

Fighting Games: More than Just a Competition

It's a fact that video games are receiving increasingly greater attention in modern media, becoming acknowledged as legitimate competitions and on occasion, works of art – and yet, the very thought of video games tends to carry a negative connotation, brought about by a reputation for inspiring violence and leading to an unhealthy obsession. There's no doubt that games, in extreme cases, can very well provide a negative and sometimes deadly influence for young people; an example of this includes the Jacksonville Landing shooting, where David Katz gunned down two people and committed suicide after losing a match of Madden NFL 19. To a lesser extent, harassment often occurs in "esports," whether among spectators or between fellow players. At first glance, competitive gaming can seem like a toxic environment that may not offer a very meaningful learning experience. However, I believe that with the proper mentality and direction, video games – specifically fighting games – can help foster immense personal growth that can be applied outside of video games.

Personally, fighting games, such as Street Fighter and infamously Mortal Kombat, have never been a major part of most of my life. Like many, I was dumbfounded at how there was such a major community shaped around fighting games – a community that goes as far back as the early 90s – despite how incomprehensibly advanced they appeared; sluggish movement, complex control inputs, and combos combining all these crazy inputs into a long-winded sequence. It's no secret that fighting games tend to be difficult, and it's that difficulty that often drives people away from them – myself included. However, it is only once they dive into the genre that they begin to realize how fun and competitive they can be in actuality. For myself, I decided to bite the bullet with a more beginner-friendly entry: Nintendo's Super Smash Bros.

Super Smash Bros. – or Smash in short – is a party fighting game where characters from various Nintendo games and beyond cross over, with the overall objective of knocking opponents off of the screen. Ever since the series' debut in 1999, it garnered a competitive community focusing on the one-versus-one aspect of the game. Unlike most fighting games, series creator Masahiro Sakurai designed Smash as a game that was easy to pick up, though difficult to master, consisting of only two primary attack buttons and use of the four cardinal directions; no complex input motions are required. Characters also have much more freedom of movement as opposed to traditional fighting games, having the ability to run and jump around a large stage. This ease of access was what encouraged many people to play the series, even those who had never played fighting games before or were intimidated by them.

When I first began playing the series seriously – starting with its 2014 iteration, Super Smash Bros. for Nintendo 3DS and Wii U – I was utterly hooked by how much more welcoming it was than most other fighting games. I became invested with the online gameplay that this iteration offered, and began watching tournament matches from the competitive scene, but in turn, I realized just how small of a fish I was inside this worldwide pond. I lost frequently against my online opponents, and it was often embarrassingly one-sided. I couldn't identify the mistakes I made during my matches, and I blamed my failures purely on the way that my opponents played; my mindset was effectively stagnant, lacking any sort of adaptation. I wondered for a while about my lack of improvement, at least until I began looking

at forum posts and videos about how other competitive players made their mark. The answer was simple yet universal; a growth mindset – looking back at your mistakes, accepting them for what they are, and asking yourself how you could learn from them.

In time, as my mentality shifted towards progression rather than stagnation, I saw gradual improvement in my gameplay as I focused more on taking losses as learning experiences rather than complaining about them. I put lots of emphasis on analyzing my matches, sitting down and asking myself, “Okay, what did I do wrong, and what did my opponent do right? What exactly did I struggle with? Now that I know my weaknesses, how should I improve on these weaknesses, and what kinds of things can I do to counter my opponent’s playstyle?” With continued practice, this began to influence my own life as well, as I started to apply the same concepts to both my lifestyle and academics. I asked myself similar questions when it came to my grades, and at times I was willing to make sacrifices in my schedule to encourage healthy habits – more spread-out time spent on homework and studying, plus a balance of free time. I’m certainly not perfect when it comes to maintaining these habits, and of course, this isn’t to say that Smash alone inspired me to adopt a growth mindset. That said, it’s still a place where I can practice self-growth and force myself to learn from my mistakes, rather than committing to inaction. It seems like a stretch, but the application of a growth mindset to a fighting game, no less, was undeniably a catalyst for its application to my personal life and beyond, and the same goes for other players. Admittedly, however, the same can easily be said for things like sports, other competitions outside of video games, and education. What makes fighting games so unique in this facet?

Generally, what attracts people to video games is the fun and potential for competition. With a wide diversity of fighting games, each one may offer very different gameplay from another. While not everyone is interested in the same games, it is this diversity that allows players to resonate with a game and devote time and effort into it. Fun is ultimately what drives their desire to improve, and in turn, it allows them to maintain a growth mindset while learning the game. In the same vein, fun and passion for a game are what drove top players to play competitively in the first place, such as the legendary Daigo Umehara. Umehara is a Japanese fighting game player known for being one of the most famous Street Fighter players of all time. Having played fighting games since the age of 10, Umehara won over 15 tournaments, making his mark through an astonishing and seemingly impossible comeback at the Evolution Championship Series of 2004 – commonly known as Evo, it is one of the biggest, if not the biggest fighting game tournament in the world. In 2012, he published a book titled *The Will to Keep Winning*, in which he describes his early experiences in Japan and its fighting game scene, as well as the lessons, hardships, and mentalities he’s had to develop in the process of improving. As he explains his tournament experience, he mentions that he often did not do well at tournaments he entered for the sake of winning: “In competitive gaming, participating in a tournament is a good objective, but a tournament victory is a poor goal. ...focusing on prizes lowers your drive for the game. Lesson learned: don’t misjudge your goals.” Having realized the misconceptions that he initially held, Umehara then describes his shift in mentality, “making continued growth to my goal rather than winning games.”

“Tournaments are a playground for people who practice growth. It’s where they show off their achievements. ... Continued growth is the goal. Since I started considering tournaments as simply

objectives and made personal growth my goal, I stopped caring about tournament outcomes so much. Win or lose, I maintain a steady drive to keep going.”

A growth mindset can often be difficult to both attain and maintain, and in the context of competitive video games, such a mentality is necessary for players to be able to learn in the first place. However, a growth mindset doesn't just apply to fighting games or competitions alone; though Umehara may be focused on constantly improving, he is quick to point out the necessities of recognizing flaws in his lifestyle, and learning from those flaws to build up a strong schedule and work ethic; keeping his schedules loose and building up a mental rhythm, paying attention to his physical health and regularly exercising, and even taking the time to talk with and take advice from those who might not even play video games at all; everything is key to allowing him to achieve growth as both a competitive player and, as a whole, a person. It is that growth that can be observed not only in top fighting game players but also athletes and successful individuals. However, the only way to achieve it in the first place is to adopt a growth mindset, and not everyone may be willing to do so – they may not even be willing to accept most of their mistakes. Many people tend to express their anger from losing in video games, and we've seen examples where such anger is taken to a violent extent. Events such as the Jacksonville Landing shooting are tragic examples where games have triggered destructive levels of anger in people, and unfortunately, anger will inevitably build up when playing competitive games of any nature. While that may be the case, there are still large communities – full of thousands, and even millions of people – formed around these games where events such as these rarely occur, if at all. Ultimately, the fact is that these events only occur in extreme cases, often when the perpetrator's mental health is unstable. Even then, sure, many people in these communities may not have a growth mindset, yet not have the will to commit violence, but there are bound to be many more who have invested a greater amount of effort and realized the inherent value of such a mindset.

At first glance, video games may only appear to be outlets for fun, and nothing more than that. However, once one begins to delve into the spirit of competition, they'll learn that with the correct mentality, there is so much more to them than just fun or winning; it's the self-growth that a person can attain that acts as the catalyst for change beyond video games; change that extends to their personal lives and even themselves as a whole.