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The case for an Alteration of the Academic Divide of the Religious and Secular:
an Exploration of the Super Smash Bros Melee Community

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all those who have struggled with mental health.

Nothing is impossible, even if difficult.

Thank you to my family for your love and support.

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Introduction

Over a history as long as that of humankind, the concept of religion has taken on many forms. Yet, the study of the field finds itself overly grounded in Christianity, and broader western preconceptions of the term. While there are commonly agreed substructures present within religion, the field has yet to arrive at a common definition for either the concept of religion itself or many of the concepts held core to its existence. In parallel to this, Scholars such as Talal Asad have found themselves occupied with the conception of an anthropology of the secular,¹ a concept that Asad denotes as equally as nebulous as that of religion itself. Asad's reasoning for such a field of study is that "The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)." ² Asad's suggestion that there is neither a historical development from the religious to the secular, nor a simple either/or, serves as the foundation for his position that a new field of study is necessary. Yet, if the Secular serves as neither antonymic to religion nor as a development from it, but is dependent on an understanding of religion and of specific context for definition, why is such a separate field of study necessary? Would it not be more apt, instead, to consider the study of the secular an extension of the study of religion? Would this not better allow both agreed upon conception and definition of these terms as secular or religious? This statement, and questions such as those posed here, serve as the inspiration for the ensuing thesis, which attempts to examine a

¹ Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.

² Ibid.

contemporary subculture through the lens of concepts traditionally associated with religion. In doing so, I hope to further raise questions as to the nature of the delineation of these fields of study.

The object of examination in this thesis is that of the community surrounding a video game for the Nintendo GameCube, Super Smash Brothers Melee. Over the course of 22 years since Melee's release in 2001, the game has fostered a worldwide audience driven by its competitive scene, and an unusually loyal fan base that refuses to move on to newer entries in the game's franchise, with Brawl (2008), Smash for Wii U (2014) and Smash Ultimate (2018) all providing ample opportunity for the Melee community to do so. I focused the examination present within this thesis on the Melee community due to this independently driven nature and stubbornness to retain cultural identity. These qualities serve to disconnect Melee from either traditional religion or contemporary geopolitics, while maintaining a singular identity. Another reason I selected Melee is the centrality of playing the game to the community itself, which provides a central ritual around which the community resolves. These traits serve to present a communal basis for engagement and shield the community from factors that may otherwise influence the structure of it. Through analyzing the Melee community, this thesis will argue the presence of different substructures commonly understood as present within religion. While an ideal world would allow for a comprehensive analysis, this is limited by the scope of this thesis. As a result, the ensuing text will focus on 3 major qualities, each the subject of analysis for a chapter within the text. The first of these chapters focuses on sacred space, pilgrimage, and the presence of sacred objects. This is followed by an examination of rites of passage and is concluded by an examination of mythic figures within the Melee community. To accomplish this, I examine different cases within Melee that potentially fit the criteria for their respective

chapters. I break down the applicability of various theories within the study of religion to each case, providing points of contrast (where applicable) between commonly understood examples of the chapter's concept of focus and examples from traditionally understood religions. While the concepts examined in each chapter hold varying degrees of essentiality to the definitions of either the religious or secular, they each serve to illustrate different aspects of cultural engagement among the broader community. These concepts are also each commonly accepted as part of religious-cultural structure. This process serves to draw connections between Melee and religion in an attempt to question the efficacy of our understanding of the field.

Of the various terms and concepts necessary to understand this thesis, perhaps the most important is that of *ritual*. Though the thesis does not engage with *ritual* directly as an overlying concept, it touches upon multiple subsets of the term. In addition, the central throughput of the Melee community, the act of playing the game, can be considered as ritual practice. What then, is ritual? Much like the concept of religion itself, the field of religious studies has not determined an agreed upon definition. For the purpose of this thesis, I have elected to go with an understanding based on that of Catherine Bell's text *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. To Bell, ritual is understood as a form of social activity.³ In referencing it as a social activity, Bell understands ritual as a practice, engaged with by a community, that provides to said community some meaning of impact. Bell's definition was chosen as the base of this thesis due to her own consideration of a multitude of definitions from different scholars, with the sole goal of her work being a deeper understanding of the concept of ritual. Within the context of Bell's definition, one can understand the desire to utilize Melee as the cultural object of this thesis, as the community itself manifests around a singular ritual. Bell's definition is also useful, amongst other potential

³ Bell, Catherine M. 2010. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

definitions for the term, as whilst it acknowledges the need for meaning and communal regularity to ritual, it does not ascribe such an act as innately religious in nature. Other examples of ritual which appear in the text are rites of passage, as understood by Victor Turner⁴ and Arnold Van Gennep;⁵ and pilgrimage, understood by Turner as a communal act of ritual travel that, via the long-lasting nature of its repeated occurrence by a community, establishes a sense of *Communitas*.

Turner's concepts of *Liminality* and *Communitas* find themselves as integral for the understanding of this exploration. Both terms originate from his text *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. *Liminality* is understood by Turner as a transitional phase that often takes the form of a suspension of social roles and/or statuses.⁶ It most commonly is used to denote the transition from everyday life to something else. *Communitas* incorporates the concept of *Liminality* to define a society that lacks hierarchical structure. While Turner suggests the presence of *Liminality* as rarely long lasting, it can, under certain circumstances, occur as such. It often provides a window from the real to the non-real, with the lack of structure potentially incurring a sense of emotional intensity. This thesis utilizes *Communitas* as a common thread across its chapters, leveraging the structures examined within the Melee community to articulate the potential presence of such a concept.

Another of the concepts present within this thesis is that of *sacred space*. The working definition that I settled on for such is as follows: *A space, set apart via the process of a ritual,*

⁴ Turner, Victor W. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

⁵ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. 2001. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶ Turner, Victor Witter. 1990. "Pilgrimages as Social Processes." In *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series. Ithaca London: Cornell University Press.

which serves to provide a space of communal import over a length of time. To arrive here, I considered multiple scholars within the field, specifically Mircea Eliade, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Emile Durkheim. I grounded my definition here due to their influence on the field of religious studies at large, and because of a lack of satisfaction with their individual definitions. While Mircea Eliade's understanding of a sacred space, as the spatial manifestation of the sacred,⁷ provides a useful starting point for understanding a religion, I take issue with his lack of specificity for how the sacred manifests within the space. This criticism is echoed by Johnathan Z. Smith, who takes issue with the inherent sacrality possible within Eliade's definition. In addition, I find it odd that such a definition does not convey any criteria by which how or why a space may be, or become, sacred.⁸ It also does not offer justification for the existence of temporary sacred spaces, such as may exist within a home congregation. Lastly, I considered Emile Durkheim's definitions of the *Sacred* and *Profane*⁹, due to their foundational role in defining not just Eliade's work, but also much of the ensuing work within the field of religion. Durkheim defines *sacred* as "that which is set apart and forbidden,"¹⁰ and the *profane* as that which is not *sacred*. While initially unclear, Durkheim's work argues that the profane are the mundane things of life, without any additional meaning. The sacred, then, is those things which are set apart from everyday life by some ascribed meaning. Durkheim defines these terms through an understanding of sacred things, though his concepts also apply to the non-material. Building off the definition of *sacred* is the term *Axis Mundi*, referenced in Chapter 1 of this

⁷ Eliade, Mircea, Willard R. Trask, and Mircea Eliade. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion ; [the Groundbreaking Work by One of the Greatest Authorities on Myth, Symbol, and Ritual]*. A Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace.

⁸ Smith, Jonathan Z. 1972. "The Wobbling Pivot." *The Journal of Religion* 52 (2): 134–49.

⁹ Durkheim, Émile, and Émile Durkheim. 1971. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. 7. impr. London: Allen & Unwin.

¹⁰ Ibid.

thesis. Coined by Mircea Eliade, this term serves to describe sacred space that serves as a societal orient, such as a Cathedral, and is defined by Eliade as “the [Sacred] Center of the World.”¹¹

Perhaps the most important term necessary to understand this thesis is its most difficult to define. Religion, despite being the central object of the field, holds no commonly held upon definition. Within the context of this thesis, I would like to offer a working definition for this term, in addition to the one offered for ritual: *religion is the societal orient of the real to the nonreal, which is set apart from the norm through ritual engagement*. Before examining existent definitions for the term, I would like to elaborate upon what I mean by “the societal orient of the real to the nonreal.” To be considered a religion, not only must a group engage in practice such that may be deemed a ritual, but they must do so in a fashion that defines a communal understanding of the world amongst the community which engages in said practice. The necessity of an orient, such as Eliade defines as *Axis Mundi*, is integral to the presence of religion. Without it, there is no central force to which a community can orient and, as a result, homogenize either belief or practice. The real and non-real, as they serve this definition, describe the necessity of relating the reality in which we live to that which stretches beyond. This can more classically be understood as the connection between reality and the supernatural. This distinction serves to replace the colloquial necessity of an explicit higher power within religion, while still requiring an orienting connection between reality and the supernatural. Many understandings of religion were examined to reach this working definition. These include those by Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, Jonathan Z. Smith, James George Frazer, Edward Tylor,

¹¹ Eliade, Mircea, Willard R. Trask, and Mircea Eliade. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion ; [the Groundbreaking Work by One of the Greatest Authorities on Myth, Symbol, and Ritual]*. A Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace.

Mircea Eliade, and Talal Asad. I will attempt to address the impact of each explicit definition upon my working one in the paragraphs that follow.

Durkheim's definition of religion is stated as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden-beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."¹² Though I find agreement with much of Durkheim's definition, which also serves as foundational to the modern study of religion, it fails to address the full scope in which religion can be understood. It does not address the centrality of ritual to the understanding of religion, instead opting to focus on the social contexts in which religion can occur. Durkheim's emphasis on a singular community is both apt and flawed, as such a designation fails to address the potential variations in either practice or belief among local sects within the same belief system. I find it inaccurate to require sacred things, as it implies the existence of inherently sacred objects, spaces, or concepts that remain unaddressed.

Geertz's definition of religion is written as follows: "*(1) a system of symbols¹³ which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.*"¹⁴ this definition provides a different approach, providing a list of five criteria through which one can determine whether a system can be considered a religion. My issue with Geertz's definition is the

¹² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 7. impr (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971).

¹³ Defined by Geertz as any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception-the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'" From Religion as a Cultural System Via Talal Asad's Genealogies of Religion.

¹⁴ "Religion as a Cultural System." 2017. In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, by Clifford Geertz and Robert Darnton, 3rd edition. Basic Books. New York: Basic Books.

inability of one to actually explain these criteria in a succinct fashion or utilize them to justify the inclusion or exclusion of something as religion. In addition, Geertz's definition asserts specifications on the nature of the myth that accompanies a religion. It also implies that for a religion to exist it cannot acknowledge potential alternative points of view as valid, and fails to touch on both the method by which symbols may be established, and the nature of moods and motivations that qualify as pervasive, powerful, and long-lasting.

James George Frazer's definition of religion finds itself with some of the narrowest criteria of any I examined over the course of my research: "By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. Thus defined, religion consists of two elements, a theoretical and a practical, namely, a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them. Of the two, belief clearly comes first, since we must believe in the existence of a divine being before we can attempt to please him. But unless the belief leads to a corresponding practice, it is not a religion but merely a theology."¹⁵ My issues with Frazer, at this point, may be obvious. The reliance on a stringent belief in higher power, specifically one which must control both nature and human life, is grounded in an Eurocentric understanding of religious concepts and excludes a multitude of non-western religions, such the Japanese tradition of Shintoism. In addition, it over-centralizes the existence of religious ritual as to either appease said higher power, or otherwise please them. Frazer's definition struggles to encompass religious practices that do not directly serve this process, including but not limited to religious holidays.

¹⁵ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Memphis: General Books, 2010).

Edward Tylor runs into many of the same issues as Frazer, defining religion as, at minimum: “the belief in Spiritual Beings.”¹⁶

J.Z. Smith’s understanding of religion does not manifest in a definition of the term, but rather serves as an assertion that such a term is unable to be succinctly defined. His understanding is integral to the purpose of this thesis, as he suggests that a religion is not an innate concept, but rather one engineered by scholars.¹⁷ In this assertion, Smith addresses the very phenomena we now examine (that being the inability to define the term in a universally applicable sense,)¹⁸ providing a basis both for Asad’s assertion that secularism is not universally definable and the ensuing question of whether we should consider the study of the secular and religious as separate. While I agree wholeheartedly with Smith, a lack of definition is not useful for the purpose of this Thesis, and the reason which I choose to qualify my definition as *working*. My issues with each understanding of religion, as presented here, provide a backdrop for my own working definition, which I hope serves to address these issues.

