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Video Game Design and Kuhn's Philosophy of Paradigms

Kuhn's philosophy of science makes the basic claim that paradigms are incommensurable. To Kuhn, different ways of doing science throughout history cannot be compared to one another because each one has a different understanding of reality and methods of getting that understanding. Simply put, the standards are different in each paradigm. This means it would be unfair to do a comparison of an older paradigm in history with a new standard because that new standard will be overcome by a new paradigm. I would like to argue that this characteristic of incommensurability is present in video games, particularly the series of Super Smash Bros.

I want to break down the paradigm or standard of measuring how good games in the Smash series are from the perspective of game designers first. In looking at the approach of the game design in the second Smash game, Smash Bros. Melee, the designers were searching to stay true to the standards of making a family game. The game was set under the genre of a platform fighter, meaning it was entirely different from normal fighting games, such as Street Fighter or Marvel v Capcom. What occurred after was unique in that the game design had flaws. These flaws are akin to what Kuhn calls anomalies. The design of the game was a platform fighter and at first glance was a game that was fast, fun, and family friendly. The flaws or anomalies in the game were the presence of mechanics that could be performed at quick speeds. And if done properly, the casual gamer would be at a disadvantage. Many if not all players saw this as something good for the game. Even if the game was bad when lined up to

the paradigm of the game designers, it seemed as if the players were happy. Smash Bros. Melee became a huge competitive game in this process.

What happened next in the game designs for the next Smash games was what Kuhn would call the revolutionary period. In light of players doing complicated movements and playing the game competitively, the game designers took a drastic approach. In the last two iterations of the game, Nintendo invited another company to help. This company was the same company that made Tekken, a conventional fighting game. What occurred in the process was a game that took away all the distinct movements and design of melee and made it more like a conventional fighting game. Some of these changes were the taking away of platform movement, and the adding of conventional fighting game mechanics such as parrying and grab cancels. Although it was a platform fighting game, the standard had been changed by Nintendo. How does this connect to Kuhn.

For players who enjoyed Melee, especially competitively, the changes Nintendo did were very bad for the game. And for those who did not want to break their fingers or get carpal tunnel syndrome, these changes were necessary to be able to play casually, and possibly competitively. The question may be asked, which game is better? I would argue that one can see what Kuhn was getting at. It is hard to compare to games that, when designed, had different approaches. And even more nuance is added when players who came from both games try to use the standard of their game to judge the other. In other words, competitive Melee players cannot tell those of the last iteration of smash that the game is better because it is faster, more true to platform fighting, even though the game might be more fun for them. That definition of fun has changed in the new game to mean, lower learning curve and more true to the intent of the game designers

The process Nintendo went through was very similar to the process of paradigms. They set out goals in Smash Bros Melee that failed, but were successful to other people. However, as a company that was not satisfied with a game that had anomalies, they had to redo the whole

philosophy of designing the game to a new standard. What ensues is groups of people from both games arguing with different standards which Kuhn says is impossible. They are incommensurable and should be seen holistically as one series with many changing ideologies of game design.