from using wobbling would limit what the character could do.

Other players saw the situation differently. They argued that once an opponent was caught by wobbling, there was effectively no way to escape. A single mistake could therefore result in the loss of an entire stock. They also argued that the possibility of being caught by wobbling could force opponents to change how they played, making them focus heavily on avoiding grabs rather than using a wider range of strategies.

The disagreement raised a larger question: **What makes a strategy acceptable in a game?**

If a player discovers an interaction that the game allows, does that automatically make it acceptable?

Does it matter whether the game's designers intended players to use the interaction in that way?

Should a strategy be judged by how difficult it is to perform, how powerful it is, how it affects an opponent's choices, or how enjoyable it is for the people playing and watching?

There was no single answer across the *Melee* community.

Before 2013, competitive *Melee* tournaments were relatively decentralized, and different tournament communities had different approaches to wobbling. Some tournaments allowed it, while others banned it.

One tournament organizer, **Juggleguy**, became known for opposing wobbling and banned it at events he organized in Michigan, including *The Big House*. Eventually, however, he decided to allow wobbling at his events. His reasoning was that players in Michigan needed experience playing against the technique if they wanted to compete successfully in other regions.

This created an interesting situation. A player could legally use wobbling at one tournament but be prohibited from using the same technique at another tournament.

The situation changed as competitive *Melee* grew in popularity.

At **EVO 2013**, wobbling was legal. Ice Climbers player **Wobbles** used the technique during the tournament and ultimately finished second. His run included victories over several highly ranked players, bringing additional attention to both the character and the technique.

Following EVO 2013 and the increased popularity of competitive *Melee*, tournament rulesets became more standardized. From 2013 through the beginning of 2019, wobbling was legal at nearly all *Melee* tournaments.

The debate did not disappear.

Around 2018, more players began arguing that wobbling was harmful to competitive *Melee*. At the same time, several high-level Ice Climbers players were using the technique successfully at major tournaments.

Supporters of a ban argued that wobbling could make matches frustrating and reduce the number of meaningful decisions available to an opponent once a grab connected. They also worried that the technique could discourage players from competing or spectators from watching.

Opponents of a ban disagreed. They argued that wobbling was simply one of the tools available to Ice Climbers. They pointed out that the initial grab could be avoided and that other characters also had powerful combinations capable of causing a knockout. They also argued that wobbling helped compensate for weaknesses in the Ice Climbers' overall game and gave the character a better chance of competing at the highest level.

By early 2019, the discussion had begun producing changes to tournament rules.

Local and regional tournament communities began introducing restrictions on wobbling. In February 2019, the Tennessee *Melee* community announced a rule limiting Ice Climbers to eight separate attacks after a grab before requiring a regrab. Violations could result in penalties ranging from a warning to a loss of a game or set.

Other regions soon introduced their own restrictions. Some created limits on the number of attacks or pummels that could occur after a grab. Others prohibited wobbling entirely.

Get On My Level 2019 became the first major tournament to officially announce a wobbling ban. Other major tournaments followed, including *Low Tier City 7*, *The Big House 9*, *Pound*, and events associated with the *Smash World Tour*.

The rules were not always identical. Different communities experimented with different approaches to the technique.

Eventually, however, banning wobbling became the dominant approach at major *Melee* tournaments. Today, wobbling is banned at most tournaments, although individual events can establish their own rules. Ice Climbers players instead rely on other techniques, including hand-off combos, which can still produce significant damage but are more difficult to perform consistently and have additional limitations.

The history of wobbling also demonstrates that tournament rules can address behavior beyond simply determining whether a particular technique is allowed.

For example, intentionally stalling or delaying a match is prohibited in competitive play. Wobbling performed beyond a percentage at which a knockout is guaranteed has been treated as a form of stalling because continuing the sequence no longer serves a competitive purpose.

In other words, players participating in competitive *Melee* encounter several overlapping systems:

- What the game's software makes possible
- What players understand to be an acceptable strategy
- What other players consider fair
- What a particular tournament organizer permits
- What the tournament's written rules prohibit

The original game has not changed to accommodate these debates. Instead, the people playing the game have developed additional rules around it.

The history of wobbling therefore raises an important question about the relationship between players and rules:

When players discover ways of playing that the game allows but that some members of the community believe damage the experience, who gets to decide whether those strategies should remain part of the game?