Last, the concept of myth. This thesis understands myth through the works of Bruce Lincoln, James George Frazer, Joseph Campbell, and Claude Levi-Strauss. Utilizing Levi-Strauss’s requirement of simultaneous historicity and anhistoricity¹⁹, Frazer’s understanding of myth as explanation of why things are,²⁰ Lincoln’s understanding of myth as narrative

¹⁶ Edward Burnett Tylor, “Religion in Primitive Culture,” in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek, Blackwell Anthologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 23–25.

¹⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, [Dig. print.], 10th print, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1955. “The Structural Study of Myth.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68 (270): 428–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/536768>.

²⁰ Frazer, James George. 2010. *The Golden Bough*. Memphis: General Books.

structure²¹, and Campbell's understanding of monomyth²², I arrived at the following working definition of myth: *A narrative with its origin in historical events that moves beyond the purely historical in order to be held as a reason for inspiration by the broader community of a particular tradition.*

In addition to these terms which require explanation, various other concepts appear over the course of the ensuing text. These terms are defined within the contexts they appear, serving as useful tools to better understand either specific examples or concepts within each chapter. Over the course of the thesis, these terms will build upon each other, utilizing *Communitas* as a point of reference in order to form a cohesive set of conclusions.

²¹ Lincoln, Bruce. 1999. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²² Campbell, Joseph. 2004. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Commemorative ed. Bollingen Series 17. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chapter 1:

The Major: Sacred Space, Pilgrimage, and Sacred Objects

Within groups both secular and religious, social gatherings play a key role in forming cohesive community and ideology. This is no different for the object of our examination, the community which surrounds the video game Super Smash Brothers Melee. In Melee, no type of event is more important than the Major, a multi-day event that occurs within the Melee community. We will consider whether such an event can be considered a sacred space, with the additional context of a potential pilgrimage. Points of comparison of note include the pilgrimages of *Hajj* and Lourdes. The following chapter will also explore the orienting nature of a Melee major, as well as the impact of objects engaged with at an event. This chapter builds off of the theoretical bases of Eliade and Turner, as their career long grapplings with sacrality and community remain fundamental to the theory that underlies the academic study of religion. We accomplish this by examining their understandings of the above terminology, and applying them, in combination with the thesis's working definitions, to the concept of a major. This exploration will allow us to both understand the potential applications of such religious ideas within the context of Melee and consider the potential implications of such.

Across its multi-day time span, the Melee major impacts the scene on both an individual and communal level. While the potential sacrality of the event is drawn from the impact of experiencing said event, the quantitative factors that denote a major are integral to understanding the how and why such events reach the scale of their impact. The quantitative criteria to determine a major are summarized as follows:

1. The event occurs over multiple days²³
 - This occurs at a predetermined location, with consistent geography across a year-to-year timescale.
2. “Larger tournament that draws an extraordinary amount of attendance from the broader region as a whole.”
 - “In North America, these tournaments attract players from across the United States and Canada.”
 - “European majors [often] feature smashers from across the continent.”
 - “Can draw attendance from different continents; for example, European and Japanese players often fly in for large American tournaments.”²⁴
 - A certain concentration of top players from the official global ranking currently known as SSBMRank²⁵
 - A large number of entrants, while varying, can range from 200 to 3000+²⁶

Each of these criteria serves to provide the structural skeleton of the event. For an event to be planned as a major, some of these criteria, such as the top player representation and the number of days, are determined well before an attendee number is known.²⁷ While this is partially for logistical reasons, it also serves to allow a multitude of other experiences to present themselves at majors which are absent from ordinary tournaments. Whilst some of these experiences are

²³ [Observations of major tournaments occurring between 2012-2023]

²⁴ “Tournament.” 2023. SmashWiki. March 25, 2023. <https://www.ssbwiki.com/Tournament>.

²⁵ Various. 2023. “Global Power Ranking.” Article. SmashWiki. March 24, 2023. https://www.ssbwiki.com/Power_ranking#Global.

²⁶ “List of Largest Smash Tournaments.” 2023. SmashWiki. March 5, 2023. https://www.ssbwiki.com/List_of_largest_Smash_tournaments.

²⁷ [Observed Experience and Conversations with @Cagt_3000, a prominent event organizer within the community.]

event specific, (such as the event occurring at, and taking over, a water park,)²⁸ many are not.²⁹ Some examples of nonspecific major experiences include: nearby or onsite housing, vendors peddling goods and services, and varying entertainment activities such as live music, side events (smaller brackets in which another game or alternative format may be played), and even live animals. Perhaps the most famed of these is the concept of controller modding, a service provided by certain vendors in which they alter, cosmetically or mechanically, a client's controller. While those that come to compete make up a significant portion of a major's attendees, they are far from the entirety. Looking at the registrants for a Melee major, such as this summer's Shine 2023, shows a significant number of attendees registered as spectators.³⁰ Though a minority of these are staffers hired to work the event, the large majority of them are members of the broader community who attend simply to be a part of the space and gather, in person, with their broader community. These spectators often have backgrounds as varied as those of the competitors themselves, with many regularly trekking thousands of miles to attend an event.

While a major is defined by its quantitative aspects (discussed above), it is its qualitative aspects that define its role relative to the Melee community. Mircea Eliade describes the following as the perception of space by a practitioner of religion: "For religious man, space is not homogeneous; [they experience] interruptions, breaks in it, some parts of space are qualitatively different from others."³¹ For a Melee major, these qualitative differences revolve around each attendee's event priorities. For some, the venue hall is a place of competitive rigor.

²⁸ Start.gg/riptide

²⁹ [personal observation]

³⁰ start.gg. "Shine 2023." Accessed December 4, 2023. <https://www.start.gg/tournament/shine-2023-4/details>.

³¹ Eliade, Mircea, Willard R. Trask, and Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion; [the Groundbreaking Work by One of the Greatest Authorities on Myth, Symbol, and Ritual]*. A Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1987.

They test their skill at the game against others to determine the best player in the building over the course of a tournament bracket. For others, it is a place to socialize, to greet friends both old and new, and share in a common interest. For others still it is a space to spectate their favorite interest and to observe the finest players in the world. And for yet others, it is a place of commerce, where one can acquire material representations of their presence at the event, or other items representative of their passion for the broader community.

The disconnect between which of these purposes the space holds for an individual is matched by the unity to which it is all for the broader community. Eliade's understanding of religious space is apt to understand the variety of ways in which the Melee community can engage with a major, even within a single unified space. In addition, Eliade's above writing (which acts as the introductory sentence to his chapter *Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred*) serves as a preliminary orient to both Eliade and Durkheim's understanding of the sacred; as that which is separate.³² What Eliade details suggests malleable criteria for a sacred space: that if it is perceived by a person or group to be different to them than the standard space, then to that group or individual, it is sacred. This understanding is supported by our colloquial understanding of sacred spaces, in which each faith holds their own spaces as sacred, but not those of other traditions. Even though a major may seem like an ordinary gathering to those outside the Melee community, to those within it holds an experience with immense additional meaning.

Though its application to a Melee major is initially unclear, Victor Turner's concept of *Communitas* further compounds this separation from the norm. Whilst it may seem as though a

³² Eliade, Mircea, Willard R. Trask, and Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion ; [the Groundbreaking Work by One of the Greatest Authorities on Myth, Symbol, and Ritual]*. A Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1987.

major's primary purpose is a tournament; it is important to recognize the impact of each of its various parts. Otherwise, the tournament's goal in dividing a player base's skill as greater and lesser would seem to fit more aptly with Turner's description of "separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less'," ³³ which applies not to his concept of *Communitas*, but instead to a structured society. The concept of *Communitas* applies when examining the event as a multitude of functions, of which the tournament is but one aspect. Taylor's understanding of *Communitas* as a group "of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders"³⁴ applies to a Major in this context, due to the presence of the spectator group. This group exists solely outside the tournament setting, and as such evokes a lack of hierarchical social ranking as is determined by such. In examining the entirety of a major's attendees then, one can only refer to them by such a term, and they become equal within the event itself: none may be ranked above each other, with the exception of the ritual elders. In the case of a traditional religion, these ritual elders exist as the priestly class, holding sway not necessarily over the individual community, but the ritual gathering itself. The equivalent to a ritual leader within a melee major is the event staff, who oversee the various aspects of a major regardless of whether someone participates in the tournament. To attend a Melee major is to signify the willingness of an individual to submit to the authority of the event staff, as it is their say that governs an individual's participation within the space. It is in this context then, which *Communitas* may be understood as applicable to the concept of a major, as within its overarching space as an event all attendees are equal, but for their willingness to listen to the event staff. In addition, Turner describes *Communitas* as "differ[ing from] structure, or the 'closed society,' in that it is

³³ Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995

³⁴ Ibid.

potentially or ideally extensible to the limits of humanity.”³⁵ The global nature of a major transcends both nationality and other cultural boundaries. It does not matter if one is a sovereign ruler or homeless: the best player in the world or someone’s parent. Within the context of a major, all are attendees, which provides a space to bring people together to celebrate passion across varied cultural divides.

In establishing the major as a space which holds *Communitas*, and which is separate from the norm in its meaning to said community, one starts to develop a case for the space as sacred. That each Melee major happens once a year act further serves this argument. Eliade writes: “establishment in a particular place, organizing it, inhabiting it, are acts that presuppose an existential choice—the choice of the universe that one is prepared to assume by ‘creating’ it.”³⁶ This concept of intentional habitation is applicable to the major. While there are various majors throughout the year, each occurs but a single time per annum and maintains a regular geographic location. Some such examples are the Shine Series, the Collision Series, and Genesis, which occur in Massachusetts³⁷, New Jersey³⁸, and California³⁹ respectively. This, in combination with both the intentionality required by the community to organize such events and the presence of in (or near) venue housing for a major, fulfills the criteria as established by Eliade. So then, each major can be understood as a created universe, (a process Eliade refers to as cosmicization⁴⁰) in which the melee community are the inhabitants.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ 1. Eliade M, Trask WR, Eliade M. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* ; [the Groundbreaking Work by One of the Greatest Authorities on Myth, Symbol, and Ritual]. Harcourt, Brace; 1987.

³⁷ Shine. Liquipedia Smash Wiki. Accessed December 4, 2023. <https://liquipedia.net/smash/Shine>

³⁸ Collision 2023: Melee. Liquipedia Smash Wiki. Accessed December 4, 2023. <https://liquipedia.net/smash/Collision/2023/Melee>

³⁹ GENESIS. Liquipedia Smash Wiki. Accessed December 4, 2023. <https://liquipedia.net/smash/GENESIS>

⁴⁰ Eliade, Mircea, Willard R. Trask. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*; [the Groundbreaking Work by One of the Greatest Authorities on Myth, Symbol, and Ritual]. A Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace.

Understood this way, the major can be considered sacred, as it is intentionally set apart from the normality of mundane life with the intention of celebrating a shared value for the game. However, the concept of a major is not just a sacred space for the Melee community, but rather serves as its orient, better understood as an *Axis Mundi*. Eliade's concept of an *Axis Mundi* is described as "the [Sacred] Center of the World."⁴¹ It is further described by Eliade's colleague J.Z. Smith as "the experience of the break in homogeneous space par excellence, the place of passage and communication through all the planes of existence and the means of organizing and founding the world in which men live."⁴² For Melee, the major is the center, around which the community revolves. The rankings overwhelmingly base themselves on the results of major tournaments. The myth⁴³ of melee is forged at majors. Most melee oriented conversation revolves, to some degree, about the performances of certain characters in the game at events. Most important, the majority of social relationships within the Melee community are fostered at these events, even if maintained elsewhere.⁴⁴ For Melee players, these events are often the center of their communal lives,⁴⁵ serving as the break in their mundane day-to-day life. (As an aside, it is interesting to note that most melee players consider themselves areligious in the traditional sense.)⁴⁶ Though the world in which men live, as Smith describes it, is not oriented by a major, the world in which Melee players live is. This is important to note, as whereas traditional religions are for the proverbial man, the major, within the context of the considered religiosity of Melee's structures within this thesis, is considered analogous for Melee players. It achieves this by serving as a dedicated space to gather and engage with the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Smith, Jonathan Z. 1972. "The Wobbling Pivot." *The Journal of Religion* 52 (2): 134–49.

⁴³ Explored in chapter 3.

⁴⁴ [Observations]

⁴⁵ [Observations]

⁴⁶ [Observations]

communal passion, serving to separate Melee from the mundanity of a normal hobby. Rather, it separates it as something to be celebrated, something which days of life should be dedicated to. This not only suggests the major as an *Axis Mundi*, but according to both Durkheim's understanding and that of the working definition provided within this thesis, suggests the game of Melee as sacred.

Though the Melee major serves as an orient for its community, the true scale of its impact is best understood by the commitment to attend them by Melee's community members. With one of the quantitative aspects of a major being its length (majors are 2-4 days in length),⁴⁷ there is significant commitment required to attend. A largely working class⁴⁸ community, Melee players regularly take time off work, school, and miss familial events to attend a major.⁴⁹ The purpose of a major, to create a space sacred to the community over the course of its duration, highlights not only the space itself as sacred, but the time over which the event occurs. This temporal aspect of a major, which requires the commitment of its attendees to sacrifice their mundane lives, denotes their status as holidays within the community. It accomplishes this by encouraging community members to renege on their individual lives for a communal engagement, entirely separate from their broader lives. This separates the temporal space from the norm of a community member's individual life. The understanding of a major as a holiday denotes not only the communal significance of the event, but the individual significance of such an event to community members. One such example of this is from G3rd, who wrote about the impact the New England major Shine had on him: "In 2016, I remember seeing Shine's initial announcement and decided to attend my very first smash event. It changed the trajectory of my

⁴⁷ start.gg

⁴⁸ [Observations]

⁴⁹ [Observations]

life and I'm forever grateful to the tournament series that introduced me to a wonderful community."⁵⁰ The change G3rd experienced is one that was neither structured nor expected. Inspired by the communal celebration of the game around him, he decided to make the smash community a significant part of his life, and regularly organizes smaller scale events for the community within his home region. For G3rd, Shine is still the only major he attends.⁵¹ Within Melee, experiences such as G3rd's are commonplace, and speak to the impact of the community upon an individual, denoting the level of significance which causes such time and space to be set apart, as well as the commitment by community members to travel to be a part of these spaces.

While there are various reasons individuals such as G3rd travel to a major, rarely is the tournament within the driving factor. Rather, there are two reasons a member of the Melee community may undertake travel to a major, in addition to the celebration of their interest:

- a) The friends and connections they have made, well beyond the bounds of their home. These connections transcend hierarchical social roles within the Melee community (such as between top competitors and those who do not compete) and are discussed above in the consideration that community at a Major should be considered *Communitas*.
- b) The acquisition of different material goods sold at the event, which represent one's attendance at the event, and devotion to Melee as a whole.

⁵⁰ G3rd [@G3rd_NE]. Tweet. Twitter, April 13, 2023. https://twitter.com/G3rd_NE/status/1646656913898176513.

⁵¹ Conversations with G3rd which predate this thesis.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on the exploration of travel to these events, its relationship with pilgrimage, and the acquisition and importance of sacred objects/wear as relates to such.

A major's status as a sacred space over limited time encourages travel. Attending these spaces outside the temporal confines of their event will cause an individual to find not an event but an empty room. While not exact, (as the city of Mecca remains existent throughout the rest of the year), this draws comparison to perhaps the most well-known act of modern religious pilgrimage: the Islamic *Hajj*, a holiday in which, at least once in the lifetime of a Muslim, they must make the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca⁵². The *Hajj* is described as “incumbent on all Muslims who are physically and financially able to make the pilgrimage, but only if their absence will not place hardships on their family.”⁵³ Though attendance of a major is not mandatory to one's participation within the Melee community, as *Hajj* is, it is prioritized in similar fashion. Much as with the hardships that may prevent a Muslim from participating in *Hajj*, the main barrier that prevents most community members from attending an event is financial. While in Islam the Hajj is required to only be a once in a lifetime occurrence, for those whom it is feasible, it may be undertaken often. A similar circumstance exists within the Melee community, with those invested in the community feeling obligated (though no formal rule dictates this) to attend at least one Major. Yet, it is regular to see a community member at as many majors as they can conceivably muster.⁵⁴ This speaks to the impact of events upon the communal lives of Melee community members, and through my own experiences within the

⁵² “Hajj | Definition, Importance, & Facts | Britannica,” February 15, 2023.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/hajj>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ [Participant Observation]

broader Smash community, I found myself at five separate majors over an eight-month span dating from January to August 2023.⁵⁵ In addition to these structural similarities, there is a similar desire to commemorate attendance of a Major as there is with completion of *Hajj*. In addition, lodging for both a Major and *Hajj* occurs at the location of pilgrimage, and each requires the singular focus of attending over the time the event occurs.

Utilizing this comparison as a base, the Melee major evokes many similarities to pilgrimage within their respective social contexts, but this is not enough to determine it such. A framework of pilgrimage is laid out by Turner within *Pilgrimages as Social Processes*, a chapter within his text *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors*. Here, he discusses how to better understand the concept of pilgrimage within the respective social context of each one.⁵⁶ Turner holds *Communitas* as a requirement for pilgrimage, writing that, as a pilgrimage becomes more established over time, *Communitas* “becomes articulated in some measure with the environing social structure through their social organization.”⁵⁷ This suggests that in order to enter the sacred space and join the community within, one must engage in the pilgrimage which pertains to it. This holds true as long as the pilgrimage has been consistently established with regards to said space. As one must travel to and from a major to attend it, the act of traveling is necessary to enter the community, defining the bounds of said liminal community. This act of traveling is not only necessary, but occurs with regularity (as housing is only available surrounding the event, due to its relation to the premises of said event.) Whilst the social context of travel being considered a pilgrimage is present within the context of the Melee major, there is still the matter

⁵⁵ [Personal Experiences]

⁵⁶ Turner, Victor Witter. 1990. “Pilgrimages as Social Processes.” In *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series. Ithaca London: Cornell University Press.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

of addressing the object criteria which make up pilgrimage. Turner describes these in three parts: “processual units,” “social ‘anti-structure’” and “ritual symbols.”⁵⁸ With regards to the Melee major, the second criteria has already been accounted for: the social anti-structure is contained within *Communitas*.⁵⁹ But we still do not hold an understanding of the other two. The first of these is the concept of processual, or process-based units. As relates to a major, those units are the act of travel to the event, the engagement with the event, and the return travel from the event. It is important to note that it does not matter the length of time that travel may take, or when it occurs, as long as it does so within the established bounds of the overall process. If one were to travel to Saudi Arabia, attend Mecca during the Hajj, and then stay in Mecca afterwards for unrelated matters before they were to return home, a break in process would occur when they did not return to the point of origin from which they reached Mecca. These processual units must be consistent across the overall process relative to each other. This holds true regardless of the overall amount of time travel takes. This requirement serves to ensure that the sacred engagement they undertake is the reason for their travel within the context of pilgrimage. As Smash players travel for a major and return home afterwards, there are consistent processual units to the travel, with the major they attend being the sole reason behind their trip. The last criteria Turner asserts for pilgrimage is that of ritual symbols. As Melee is a video game and holds a comprehensive set of iconography, this is utilized as the core of a Major’s symbology. These symbols are consistent as they relate to Melee, regardless of the varied specifics via which an event may represent them. These symbols are engaged with by the broader Melee community through their presence events, with clothing and objects (such as controllers) that

⁵⁸ Turner, Victor Witter. 1990. “Pilgrimages as Social Processes.” In *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series. Ithaca London: Cornell University Press.

⁵⁹ Turner, Victor W. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

bear them able to be acquired. Perhaps no such symbol is more omnipresent than that of a Shine, a blue hexagon⁶⁰ from which the Major series takes its name.



Figure 1: An upscaled image of a Shine extracted from Melee's Base Texture files⁶¹, and shine 2023's⁶² branding.

Though each major uses iconography such as a Shine in different forms, the homogeneity among them serves as a consistent symbology which represents both the Melee community and the act of engaging within it. This symbology is omnipresent at majors, whether through branding, merchandise, or other objects sold by both the event organizers and the various vendors contained within.

Vendors at majors, whether they be part of the event or other booths, are an omnipresent part of the experience. When attending a major, it is impossible to not engage with their wares, as each vending space (booth) is prominently featured at the center of the venue's foot traffic.⁶³ One such example of this is Collision 2023, a Major located in the State of New Jersey.⁶⁴

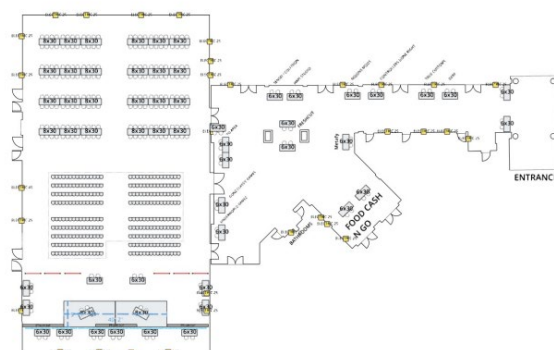


Figure 2: A Diagram of Collision 2023's main Hall (the entire right side are the vendor locations)

⁶⁰ Figure 2

⁶¹ "Super Smash Bros Melee." 2001. Nintendo Gamecube. Super Smash Brothers. Hal Laboratories.

⁶² "Shine 2023." n.d. Start.Gg. Accessed December 4, 2023. <https://www.start.gg/tournament/shine-2023-4/details>.

⁶³ [Observations and personal Experience]

⁶⁴ \ twitter.com/collisionseriesTV

The vendors for this event lined the entry hall, forcing any who entered the Major to engage with the goods being sold. The reason for this is twofold. The first is pragmatic: higher engagement = more interest = more purchases. The second reason is the nature of the goods. Melee majors feature a mixture of vendors with different specialties, but each solicits vendors that match the following categories⁶⁵:

- An official vendor for the event, selling commemorative clothing that links the event itself to Melee.
- Vendors who sell commemorative artwork evoking the imagery of Melee
- Vendors, who repair, modify, manufacture, and sell controllers, the tool by which Melee players play the game. These Vendors are known as either controller modders or simply modders.

This variety of vendors provides a selection available for all members of the community, regardless of their individual reason for attending the event. In doing so, the presence of vendors further homogenizes the different priorities Melee players have for attending. By providing such a variety, it is the goal of a major for each community member, regardless of their interest, to have something available to them to help commemorate their time within the sacred space of the event. This is intended to both further augment their experience at a major and increase an individual's personal connection with the event, providing a commemoration of the Major post occurrence.

This relationship between a given space and material goods calls to mind a question: should these goods be considered a purely mercantile venture, or one intended to provide a

⁶⁵ twitter.com/Megamoose_

window into a sacred space, orienting themselves as sacred? Perhaps the most important vendor to this exploration is that of the controller vendor. The community of Melee is fostered surrounding the game of Melee, which requires a controller in order to play. In considering the act of playing Melee a ritual to said community, the controller then, holds potential significance as a potential sacred object, as it is used to perform a ritual.⁶⁶ At almost any event surrounding Melee, though especially a major, there is a policy referred to as BYOC, or bring your own controller.⁶⁷ This policy causes each member of the Melee community to possess a controller, unique to them, that they use to engage with each other and with the ritual act of playing the game. Though several types of controllers are used to play smash, the most common is the GameCube controller. These controllers are what are personalized by the controller modder vendors present at events. Due to the esoteric nature of the knowledge required to customize, modify, create, or repair such a controller, a major is often the only place that one can interact with these modders.⁶⁸ Each controller serves not just as the physical connection between the player and the game, but as a representation of the player, as they pertain to it. These modifications are a mixture of functional and aesthetic, resulting in each individual's controller being as unique as the individual themselves. While the aesthetic modifications simply alter the coloring and designs of a controller due to personal preference, the functional modifications offer a perceived advantage in competitive play, whether universally or specific to the character piloted by an individual player.⁶⁹ One such example of a functional modification is the Firefox

⁶⁶ Weinryb, Ittai, and Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, eds. 2018. *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery.

⁶⁷ [Personal experience]

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ <https://gloomwave.com/2020/06/28/smashscope-guide/>

notch, used to make it easier to align the control stick at a specific angle for a singular move of one of Melee's characters, Fox McCloud.