Sources

The case study is adapted from the following sources:

- “EVO 2013.” *SmashWiki*, 2013, https://www.ssbwiki.com/EVO_2013.
- “Ice Climbers (SSBM).” *SmashWiki*,
[https://www.ssbwiki.com/Ice_Climbers_\(SSBM\)](https://www.ssbwiki.com/Ice_Climbers_(SSBM)).
- Walker, Ian. “Another *Super Smash Bros. Melee* Major Bans Infamous Ice Climbers Technique.” *Kotaku*, 4 Feb. 2020,
<https://kotaku.com/another-super-smash-bros-melee-major-bans-infamous-ice-1841457017>.
- Walker, Ian. “*Super Smash Bros. Melee* Events In Four States Ban Wobbling After Tennessee Ruling.” *Kotaku*, 13 Feb. 2019,
<https://kotaku.com/super-smash-bros-melee-events-in-four-states-ban-wobbl-1832595981>.
- Walker, Ian. “*Super Smash Bros. Melee* Technique Gets Fake-Banned And Then Actually Banned.” *Kotaku*, 8 Feb. 2019,
<https://kotaku.com/super-smash-bros-melee-technique-gets-fake-banned-and-1832473327>.
- “Tournament Legal (SSBM).” *SmashWiki*,
[https://www.ssbwiki.com/Tournament_legal_\(SSBM\)](https://www.ssbwiki.com/Tournament_legal_(SSBM)).
- “Tournament Rulesets.” *SmashWiki*,
https://www.ssbwiki.com/Tournament_rulesets.
- “Wobbling.” *SmashWiki*, <https://www.ssbwiki.com/Wobbling>.

Questions for Discussion

1. The Rules of the Game

What rules are actually being followed in this case?

Consider the difference between:

- What the *Melee* software allows
- What a tournament's rules allow
- What players consider acceptable

Can an action be legal under the game but illegal under a tournament?

Explain using wobbling as an example.

2. The Player Who Masters Wobbling

Imagine a player who spends hundreds of hours studying Ice Climbers, practicing wobbling, and using it whenever possible in tournaments where it is legal.

How would you describe this player's relationship to the rules?

Use concepts from today's lesson to explain your answer.

3. Strategy or Exploit?

Is wobbling:

- A legitimate strategy?
- An exploit?
- A degenerate strategy?
- Cheating?
- Something else?

Choose the classification you think fits best.

Then explain **what evidence from the case supports your position.**

4. When Does a Strategy Become Unfair?

Some players argued that wobbling was fair because opponents could avoid the initial grab. Others argued that the lack of options after the grab made the technique unfair.

What makes a strategy fair or unfair?

Consider:

- The player's opportunity to respond
- Skill
- Risk and reward
- Meaningful choices
- Competitive balance
- Community expectations

5. Why Did the Rules Change?

Before 2013, some tournaments banned wobbling while others allowed it. Later, most tournaments allowed it. Beginning in 2019, more and more tournaments began banning it.

Why do you think the rules changed over time?

Identify at least **two factors** that may have influenced the *Melee* community's changing position.

6. You Are the Tournament Organizer

Imagine that you are organizing a major *Melee* tournament in **2013**.

Would you:

- Allow wobbling?
- Ban it?
- Place limits on how it can be used?

Explain your decision. Now imagine that you are organizing the same tournament in **2019**.

Would your decision change? Why or why not?

7. Who Controls the Rules?

The designers created *Melee*, but players discovered new strategies. Tournament organizers then created rules about which strategies could be used in competition.

Based on this case, who has the greatest influence over how *Melee* is actually played?

- The game's designers
- Individual players
- Competitive players
- Tournament organizers
- The larger player community

There may be more than one correct answer. **Defend your position.**

8. Final Reflection

In a short paragraph, respond to the following:

Players do not simply follow the rules given to them by game designers. How does the history of wobbling demonstrate the ways players can interpret, use, challenge, and reshape the rules of a game?

Use specific evidence from the case study.

Submission

Each student must submit their own copy of the completed activity to Brightspace by 11:59 PM on Tuesday, September 15.

Your submission should include:

- **Your name**
- **Your partner's name**
- Your completed responses to **Questions 1–8**
- Your **Final Reflection**
- Specific evidence from the case study to support your answers

Important: This is a **partner activity**, but the submission is **individual**. Partners may submit the same or substantially similar responses where they worked together, but **each student is responsible for making their own submission.**

Deadline: Tuesday, September 15, by **11:59 PM**