Figure 3: A customized controller with a notched left stick, and unnotched right stick. ⁷⁰

At events such as these, controller customizations can range anywhere from \$5 USD to \$700 USD⁷¹, which can also cause them to be viewed as representative of a community member's investment, with the purchase and maintenance of a custom controller considered the cultural norm among melee players. Such standardized individual ownership of material goods that are representative of a broader community evokes the Byzantine icon. This item is considered, within the field of art history, to be a portable portrait of Christian holy figures. It was designed not just to be seen but physically engaged with as well.⁷² These icons were, like a customized GameCube controller, considered to be luxury items, but were also intended to allow an individual possessor to, through engagement with their icon, become closer to the holy. This process is described by Bissera V. Pentcheva as follows: "in saturating the material and sensorial to excess, the experience of the icon led to a transcendence of this very materiality and gave access to the intangible, invisible, and noetic."⁷³ Such an experience also holds true for a melee player's controller, as using a controller designed to an individual's specifications often leads to a perceived improvement in gameplay so severe that most melee players will refuse to

⁷⁰ <https://twitter.com/MaxwellsMods>

⁷¹ a limited set of partial cosmetic modifications can be found at <https://www.nojonsmods.com/>

⁷² Pentcheva, Bissera V. 2006. "The Performative Icon." *The Art Bulletin* 88 (4): 631–55.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

use controllers not their own.⁷⁴ As far as a Melee player is concerned, the act of customization of a controller allows for an individual to more closely connect with Melee, and is perceived by them to better allow themselves to enter what they refer to as *flow state*.⁷⁵ According to Pentcheva, the act of engaging with such an icon is what makes it holy:

A person's approach, movement, and breath disrupt the lights of the candles and oil lamps, making them flicker and oscillate on the surface of the icon. This glimmer of reflected rays is enhanced by the rising incense in the air, the sense of touch and taste, and the sound of prayer to animate the panel. The icon thus goes through a process of becoming, changing, and performing before the faithful.⁷⁶

It is not the icon itself that evokes the divine, but rather the unique result of an individual's engagement with the icon itself, either through faith or passion. As time progresses, the memories of these experiences become associated with the icon, causing it to embody the perceived holiness. So too, as a player utilizes their controller over time, it undergoes wear, further becoming unique to the individual. As a result of this, the perceived influence on a Melee player's in-game performance becomes embodied within the controller itself.⁷⁷

Byzantine icons are far from the only material religious object that draws similarities to the Melee player's controller. In his essay, *Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, Clifford Geertz describes the process of cleaning cockspurs used within the ritual:

for reasons I shall come to presently, it is done somewhat differently from case to case, and is an obsessively deliberate affair. The lore about spurs is extensive --- They are sharpened only at eclipses and the dark of the moon, should be kept out of the sight of women, and so forth. And they are handled, both in use and out, with the same curious

⁷⁴ [Observation]

⁷⁵ This term is commonly used within the melee community and refers to the act of performing at one's peak without conscious focus towards doing so.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ [Observed Experience]

combination of fussiness and sensuality the Balinese direct toward ritual objects generally.⁷⁸

Geertz goes on to continue this description of care, a process just as ritualized as the cockfight the spurs are used in. This process of maintenance is similar to that of a GameCube controller. When not actively being used, a controller is to be encased, preventing degradation. In addition, there are specific processes to cleaning a controller, to the degree that players will attend an event with a Modder solely to have this process done properly.⁷⁹

Despite the meaning they obtain, such objects are not inherently sacred. Instead, it is the enchantment they provide (both on a communal and individual level) that makes them so. David Morgan offers a succinct definition of enchantment in his work *The Thing about Religion*: “Enchantment engages powers that do not have to work but are persuaded or inclined to do so by gift, vow, or devotional recognition. Enchantment is about how things and beings are persuaded to help.”⁸⁰ Each of the above objects accomplishes this enchantment through devotional recognition. The Cock-spurs serve as a devotional representation for Balinese society. They express a mixture of socio-hierarchical understandings and a ritual significance placed in the relationship between the birds themselves and the spirits they represent.⁸¹ For the Byzantine icon, this enchantment comes as a result of the process described by Pentcheva in the previous paragraph. For controllers, this comes through their representation of commitment to the community, and to their individual character. While the devotion to their character comes in the form of the functional modifications they make, the devotion to the community is

⁷⁸Geertz, Clifford. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972): 8.

⁷⁹ [Observed Experience]

⁸⁰ Morgan, David. *The Thing about Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 61.

⁸¹ Geertz, Clifford. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972)

represented through the monetary cost of such a device. The cost of a controller can often exceed the monetary cost of attending a major, with the cost of acquiring a modified controller ranging from \$150⁸²-\$650⁸³ USD at the time of writing.

Though Controllers are the premier goods sold at majors, they are accompanied by the sale of event merchandise, such as clothing. While the clothing itself holds no ritual value, its direct representation of the major itself speaks to the sacrality of the space. It serves to represent one's attendance at the event and serves as a connection back to that ritual time. Such merchandise evokes similarities to the various goods that are sold at sites of pilgrimage. The most notable of these occurrences is the Christian pilgrimage of Lourdes, widely known for the omnipresent mercantile presence at and surrounding the shrine.⁸⁴ There, the presence of so-called piety shops serve to offer a pilgrim the opportunity to commemorate their pilgrimage and immortalize an aspect of their ritual journey through material goods.⁸⁵ A genesis of such commercialized religiosity, Lourdes has generated ongoing discussions about the relationship between commercialization and religious life. Defenders of the space, such as Abbe Domenech at the turn of the 20th century, have argued that the commerce occurred separate to the shrine, but was still beneficial to it.⁸⁶ This argument suggests that even the most religiously evocative trinkets sold by shops surrounding the Shrine hold no inherent sacred value. Even still, the sale of these goods capitalizes on a desire to engage with the site, and to carry a form of iconographic remembrance of the act of pilgrimage. So too does the merchandise at majors hold no inherent value in sacrality, but rather speaks to the similar level of engagement

⁸² <https://www.riennecustoms.com/shop/>

⁸³ [Observed Experience at Shine 2023]

⁸⁴ Kaufman, Suzanne K. 2005. *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine*. 1. publ. Cornell Paperbacks. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

between a Melee player at a major and a pilgrim. Both groups express similar desires to find forms of commemoration of their respective pilgrimage.

Through the working definitions of this thesis, in combination with the work of Victor Turner, Mircea Eliade, and others, I have provided a breakdown of the isolated aspects that evoke similarity between a Melee major and sacred space. In doing so, I have posited that within the context of the Melee community, such a space should be considered sacred. In addition, due to the central orient of the space within the communal culture, it can be considered an *Axis Mundi*. This overarching conclusion has its roots in Turner's concept of *Communitas*, wherein the equal status of an event's attendees causes any secular social status to be lost within the confines of the event. The Melee major, through both its housing of ritual and relationship with material objects both ritualistic and commemorative, not only fulfills these theoretical qualifications of a sacred space but, due to the singularly purposed travel required to attend, draws consideration as a site of pilgrimage. Utilizing the Muslim *Hajj* and Christian pilgrimage to Lourdes as points of comparison, I noted similarities between the purposes of travel, in combination with a shared relationship between the relationship with the event itself and the goods peddled there. Both these aspects serve to further understanding as to whether, as the study of religion currently stands, the event has a secular or religious nature. In examining the Gamecube controller through a mixture of theory and comparison to agreed upon objects of material religion, I provide a supporting argument to one of the reasons an individual may decide to attend a major, positing the iconic and ritualistic properties of such a device. These sacred objects, in combination with the communal impact and surrounding singular focus of the event, further speak to the devotion a community member has to Melee and helps to better understand the impact of the hobby upon their life. Its potential status as a

communal holiday, as well as its ensuing potential designation as a site of pilgrimage, hinge on this uniform individual impact on a communal level. Without this understanding, it may be considered no different from an ordinary secular excursion. I pose here that a Melee Major can be considered not just a sacred space, but also both a site of pilgrimage and an *Axis Mundi* due to the fulfillment of existent theoretical criteria. This is supported by how a major intentionally separates itself as a dedicated space and time outside of a player's ordinary life, and presents multiple similarities to existent sites of pilgrimage. It holds within cultural norms a commitment to both attend the event and further engage with it.

Chapter 2:

Rites of Passage in Melee

Melee events serve as the communal gathering space for their event, of which majors serve as the preeminent example. While not every event can reach the scale of broader communal orient which serves as an *Axis Mundi*, each still retains the properties of communal gathering that lead to the determination of a major as a sacred space. These events serve as the location not just for existent members of the community to gather, but also as the location in which those on the community's periphery may properly join. This chapter will engage in an examination of processes by which this might occur, attempting to determine whether they should be considered rites of passage. A rite of passage is defined by Arnold Van Gennep as "[a ritual] whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined."⁸⁷ Utilizing this definition, as well as further elaboration by Van Gennep as a basis, I will build upon Chapter One's exploration of the major to examine the impacts of attending an event for the first time and establish the process of transition from outsider to insider.

To understand these transitions and consider their potential as rites of passage, one must start by asserting the distinct roles that can be transitioned between. At the broadest level there sits the division of outsider and insider⁸⁸. Referenced by Van Gennep, this pair of roles is universal, and exists regarding any community. The insider is one who is a part of said

⁸⁷ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. 2001. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

community, and the outsider is one who is not. In Melee, one transitions from outsider to insider (in turn, joining the community) through the process of attending one's first event. This type of rite of passage is known as a Rite of Initiation. Emile Durkheim describes such rites in his text *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, writing: "Rites of initiation, [...are...] a long series of rites to introduce the young man into religious life. For the first time, he comes out of the purely profane world, where he has passed his childhood, and enters into the circle of sacred things."⁸⁹

Melee itself occurred well before the age of online multiplayer in video games, releasing in 2001. This fostered a culture where, in order to engage with the game, one was required to travel to a communal space where others were also attempting to do so. The described occurrence gave birth to what we now consider Melee events, and as a result, the broader Melee community. This link between the community's origin and that of communal events still holds true today, with an individual's presence within the community being defined by their engagement at events. While one who does not attend events can still enjoy the game of melee, it is Melee events which forge a community unified by the game, with their own traditions and stories. By attending an event for the first time, an individual not only engages with these various cultural peculiarities, but they are also able to forge their own stories and interpersonal relationships. Though the Melee *Communitas*⁹⁰ is unified by the game itself, it is these relationships and stories that set the Melee community apart from one who simply has a passing interest in the game, and considering that such is found only at events, attendance of such an event must be considered necessary to be understood as a member of the Melee community. While the largest and most impactful of such events, the major, was discussed in chapter 1, smaller events occur on a much more regular basis.

⁸⁹ Page 37. Durkheim, Émile, and Émile Durkheim. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. 7. impr. London: Allen & Unwin, 1971.

⁹⁰ Turner, Victor W. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Local tournaments occur weekly, ranging anywhere from eight to seventy entrants on average.⁹¹

While the size of an event is specific to each one, the community members remain mostly consistent for any given event. This consistency among individuals is what allows the game to foster a community such that requires a form of initiation, as members of a local Melee community each attend the same space, the same night every week, on the bases of interpersonal connection and passion for their interest.⁹² This size and consistency is also the best indicator of the difference in scale between outsiders who observe the game and members of the community proper, best illustrated by large local streams regularly hitting viewer numbers in the thousands⁹³. The large majority of these virtual viewers have never attended an event, only engaging as spectators.⁹⁴ Without attending an event, these viewers hold no understanding of the community, its scale, or the culture held within. As a result of this barrier of understanding, it is by attending an event for the first time that an individual may experience the Melee community and be transformed from an outsider (who cannot engage with the communal culture) to an insider (one who can).

In that a Rite of Initiation is considered a rite of passage, it is relevant here to consider Arnold Van Gennep's three stages of such: the separation, the transition, and the incorporation rites.⁹⁵ The first of these stages is that of separation. Understood by Van Gennep as the separation "from a previous world,"⁹⁶ this subcategory is named for how one is separated from what they were before the undergoing of the rite of passage. By attending a Melee event, a separation

⁹¹ [Observations]

⁹² [Observations]

⁹³ Twitch.tv

⁹⁴ Start.gg

⁹⁵ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

occurs from the outsider, and from one's former relationship with the game. By simply arriving at a Melee event, one is struck by the aforementioned difference in scale, and the familiar nature by which community members engage each other.⁹⁷ When attending an event for the first time, an attendee is offered a breakdown of the event's structure by the organizer, as well as asked to make an account on a website known as start.gg if they have not prior.⁹⁸ This website largely serves as a logistical tool for those who run events, allowing them to manage a list of the event's attendees and the tournaments hosted within. While neither of these serves as an act of separation, it is the method by which attendees are tracked, in combination with the understanding they gain, that causes this separation to occur. Upon making an account, a start.gg user is asked to input standard identifier information, contact information, and their region.⁹⁹ They are also asked to create something known as a *Tag*. An attendee's *Tag* serves as a moniker of referral for the individual within the events they attend and is often used by members of the melee community to reference each other in lieu of their name. Some famous tags used by players include those of Joseph "Mang0" Marquez and Juan "HungryBox" Debiedma. These chosen monikers are selected by the individual and serve as an opportunity to define oneself. While attendees are required to create one, there are no requirements to which a *Tag* must adhere. While most attendees follow the above examples and create wholly new identities by which they are known at events, a select minority of players, such as Cody "Cody Schwab" Schwab, and Zain "Zain" Naghmi choose to use a variation of the name they use outside of Melee communal spaces. This act of choosing a *Tag* is one that all melee players go through

⁹⁷ [Observations]

⁹⁸ [observations/experience]

⁹⁹ Start.gg

upon attending their first event, and it serves to separate their existence within Melee spaces from that outside of it.

The next of Van Gennep's phases of a rite of passage is that of transition. These are described by Van Gennep as "liminal (or threshold) rites,"¹⁰⁰ and exist during the process of transition from outsider to insider. After creating arriving at an event and creating a *Tag*, an individual has successfully separated themselves from the outside community, but not yet established themselves as part of the Melee community. This transitory period causes an attendee to exist in a liminal space. While there is not a separate liminal rite which occurs within Melee, the period of time after determining one's tag provides an individual the opportunity to engage with the communal space as they see fit. An individual during this time has the opportunity, under the new identity defined via their tag, to form new interpersonal connections. These connections are invariably grounded in Melee due to the unifying backdrop the event space provides.¹⁰¹ It is during this time that someone starts to gain an understanding of how a melee event functions, and observes the various roles performed by community members to facilitate such. These roles are understood as follows:

- Competitor
 - Those which participate in the event tournament.
- Event organizer
 - Those who provide the logistical support necessary to organize events within the community.

¹⁰⁰ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

¹⁰¹ [Observation]

- Production
 - Those who document and showcase the community to bridge the gap between local communities, provide additional outreach, and document the community for the future.

This knowledge is gained through existence within an event space, as each role is present and accessible to watch. Despite this, only the competitor role is available to someone in the transitional period of their rite of passage. Making up the majority of Melee community members, competitors engage with the game of Melee directly, and form interpersonal connections through playing against each other at the event space. To perform this role, an attendee must simply play the game with another attendee. In doing so, a social connection is fostered, with the two players sitting shoulder to shoulder, due to the shared screen format in which Melee is played.¹⁰² This physical proximity, in combination with a shared interest, specializes in fostering social connections, and these interpersonal relations are what allow an attendee to transition out of the liminal space into the melee community proper.

The last phase of this rite of passage is that of Incorporation, referenced by Van Gennep as “post-liminal rites.”¹⁰³ Serving as the final phase of a rite of passage, these rites of incorporation serve to solidify one’s status within the community. Within the rite of initiation to the Melee community, this final phase is one of personal decision-making. Having already established a communal persona, and having begun to form personal connections, an individual then starts to integrate themselves with the Melee community as a whole. However, at this point, they have only been able to do so within the role of a competitor, with the final phase of

¹⁰² “Super Smash Bros Melee.” 2001. Nintendo Gamecube. Super Smash Brothers. Hal Laboratories.

¹⁰³ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

integration offering the conscious choice of whether to maintain this relationship or add an additional role from the list above. The act of integration comes about as a result of this choice, as it is the first agency provided to a community member after leaving the liminal stage. In doing so, it serves to determine the method of engagement by which a community member will continue to engage with the broader Melee community. A member's chosen role, though changeable at any time, can best be considered an object of specialization within the Melee community. The newfound insider utilizes their understanding of the various structures of the Melee community as well as its underlying social dynamics, to determine the best path forward for them within the community. While I designated it as a rite of separation due to its redivision of the self into existing outside and Inside the Melee community,

It is important to acknowledge that the aforementioned rite of passage "defining a tag" merits consideration as a rite of incorporation instead of a rite of separation, due to its status as a rite of naming. With regard to such rites, Van Gennep writes the following: "When a child is named, he is both individualized and Incorporated into society. [...] or he may be given the name of one of his ancestors. [...] or he may be allowed to choose his name. or he may change names as often as he changes age categories in childhood."¹⁰⁴ Gennep's understanding stems from the occurrence of most naming rituals at the onset of one's societal journey. While this most commonly occurs at birth, in which one is wholly entering into a society, it also occurs through certain religious rites of passage, such as the Catholic Baptism. In such instances, one leaves their previous societal view behind in favor of a new one. Described by the Catechism of the

¹⁰⁴ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. 2001. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Catholic Church as “the basis of the whole Christian life,”¹⁰⁵ Baptism serves primarily as a rite of incorporation, as is classically understood to be the case for most naming rites per Van Gennep.¹⁰⁶ The Catechism defines the Baptism ritual explicitly as such, writing “Through Baptism [...] we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church, and made sharers of her mission.”¹⁰⁷ Here, the Catechism highlights the primary goal of Baptism as welcoming a baptized individual into their new life, that of a Christian. This serves to further Van Gennep’s assertion that this naming rite is one of incorporation, suggesting the communal shift as the main aspect of Baptism. This is in contrast with the separative aspect of Baptism, which serves to separate one from their previous life. Such separation is described in the following section of the Catechism, which suggests the act of Baptism as “the catechumen’s burial into Christ’s death, from which he rises up by resurrection with him, as ‘a new creature’.”¹⁰⁸ While this verse highlights the nature of Baptism in initiating the uninitiated into the Christian community, it does not focus on the separative aspect. Though it may seem that the focus of rising as a so-called “new creature” would imply a ritual focus on this separation from what came before, it is the term catechumen, used to refer to a pre-baptized convert to Christianity¹⁰⁹ that belies the true focus of the ritual. That this term is the primary focus of this section of the Catechism inverts the understanding of focus from separation to Incorporation. It accomplishes this by reframing the imagery of death and rebirth, understood in isolation as a separation into two states of before and after, into imagery overwhelmingly focused on the after. The term’s presence causes “new

¹⁰⁵ “Catechism of the Catholic Church.” n.d. Accessed December 10, 2023.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

¹⁰⁶ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. 2001. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰⁷ “Catechism of the Catholic Church.” n.d. Accessed December 10, 2023.

https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM. 1213

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 1214

¹⁰⁹ “Definition of CATECHUMEN.” n.d. Accessed December 11, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catechumen>.

creature” to serve in place of the term Christian, and the focus to be on the rebirth, through Christ’s resurrection, which in turn allows an individual to be welcomed into the Christian community. This section of the Catechism also suggests a death of the person that one was before, framing it less as a separation from what came before than as a transformation of it. As a result, the primary focus of the Catechism on incorporation through separation (as pertains to Baptism) contrasts with the Melee ritual of selecting a tag. Whilst Baptism serves primarily to offer a new identity for an individual to embody, a Melee tag instead offers an alternate identity through which the individual may inhabit the Melee space. Instead of transitioning an individual from one community to another, as is the case with Catholic Baptism, the Melee tag instead serves to offer the ability to transition between two separate communities. These communities are their mundane life, and Melee itself). This separate coexistence is the preeminent reason that one should consider a Melee tag a rite of separation, as opposed to the rite of incorporation more traditionally associated with naming rituals such as that of Baptism.

The beginning of this chapter designated multiple roles a member of the Melee community may fill during their time within the community. In order to specialize in any of these roles, whether competitor, production, or event organizer, additional rites of passage must be undertaken.¹¹⁰ The first of these rites of passage is that of the competitor. To specialize in competition, each individual within the Melee community makes a determination: they choose which character to play within the game, referred to as a main¹¹¹. Within Melee, there are twenty-six unique characters, each of whom offers a vastly different style of gameplay. The roster of these characters is pictured below:

¹¹⁰ [Observations]

¹¹¹ [Observations]



Figure 4: Melee Character Roster. (Not Pictured, Sheik, who cannot be selected on this screen)¹¹²

The various playstyles associated with each character stem from the unique skillset required each one, and high level of technical mastery required to pilot them.¹¹³ By selecting one, players self-select into this group and provide themselves a structured avenue to further this gameplay. This rite of initiation separates them from that of a standard community member, reincorporates them within the scene as a player associated with that specific character. For most, this is as far as the process goes, and it serves as a nested rite of initiation by providing an individual further designated subcommunity. A vast minority of individuals within Melee, however, find this choice the beginning of another, much longer journey. For those who see consistent improvement with their character of choice, they quickly gain renown among their character community. What these individuals seek is simple: to win a major. As discussed in chapter one, the Melee major is the preeminent type of event within the Melee community, serving as an *Axis Mundi* for the community at large. To win a major takes time, dedication, and skill. Many attempt the task, and while there are no consequences for those who fail to complete it, the successful completion of such incurs a rite of passage in which a player's communal persona, or tag, is etched into history. To have one's tag become synonymous with the character piloted is perhaps the highest honor that can be undergone within the Melee community. It highlights a shift among one's communal

¹¹² "Super Smash Bros Melee." 2001. Nintendo Gamecube. Super Smash Brothers. Hal Laboratories.

¹¹³ [Observation]

status, in which a player's tag becomes synonymous with their character.¹¹⁴ These players have their tag etched into the myth that pervades Melee, with the feat of winning a major considered miraculous within the community. Over the countless Majors that have occurred across Melee's 22-year history, only twenty-five players have won a Melee major.¹¹⁵

Whilst the Melee competitor, and by extension their rites of passage, are focused on gaining global community and gaining status within it, one who seeks to specialize in the role of Event organizer finds themselves on a lonelier path. To transition from the role of competitor to event organizer, one must first have been embedded in their community long enough to hold a mastery of the different social dynamics held within. Once this has been accomplished, a community member may seek approval from an existing Event organizer to start the rite of passage to begin on this path, focused on fostering their own local subset of the Melee community. This rite of passage, much like the rite of initiation to the Melee community, fulfills all three of the stages of separation, *liminality*, and incorporation. Event organizers hold various responsibilities within the Melee community, responsible for the organization of the community's sacred spaces and the events held within. The most notable of these events are tournaments. This responsibility for one's local scene invariably excludes a local Event organizer from also holding the role of competitor within their local community. The renouncement of this competitor status serves as the act of situation in this rite of passage, as it enters the individual into a liminal space at events without a role to fulfill. The liminal stage of this rite of passage is the process by which an individual learns how to organize an event. After renouncing their competitor status and receiving permission from an existing event organizer, an individual

¹¹⁴ [Observation]

¹¹⁵ "User:Monsieur Crow/List of Characters That Have Won a Major Tournament." 2023. SmashWiki. November 13, 2023. https://www.ssbwiki.com/User:Monsieur_Crow/List_of_characters_that_have_won_a_major_tournament.

proceeds to shadow them over the course of ensuing events. While not yet reestablishing an individual within the community under their new role, this stage serves three purposes.

- 1) It helps to grow the relationship between an individual and their community outside the bounds of the competitor role. This allows an individual to witness a greater number of interactions outside their individual scope and better handle conflict resolution.
- 2) It imparts upon the individual the moral values of their local community.
- 3) It trains the individual with the logistical knowledge of how to run an event and allows them to gain preliminary experience with oversight.

The mastery of a local community's dynamics, gained in this phase, is integral to the process of becoming an event organizer. This is because of their afore-described status, not just as those who organize the spaces in which the Melee community exists, but also as those who serve as the ritual leaders within their local community. The incorporation stage of the event organizer's rite of passage occurs when they run their own event. Whether of their own design or a torch passed from a previous event organizer, this firmly reintegrates the individual back into the Melee community under their new role, and due to their status as a community leader, provides the individual their own subset of the community through which to continue to engage with Melee. While the last role within the Melee community is that of production staff, there is no formalized rite of passage for this role. Rather, it is often born out of desire to share the community with a larger audience, and the process for accomplishing such falls to whoever may have a combination of the desire and technical expertise to do so.

Each of the different structural roles within Melee, as well as the rites of passage accompanying them, find themselves in a dilemma unique to them among cultures with distinct

social specializations. While each of these specializations exist concretely within the context of one's local community, for those outside of the competitor specialization, this does not transfer between local communities, and by extension, to the broader Melee community.¹¹⁶ One such example of this is when an event organizer travels to a different region. While they may still be known by association of the event they run, and still hold that role with regards to their own community, the community they are travelling to does not see them as an event organizer. Each local sub-community, despite having uniform rites of passage to uphold the social specializations undertaken by community members, rarely recognizes an individual as holding these roles, and accompanying social status from that of another subcommunity. This suggests a disconnect between the individual and the role, or roles, that they inhabit. This is because the role(s) and progression between them, as held by an individual, serve to be more akin to an office inhabited than a characteristic gained. While Chapter One briefly addressed the nature of the Melee community as liminal, in that it unites those who hold it dear under their interest for the game, this lack of permanence among social roles further amplifies that understanding. Victor Turner describes liminal entities as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”¹¹⁷ While this classification is traditionally used to describe entities such as “neophytes in initiation or puberty rites,”¹¹⁸ I find it apt to suggest the Melee player outside of their own local community to be a liminal entity. While an individual within Melee can, and often does travel to other local subsets of the community, in doing so, they give up their status and hold nothing that, to the unfamiliar, would denote them as separate from any other Melee player. That such roles are tied to the geographic

¹¹⁶ [Observation]

¹¹⁷ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. 2001. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

location in which they are obtained (apart from top players), promotes the concept of Melee as a liminal community. It allows a necessary structure to exist that fosters a local community, without obscuring the lack of such roles.

This coexistence of such social structure and anti-structure within the Melee community creates a social environment that would perhaps surprise Turner, who posited that *Communitas* as social phenomena cannot last, as it “soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae.”¹¹⁹ Despite this assertion, Melee has existed, perhaps due to the lack of moral assertion its community provides, for 22 years without generating a social hierarchy. While there are multitudinous examples of the “relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals”¹²⁰ (as Turner describes *Communitas*) slowly transitioning to match social norms, the Melee community stands in opposition. As opposed to such cases as that of the American high school, in which a group of unstructured individuals without social roles rapidly develop a hierarchy and personae by which to define themselves, The Melee community instead sees the opposite occur. While a concrete reason cannot be given to this phenomenon, I would like to posit that it is a result of the Rite of Initiation. In Melee, as opposed to other naming rituals, the purpose of a name is not to integrate oneself within the community. Rather, it is to separate itself from the outside community, and helps to designate the space, and the people within, as outside the social politicking of everyday life. Most of the Melee community does not profile others based on social status, ethnicity, orientation, or any other denominator of identity,¹²¹ existing

¹¹⁹ Turner, Victor W. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ [Observations]

within the “I and Thou”¹²² framework Turner describes as representative of an ideal state of *Communitas*. When the rare community member does, they are overwhelmingly shunned by the broader community, not out of a desire to maintain social status, but rather to maintain an environment in which all can be seen as themselves, regardless of interests, behavior, or identity. The Liminal nature of the social states associated with Melee’s rites of passage would, classically, disrupt their status as such, as Van Gennep’s definition of a rite of passage describes the concrete transfer between two equally well-defined social states.¹²³ While the liminality of the social status associated with each specialty suggests that they have a lack of definition, that definition is instead contained within the local subcommunity, and allows the broader community to maintain a liminal, more accessible nature, without impacting the validity of the rite of passage or definition of said states. These statuses exist without regard to social power, as, noted previously, they lack such. Instead, they serve primarily to communicate purpose to the outsider, with any who have undergone such a rite being able to fluidly shift between them. This suggests these roles primarily existent to designate a delineation between those who have and have not undergone them, similar to the existence of the aforementioned catechumen, which serves to delineate a convert who has not yet undergone Baptism from one who has. That these rites of passage designate the very social states they cause a transfer between is a curiosity my research has not led to an explanation for. This is neither suggested as an occurrence among other rites of passage, nor suggested by the field to preclude such a role from soliciting such a rite. Despite this, I feel it important to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of rites within the Melee

¹²² Turner, Victor W. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

¹²³ Van Gennep, Arnold, Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee, and Solon T. Kimball. 2001. *The Rites of Passage*. 17. pr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

community, as beyond the rite of initiation, they serve primarily to allow access to a role of their own creation.

Utilizing the understandings of rites of passage presented by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner, this chapter serves to examine the process of initiation into the Melee community, and the various roles one may specialize in within it. By focusing on the process by which one enters into the Melee community, the chapter establishes not only the steps needed to do so, its overarching quality as a rite of initiation, and further elaborates upon this by breaking down the process into each of the three phases of a rite of passage, separation, transition, and incorporation rites. This posited a question not of qualification, but classification, as the presence of a naming rite within this process, in the definition of a tag, causes some debate as to its nature as separation or incorporation rite. Through contrast to the Catholic rite of Baptism, the chapter settles on determining that though it is standard to consider a naming rite one of incorporation, the defining of an alternate persona, rather than an encompassing one, earned the definition of a tag its proposed shift in classification to a rite of separation. The chapter concludes focusing on the non-static nature of social structures, and though I question whether the lack of associated societal status or permanence associated with them allows retain their consideration as rites of passage, it is ultimately not a strict enough margin by which to disqualify them from such discussion.

Chapter 3:

The existence of mythic figures in Melee

The Melee community holds within it many events and individuals that have held pervasive influence among it. Over its 22-year history the Melee community has seen multiple distinct eras, each with their own prominent figures and stories. This chapter will examine the potential for some of these influential figures as Melee utilizing as a base the understanding of myth presented by Claude Levi Strauss in his text *The Structural Study of Myth*; Joseph Campbell's understanding of monomyth and the classification of mythic figures presented within his text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; and Bruce Lincoln's text *Theorizing Myth*. Utilizing these texts, the chapter will examine the potential for these communal figures as the central characters of myth within the Melee community. To properly understand these events, one must additionally start by understanding the division of historical eras within the Melee scene, starting with the game's Japanese release on November 21st, 2001. For the reader's understanding, a timeline is listed below:¹²⁴

- The Early Age – 2001-2004
 - November 21st, 2001 – Super Smash Brothers Melee releases for the Nintendo GameCube in Japan. On December 3rd, the game was released in the United States.

¹²⁴ SmashWiki. "Super Smash Bros. Melee in Competitive Play," January 26, 2023. https://www.ssbwiki.com/Super_Smash_Bros._Melee_in_competitive_play.

- April 2002-2004 – The first publicized tournament series is run by Matt Deezie, titled Tournament Go
- The Golden Age – 2004-2008
 - Major League Gaming hosts the first, and only, successful pro Melee circuit, MLG Series
 - 2004-2006 – the first group of prominent figures emerge among the broader player base: Ken “Ken” Hoang, Jason “Mew2King” Zimmerman , Daniel “ChuDat” Rodriguez, Joel “Isai” Alvarado, and Chris “PC Chris” Szygiel
 - Evo Adds Smash. 2007 – Evo, the largest tournament circuit for fighting games in the world, adds Melee to its roster of events.
- The Dark Age and crowning of the 5 Gods– 2008-2011
 - Smash Bros Brawl is released, 2008 – The first smash game after Melee comes out, and for the first time, divides the community. This era is known as the Dark age of Melee, due to many players transitioning over to the new game, and the ensuing decline in community.
 - Revival of Melee is Held, 2009 – Revival of Melee, a one-off tournament is held by an organizer named Alukard and features many players from previous and future Eras of the game, such as Mang0, PC Chris, and Mew2King.
 - The top players of the golden age retired in 2009-2010.
 - The Crowning of the 5 Gods, 2011 – 5 Players Emerge who would go on to dominate tournaments for the ensuing 6 years, with one of these five players winning every Major during this time span, and only losing to each other.
- The Era of the 5 Gods – 2011-2017

- The 5 Gods win every major event: Mang0, Jason “Mew2King” Zimmerman, HungryBox, Kevin “PPMD” Nanney, and Adam “Armada” Lindgren. This also marked the first time the game had top level international competition, as while four of the five gods were from the United States, Armada, arguably the most dominant of the Gods, was from Sweden.
- Samox’s Smash Documentary Releases – October 2013
- Travis “Samox” Beauchamp’s Documentary “The Smash Brothers” follows various figures from Melee’s earlier history releases. This served to usher in a new era of players to the game, and is widely revered as one of the highest forms of historical/philosophical content as to the communal impact of Melee.
- The first Godslayer – 2014, William “Leffen” Hjelte Wins B.E.A.S.T 5, becoming the first player to take a tournament over two or more of the 5 Gods. He later goes on to become the first player to defeat all five.
- PPMD Steps away – 2016, The First of the five gods to retire, leaving Leffen as the only person to beat all 5 Gods in open bracket.
- The second Godslayer – 2017, a player named Justin “Plup” McGrath takes second at the Big House 7, becoming the second player to defeat all 5 Gods in open bracket.
- The Fall of the Gods / The Documentary Era 2018-2019
 - Armada retires from Melee – 2018, Armada retires from Melee, leaving only 3 Gods active.
 - HungryBox dominates the game, being ranked #1 in the world three times in a row, in 2017, 2018, and 2019. This marks the last time one of the 5 Gods was world one.

- After watching Samox’s documentary, a new wave of players enters the community and its competitive scene. These players include Cody “Cody Schwabb” Schwab, Jake “Jmook” Dirado, and Zain “Zain” Naghmi. These players are collectively referenced as “Doc Kids.”
- Slippi era 2020-2023 (present at time of writing).
 - The Covid-19 pandemic occurs in spring 2020 – marking a two year pause to the gathering of in person events and world rankings.
 - June 22nd, 2020, Slippi Is released – A version of Melee emulation software called project Slippi is released, integrating modern netcode directly into Melee. This ushered in the current era of the game, allowing accessible practice to anyone in the world, causing a spike in the attendance at Melee events upon the game’s in-person return.
 - 2021 – Mew2King retires, leaving HungryBox and Mang0 as the only active Gods within the Melee community.
 - 2022 – The first global ranking is published after the Covid-19 pandemic, marking the first time a player other than one of the 5 Gods was ranked as the best in the world for the first time.

The players who dominate Melee find themselves etched into the halls of the game’s history. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is Ken. Though far from the most dominant player in Melee’s history, only holding dominance between 2003-2006, a period in which he did not place below second.¹²⁵ Considered the first top pilot of the character Marth, his name continues to be synonymous with the character, with one of the character’s main kill confirms being

¹²⁵ “Smasher:Ken.” 2023. SmashWiki. September 12, 2023. <https://www.ssbwiki.com/Smasher:Ken>.

referred to as “the Ken Combo”¹²⁶. His status as one of the most recognizable names from the early days of Melee led to Ken being documented in part for of a documentary about the history of Melee known as “The Smash Brothers.”¹²⁷ As mentioned in the timeline, this documentary served to inspire many to pick up Melee as a game, and eventually join the Melee community. Many of these players were inspired by Ken specifically and attempted to follow in his footsteps. What started within a historical context had transitioned beyond it, with Ken’s story becoming something more. In his article, *The Structural Study of Myth*, Claude Levi-Strauss describes myth as simultaneous historical and anhistorical.¹²⁸ Here, Levi-Strauss asserts the necessity of a historical aspect to myth. This, to Strauss, is what allows such stories to hold as pervasive an influence as they do over the reader’s lives. That it is grounded in the past justifies the potential supernatural qualities myths may contain, but more importantly allows the audience to connect with the characters within. Simultaneously, there is the anhistorical subset of myth. While the terms historical and anhistorical are antonyms, quite literally meaning historical and not historical, Levi-Strauss’s understanding of Myth as anhistorical takes a slightly different lean. What Levi-Strauss is attempting to convey is not a lack of historical grounding for Myth, but rather a necessity for the story to move beyond a simple retelling of the past. For Levi-Strauss, anhistorical comes to refer less towards a lack of history, and more to a lack of reliance upon history. This is what allows Myth to exist as a timeless entity, something that can be connected with even by those not present within the time it occurred. This historical-anhistorical simultaneity is apt to describe the transformation of Ken’s story by the documentary Samox

¹²⁶ [Observations]

¹²⁷ EastPointPictures, dir. 2013. The Smash Brothers: Episode 4 - The King of Smash (Remastered). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEdi-HsIFuk>.

¹²⁸ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1955. “The Structural Study of Myth.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68 (270): 428–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/536768>.

produced. While a retelling of the historical events of early Melee, it does so with narration from its participants occurring nearly a decade later. With the narration for *The Smash Brothers* being presented by the characters of the story, the viewer was presented not only with the historical context of the events, but also the perception held of Ken by his competitors. This served to separate him solely from his historical context, as these perceptions are being recounted nearly a decade after the events they describe occurred.

Ken's journey fits the structure of separation, initiation, incorporation, that Arnold Van Gennep denotes as a Rite of Passage.¹²⁹ This similarity is not coincidental, as noted by Joseph Campbell in his exploration of mythic heroes, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell designates such phenomena with the term *monomyth*, writing: "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth."¹³⁰ Due to the presence of an exploration of rites of passage within this thesis, I will from this point forth refer to these 3 phases by the alternate names Campbell prescribes: the departure, the trials, and the societal reintegration, respectively.¹³¹ The departure is the section of the myth that sees the individual depart from society to undergo their journey. This is the beginning state, and the one we are meant to relate to. At this point within a myth, heroic figures are still akin to ordinary people, allowing the audience to connect with them as individuals. This is the point at which Samox's documentary introduces us to Ken. Without consistent event spaces as are present within the modern age, Melee players would discuss their skills on a

¹²⁹ Van Gennep, Arnold, and Monika B. Vizedom. 1992. *The Rites of Passage*. 12. print. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr.

¹³⁰ Campbell, Joseph. 2004. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Commemorative ed. Bollingen Series 17. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹³¹ Ibid.

website known as SmashBoards.¹³² At 2:26 of the documentary's fourth episode titled *The King of Smash*, the documentary discusses this, describing how Ken's reputation started off a challenge originating from SmashBoards.¹³³ This served to transition him into the second phase of monomythic progression, that of the trials. This phase is described by Campbell as where "fabulous forces are ... encountered and a decisive victory is won."¹³⁴ This is the central chapter of most myth, and can be most easily seen in examples such as Homer's *Odyssey*. Here, the various conflicts Odysseus undertakes (such as those of the Cyclops and Calypso) are encountered and defeated. For Ken, these came in the form of his various opponents, players such as Azen and PC Chris. In vanquishing these obstacles, the heroic figure proves their mettle, and provides grounds for the audience's reverence of them. It is also where they demonstrate their connection with the non-real to some capacity, fulfilling Levi-Strauss's criteria of anhistoricity.¹³⁵ One of his opponents over the course of these so-understood trials, a player named Azen describes his loss to Ken in an interview presented at 12:02 within *The King of Smash*¹³⁶. "It was like I was facing Neo... he knew everything I was going to do."¹³⁷ Azen's description of Ken as Neo refers to the Matrix, a movie in which a character by that name could slow the pace of time. This connection not only attests to the decisiveness with which Ken's victories were won, but also further characterizes him within the story presented to the audience as beyond the historical world. Lastly, the societal reintegration. This is the conclusion of a given

¹³² "SmashBoards." 2023. Smashboards. December 8, 2023. <https://smashboards.com/>

¹³³ EastPointPictures, dir. 2013. The Smash Brothers: Episode 4 - The King of Smash (Remastered). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEdi-HsIFuk>.

¹³⁴ Campbell, Joseph. 2004. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Commemorative ed. Bollingen Series 17. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹³⁵ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1955. "The Structural Study of Myth." *The Journal of American Folklore* 68 (270): 428–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/536768>.

¹³⁶ EastPointPictures, dir. 2013. The Smash Brothers: Episode 4 - The King of Smash (Remastered). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEdi-HsIFuk>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

myth, occurring when the Heroic figure returns to the society from which they left. For Odysseus, this is his return home, after defeating his suitors. For Ken, this comes with the establishment of his reputation, in which, by becoming known as the King of Smash, he was able to share what he had learned with the rest of the player base. This comes in the form of concepts like *The Ken Combo* and *Dashdancing*¹³⁸: mainstays of Melee competition that find their origins within his journey. In understanding Ken as a monomyth, one finds the first example of mythology within the Melee community, as well as its first heroic figure. However, this is far from the only one.

At the time of writing, perhaps the most recognizable of the different epochs of Melee is that of *The Era of the 5 Gods*. Occurring after the Revival of Melee, this era served to usher in a new age of players, with new individuals rising to leave the whole Ken left at the top of Melee's competitive world. For over half a decade, five players dominated the competitive Melee scene, only losing to each other at events. These five players, PPMD, Mew2King, Mang0, Hungrybox, and Armada, were seen as so dominant that for 7 years they were seen as untouchable, with the inability of others to defeat them leading to their moniker as Gods, referencing their perceived lack of competitive mortality. In addition, each player represented a different aspect of the skills required to play the game. Mew2King is widely credited with our modern understanding of game mechanics, providing the comprehensive research on which the game's modern competitive landscape is based.¹³⁹ He is the first player to utilize a data driven approach to the game, and as a result, shifted the way Melee players view, study, and approach the game. PPMD is the God of

¹³⁸ EastPointPictures, dir. 2013. *The Smash Brothers: Episode 4 - The King of Smash (Remastered)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEdi-HslFuk>.

¹³⁹ "SSBM Statistics List." 2003. Smashboards. August 8, 2003. <https://smashboards.com/threads/ssbm-statistics-list.30064/>.

neutral, one of the three phases of Melee, with the other two being advantage and disadvantage. neutral is best understood as the state in which two players vie for control of the stage they are fighting upon. Neither player has either an advantage or disadvantage towards losing, with the term drawing its name from this fact. It is widely considered the most difficult part of gameplay, as you must both outskill and outwit your opponent to win it consistently. Hungrybox is the God of Defense, with his ability to find victory even in the most lopsided situations earning him the nickname ClutchBox. Armada can best be understood as the God of precision. Melee is notoriously difficult to control, with players regularly positioning themselves just outside of the correct place. Armada achieved consistent dominance with his ability to avoid this altogether. The last God is Mang0, who can best be understood as the God of creativity. One of the traits that draws players to Melee is the flexible ways a player may utilize their character's tools in any situation. Mang0 is known, above all else, for his innate ability to come up with routes considered impossible, despite his marked lack of practice.¹⁴⁰

Juan "Hungrybox" DeBiedma holds a unique role among the 5 Gods of Melee. While the other four Gods have been viewed with a consistent adoration, Hungrybox has had to face consistent condemnation from his peers and the broader community alike, despite his consecutive three-year stint as the best player in the world, the most of any single Melee player.¹⁴¹ The overwhelming reason for his revilement is that of his character of choice. Hungrybox mains Jigglypuff, a character known for her defensive gameplan. This, combined with Hungrybox's own defensive prowess, leads to many of his sets taking significantly

¹⁴⁰ "Mango: 'Being a Mango Fan Is a Beautiful Thing--and Also Sometimes the Worst Thing in the World.'" 2016. ESPN.Com. April 21, 2016. https://www.espn.com/esports/story/_/id/15288899/being-mango-fan-beautiful-thingand-somes-worst-thing-world.

¹⁴¹ SmashWiki. "Smasher:Hungrybox," March 13, 2023. <https://www.ssbwiki.com/Smasher:Hungrybox>.

longer¹⁴² than those of other players and by extension, are seen as boring by the rest of the playerbase. This led to a widespread distrust and disdain for Hungrybox within the Melee community, which continued to shadow him for much of his career.¹⁴³ As his three-year reign at the top trended towards its final year, one event would prove itself the springboard for the rehabilitation of Hungrybox's image. Pound 2019 was a Melee tournament which occurred from April 19-21, 2019, in Laurel, Maryland.¹⁴⁴ The tournament, like the majority of those that occurred in 2019, resulted with, Hungrybox's victory. with Hungrybox taking home first place. But, as he stood on the stage basking in his victory over the crowd, something unexpected happened. Of all things, a crab was thrown from the crowd, hitting Hungrybox in the head.¹⁴⁵ Whatever the reason, this caused the broader Melee community to change their stance on him from disliked to misunderstood, and served as the grounds for him to begin creating content, since becoming one of the preeminent faces of the community.¹⁴⁶ Whereas Ken's heroic Journey is one of inspiration, Hungrybox's is one of redemption. His separation occurred by the ostracization underwent for his playstyle, with his trial being that of the Crab. Lastly, his reintegration occurred through his stream, with one of the 5 Gods of Melee, long without a voice, finally receiving one. As things stand, he is one of the two preeminent voices within the Melee community, with the other being that of the other active God, Mang0.

Joseph "Mang0" Marquez is the only other member of the 5 Gods of Melee still active within the community, and perhaps fittingly, is the most antithetical of the remaining Gods to

¹⁴² Cody Schwab, dir. 2022. GIGASCHWAB 3 - lloD (Peach) Vs. Hungrybox (Puff) Grand Finals. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--cWNxiwA3U>.

¹⁴³ How the Once-Hated God of Melee Became Esports' Greatest Popoff Artist, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UuuCU79yDmA>.

¹⁴⁴ Liquipedia Smash Wiki. "Pound 2019." Accessed March 15, 2023. <https://liquipedia.net/smash/Pound/2019>.

¹⁴⁵ HBox Gets a Crab Thrown at Him After Winning POUND 2019, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36QGssyvzgs>.

¹⁴⁶ "Hungrybox - YouTube." n.d. Accessed December 9, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/hungrybox>.

Hungrybox . Since his arrival in competitive Melee during 2007, he has been the community's golden child, earning himself the moniker of The Kid.¹⁴⁷ The origins of this moniker date back to his arrival in competitive Melee, during 2007. This year also served (as noted in the timeline) as the first appearance of a Super Smash Bros title at Evo, widely considered the most prestigious tournament in the world.¹⁴⁸ Perhaps fittingly, this event also served as Mang0's Monomyth. At the time of entering, he was an unknown player, with zero expectations. For him, entering EVO 2007 was a rite of passage much as described in chapter 2 of this thesis. Over the course of the tournament, he defeated Ken¹⁴⁹, who at the time was winding down his last year as the best player in the world, and Mew2King¹⁵⁰, who had similarly burst onto the scene a year prior and had quickly established himself as second only to Ken. This defeat over Ken can best be considered a passing of the torch, with Mang0 drawing an adoration among the broader community that has never been matched. He proceeded to follow up this breakout by taking his first Major, Pound 3, at the age of 16, merely a couple months afterwards.¹⁵¹ Mang0 is known for his unorthodox approach to gameplay and lack of consistent practice, but also his longevity, with his continued success over 18 years earning him consideration as perhaps the best player to ever live.¹⁵² What truly sets Mang0 apart from his peers though, is the community's wider perception of him. While Hungrybox is considered, even after his redemption, antithetical to the values Melee holds, Mang0 is seen as their embodiment.¹⁵³ His prioritization of creative gameplay in

¹⁴⁷ "Mang0." n.d. Liquipedia Smash Wiki. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://liquipedia.net/smash/Mang0>.

¹⁴⁸ "Evolution Championship Series." n.d. Liquipedia Fighting Games Wiki. Accessed December 10, 2023. https://liquipedia.net/fighters/Evolution_Championship_Series.

¹⁴⁹ "Mang0." n.d. Liquipedia Smash Wiki. Accessed December 10, 2023. <https://liquipedia.net/smash/Mang0>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ theScore esports, dir. 2022. The Story of Mang0: Melee's One True God. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HkbFWygl5o>.

¹⁵² "The Melee Stats All-Time Top 100." n.d. Liquipedia Smash Wiki. Accessed December 10, 2023. https://liquipedia.net/smash/The_Melee_Stats_All-Time_Top_100.

¹⁵³ theScore esports, dir. 2022. The Story of Mang0: Melee's One True God. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HkbFWygl5o>.

combination with his friendly, laid-back persona, endeared him to the Community, and have provided him a significant platform with which to be the other Communal voice opposite Hungrybox . Mang0's gameplay is held by the broader community as so unique that it is unreproducible.

Though texts such as James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* suggest that "The notion of a man-god, or of a human being endowed with divine or supernatural powers, belongs essentially to that earlier period of religious history in which gods and men are still viewed as beings of much the same order"¹⁵⁴, the Melee community finds itself in this position during the contemporary period. It is perhaps notable that, in manifesting their own sacred culture, the Melee community has developed a culture that scholars would denote as primitive. In reference to such a designation, Frazer writes "At this stage of thought the world is viewed as a great democracy; all beings in it, whether natural or supernatural, are supposed to stand on a footing of tolerable equality."¹⁵⁵ This descriptor, of all beings within the space standing on a footing of tolerable equality, eerily echoes the criteria for Victor Turner's concept of *Communitas*.¹⁵⁶ As discussed in the first two chapters of this thesis, this holds true for the Melee community, and serves here to allow within it the manifestation of mythic figures deemed Gods by their communal populace. While it would be expected to see a community which manifests godly figures in the contemporary period model them after contemporary understandings of such divinity, Melee instead does so more akin to that of Hellenistic myth than that of Christian faith. Frazer's reasoning for this distinction is a difference in the understanding of the supernatural

¹⁵⁴ Frazer, James George. 2010. *The Golden Bough*. Memphis: General Books.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Turner, Victor W. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

powers held or imbued by a deity. He suggests that a developed culture requires a higher degree of supernaturality than could be attained by a mortal for a godly figure to be considered. In contrast Frazer suggests that a primitive tradition has obtainable to man, with perfect faith, the same supernaturality that said Gods possess.¹⁵⁷¹⁵⁸ In that the 5 Gods of Melee were originally held as such because of their prowess within the game, the latter description seems to hold true, with the analogy to perfect faith being an individual's commitment to practicing the game. Yet, it does not seem correct that the determining factor as to the categorization of the Gods of Melee, according to Frazier, must be determined solely on the attainability of a certain level of skill. Rather, this suggests additional criteria responsible for such a designation within the Melee community, something attested to by these communal figures continued understanding as Gods whereas those who came after them are either understood as God-Slayers or exist without such a moniker. Perhaps then, the Melee Gods are not best understood as Gods at all. Yet, their difference in standing from the God-Slayers and current top player base is immense. None who have followed, nor came before, have either their platform, consistency, or impact upon the Melee scene. While others are considered to represent the Melee community, it is the 5 Gods alone who are considered as embodiments of the community itself.¹⁵⁹ Despite this, these community members still do not hold within them divinity, and it is still nebulous as to whether they can be considered Godly figures, or whether this simply furthers their similarities to other mythic mortals.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Before continuing with this examination, I would like to take a moment to push back on Frazer's designation of such cultures as primitive, as such understandings stem from a Christo-centric origin in which the modern White Man is believed to be superior to others. While his distinctions are useful, to frame the division as primitive and developed serves no purpose other than to promote a Christo-centric culture as the proper way to live.

¹⁵⁹ [Observations]

With both the Golden Age of Melee and the Era of the 5 Gods each spawning mythic figures within the Melee Community, it would stand to reason that the current age, the Slippi age of Melee, would do so as well, yet this is not the case. While there are members of the community who hold similar social roles, and whose experiences hold similar trajectories, to those of the figures discussed previously,¹⁶⁰ these figures, namely Cody Schwab and Zain, lack the same broader reverence and communal impact of Mang0, Hungrybox, and Ken. Whilst one potential reason for this is their temporal closeness to the present (at time of writing), preventing them from yet reaching the anhistoricality that Levi-Strauss suggests is needed for myth, there is another potential reason. Zain and Cody both entered the community as Doc kids, which also holds them as the first of Melee's highest echelon to be influenced by the existence of Melee's mythic figures. In examining classical cases of mythic figures, such as those of Hellenistic myth, one notes that such figures are not inspired by the heroes that existed previously, a direct contrast to Zain and Cody Schwab. Perhaps the most pertinent example of this comparison is Homer's *Iliad*.¹⁶¹ Considered the end of the Hellenistic period's age of Heroes, as represented within the text by the shield crafted by Hephaestus for Achilles¹⁶², this text serves as a prime ground in which Heroes would be inspired directly by those who came before. Yet, the only mention of previous mythological heroes comes via Nestor, a character held to have lived and interacted alongside them.¹⁶³ Nestor serves, within the *Iliad*, as a dispenser of advice and old stories, providing the preeminent connection between the events of the *Iliad* and broader Hellenistic myth. His advice is described by Homer as both wise and ineffective, such as his acceptance of

¹⁶⁰ [Observations]

¹⁶¹ Homer, Richmond Lattimore, and Richard P. Martin. 2011. *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 1:253-284

the dream Zeus sends to Agamemnon within book 2.¹⁶⁴ Though the Graecians are inspired by Nestor, it is represented neither as consistently effective, nor as connected to previous mythic heroes. Instead, Homer credits this inspiration as resultant of Nestor's vast experience. The sole comparison of previous mythic figures to those in the text comes during his ignored advice to Agamemnon and Achilles in Book one suggesting they reconcile.¹⁶⁵ Throughout the text, Nestor's determination to accompany his advice with his previous adventures is met with an underlying tone of humor, as if to mock him for his reliance on these stories as potential inspiration. The characterization of Nestor within the text seems to suggest that despite his wisdom, it is his seniority rather than mythic status that is respected by the other Graecians. This characterization seems to suggest a requirement from mythic figures absent from the theoretical understandings that I came across over the course of my research: To be understood as a Mythic figure, one cannot draw the inspiration for their journey directly from that of a previous Mythic figure. Though Nestor provides a connection between the current mythological proceedings of the *Iliad* and those prior, he neither serves as a direct influence for any character's monomythic journey, nor is suggested as being inspired by others himself. This seems to provide a reason for Zain and Cody's lack of ensuing impact, as in being directly inspired by the Mythic figures before them, they are then unable to establish their own Mythic status.

The writings of Bruce Lincoln in his text *Theorizing Myth*, though they do not expressly address the criteria posited above, seem to support it. In the preface of his text, Lincoln writes "whenever someone calls something a 'myth,' powerful-and highly consequential-assertions are

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

being made about its relative level of validity and authority vis-a-vis other sorts of discourse.”¹⁶⁶

For a mythic figure to be inspired by a previous monomyth, it would establish a hierarchical structure among them. This would in turn undermine the authority of the latter myth, as it would exist in deference to the one its mythic figure drew their inspiration from. In the first chapter of his text, Lincoln provides an examination of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, and notes a detail within the text that provides further credence to this potential theory. He notes how within the *Theogony*, it is agreed that the text is supposed to read “We know how to recount many falsehoods like real things, and / We know how to proclaim truths when we wish”.¹⁶⁷ He notes the contrasting yet equally available nature of facts and falsehoods to the Muses, and as a result, their equal presence within myth. He proceeds to provide a linguistic breakdown of the text, noting the intentional differentiation of recount and proclaim.¹⁶⁸ “To recount” (in greek *legein*), is a term traditionally used to describe the telling of history, yet here it is conversely utilized to denote the description of falsehoods. He also notes the use of “to proclaim” (in Greek, *gerusasthai*) in reference to truths, a term that inversely is used to assert statements as true without the necessity of a basis of fact.¹⁶⁹ Lincoln notes the disparity between this commonly understood version of the text, and that of many manuscripts of *Theogony*, which replace the term *gerusasthai* with the term *mythesasthai* (to speak, to tell).¹⁷⁰ This draws interest to Lincoln because of the latter term’s use later in the poem, in which Zeus utilizes it to tell “real things” to Perses.¹⁷¹ He finds this

¹⁶⁶ Lincoln, Bruce. 1999. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶⁷ Hesiod. n.d. *Theogony*, via Lincoln, Bruce. 1999. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶⁸ Lincoln, Bruce. 1999. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Hesiod. n.d. *Theogony*, via Lincoln, Bruce. 1999. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

important as, to Lincoln, it suggests that “Greeks found the juxtaposition of *mytehomai* to *legein* the most comprehensible and most effective way to draw a multivalent contrast between true speech and deception”¹⁷². He also notes the lack of presence of these verbs elsewhere within Hesiod’s body of work.¹⁷³ The use of to proclaim, in place of “to tell,” suggests a necessity for not just the presence of historicity and anhistoricity within myth as asserted by Levi-Strauss, but also the blurring of lines between these concepts. This linguistic examination by Lincoln, in touching upon the necessity of myth to represent history and falsehoods as one, provides the premier reason that we see a lack of monomythic inspiration across mythic figures within Hellenistic storytelling. To contain a character inspired by the monomyth of previous figures, a myth would, as can be inferred from Lincoln’s analysis, need to assert which aspects of said myth are true, and which are falsehoods for the purpose of storytelling. The lack of monomythic inspiration across myths, and presence of Nestor (a being known for his age, which would imply an imperfect memory) as the sole connection of the *Iliad* to previous mythic figures, is due, then, to the liminal nature required of the co-present historicity and anhistoricity of a myth. As pertains to Melee, by being inspired by the monomyth of Ken, Mang0, and Hungrybox, the Melee community have accepted the nature of their journeys as blurring the line between truth and fiction. This serves to prevent their obtainability by the current community, as to do so would be to remove their very acts of inspiration from mythic status.

In exploring the journeys of Mang0, Ken, and Hungrybox, I have argued for their consideration as monomythic figures as understood by Campbell and contextually supported by the structural similarities to existent Hellenistic myth. In presenting their journeys over the

¹⁷² Lincoln, Bruce. 1999. *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

course of Melee's history, this chapter touched on the necessity of historical context to determine the nature of myth, in addition to just the historical-anhistoricality. It examined the inspiration these myths provide to future generations, and in doing so, determined the relevance of this inspiration in preventing Myth from occurring. It became relevant to examine why, beyond the historical recency, such a phenomenon of influence has occurred with the most pertinent figures of Melee's past yet fails to do so among those in the present day. In refuting the notion that such a distinction is purely due to historical recency, the chapter grapples with some of the assertions made by Lincoln within *Theorizing Myth*. It attempts to provide a potential reason for the Hellenistic lack of monomythic figures being inspired by those who ostensibly came before. In extrapolating this onto Melee, the determination arises that such inspiration would cause certain myth to make an assertion on the nature of the historical and anhistorical aspects of other myths, calling into question whether they should be considered myth in the first place. The necessity of myth to provide historical and anhistoricality in tandem, as asserted by Levi-Strauss, is not only necessary to the determination of myth, as supported across this chapter, but provides the very reason why the current generation of present figures within Melee find themselves unable to obtain the community influence of their predecessors. While the stories of Mang0, Ken, and Hungrybox can and should be considered mythic within the context of the Melee community, such a designation is barred from obtainability by the current generation not by historical recency itself, but instead by the current generation being the source of the very inspiration that designates their predecessors as such figures.

Conclusion

Over the course of this Thesis, we examined the spaces and characteristics of the Melee community within the context of academic theory within the field of religion, and further examined them as they compare to various religious communal structures. Because of this communal through point, Turner's concept of *Communitas* has served as a unifying factor and point of reference over the course of the text, helping us to better understand the relationship between structure (or lack thereof) and community as pertains to these various structures. In doing so, the exploration conducted within this thesis has come to the following conclusions. Based on the examination undertaken within Chapter 1, in conjunction with the underlying theory which grounds this thesis, the Melee Major can be considered not just a sacred space but an *Axis Mundi*. In addition, we determined the potential presence of sacred objects within the Melee community, which suggests a deeper layering of ritual engagement than the scope of this thesis allowed us to engage with. The thesis also observes the structural similarities between the travels of a Melee community member to a Major and those present within traditional instances of pilgrimage such as the *Hajj* and Lourdes. This speaks to the liminal nature of the Melee community, which it does by virtue of the relationship between existent pilgrimage and the presence of *Communitas*. In acknowledging the relationship between sacred space and ritual within the religious context, and the presence of rituals which occur within such spaces in Melee, we are able to note the nature of ritual within Melee as having overt similarities to rituals of religious nature. The second chapter led us to continue down this path of overt similarity. In examining rites of passage within Melee we not only find a similarity in structure, but through comparison to Baptism, we are able to ascertain that at least some of these rituals hold similar

meaning and function as they do within religious context. The same comparison also suggests that the different types of rites of passage, as framed by Van Gennep (separation, transition, and incorporation,) can be significantly more fluid than the theory asserts. A similar structure finds itself within monomyth, suggesting a connection between the process of engaging with a rite of passage and the potential for a myth to be created. Through examination of both Melee and Hellenistic myth, we were able to assert the presence of mythic figures within melee. This not only suggests that both myth and mythic figures exist outside of religious context but that for one to be the subject of a myth, they cannot be inspired to undergo said process by myth. For example, this would preclude a rite of passage inspired by mythic origin from generating more myth of its own, as doing so would establish a hierarchy within myth that cannot be present.

Based on the above analysis and the definitions provided, we can note the similarity in various ritual structures; presence of sacred space and objects; and presence of myth. This highlights an issue with our existent understanding of the religious/secular divide, in that, by suggesting a hard division between the two concepts, we neglect the context dependent definitions that both Asad and Smith assert as necessary to either the understanding of these terms or the designation of cultural phenomena as such. This speaks to a less concrete divide between the religious and secular, both in practicum and in academic study, than is commonly understood. In addition, I believe the Melee community serves as a strong example for such forms of research as conducted within this thesis due to its overtly non-religious nature in the traditional sense. It is important to note the potential flaw within the scope of my work in coming to these conclusions: this thesis does not take into consideration the experiences of the populace of either the religious or secular groups. While this would have been ideal, due to a mixture of

the scope of the thesis and the lack of IRB approval, the conducting of interviews to obtain such supporting research was impossible.

At the time of writing, this thesis has raised multiple further questions that could be answered with a mixture of further research and anthropological survey should I or others continue this research. Some of these questions are as follows: How does the experience of the populace complement or contrast the assertions made through theory and structure within this thesis? Is the distinction of secular and religious, in the less concrete context asserted by this thesis, a useful distinction for academic study as currently understood? What are the implications of the short timescale of Melee regarding its ritual development? How unique, or non-unique, is Melee within its fulfillment of these traditionally religious criteria? What are the broader cultural implications of the prevalence of such structures within traditionally-held-as-secular cultures, such as Melee? Regardless of the answer to these questions, the presence of concepts fitting the framework of religious theory within communities like Melee suggests a potential evolution in our study of both the religious and secular.

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