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'Smashing it':
How user entrepreneurs drive innovation in esports communities

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Abstract

Aims: This study aims to understand user entrepreneurship within esports by analyzing the
Nintendo esports title 'Super Smash Bros.'

Methods and results: Using a case-study approach we develop a model that integrates factors
supporting user entrepreneurship in the esports industry. Through a content analysis
approach, we combine online forum data with 12 interviews of key figures within the European
Super Smash Bros scene to develop our findings. We contribute to the understanding of the
interdependence between user- and environmental-specific factors of user entrepreneurship
that enable innovation within communities. This study provides value in providing a platform
for future studies to further develop our understanding of innovation and entrepreneurship
within esports.

Conclusions: Esports as a context is particularly suited for innovation through user
entrepreneurship. User specific factors are the result of motivations that were not exclusively
financial and driven by insights and knowledge obtained through the system in use
perspective. Environment specific factors are due to engaging, uncertain and dynamic
conditions combined with the unique context of the competitive Smash scene. The
entrepreneurial activities of users are central to the development of esports, from which the
whole industry benefits. User entrepreneurs play a valuable role for the development of the
industry, as they seek opportunities that may not be recognized by larger commercial actors.

Highlights

- The Super Smash Bros community represents a unique platform for user entrepreneurs who have been integral to the development of the competitive scene.

- Esports can increase our understanding of the interdependence between user- and environmental-specific factors of user entrepreneurship that enable innovation within communities.

- User entrepreneurship is an important but underestimated aspect of the esports industry and acts as an important driver for its continued development.

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Introduction

Esports emerged from user innovation within the context of video games and, to this day, remains one where the audience acts as the central stakeholder.(1) Prior research has found a positive impact of user innovation on company performance and industry development.(2-5) Thus, it is not surprising that this phenomenon is receiving increasing attention in theory and practice.(6) There are various forms in which users create innovation. When users take charge of both developing *and* commercializing innovation, this is defined as *user entrepreneurship*.(7)

User entrepreneurship is "the commercialization of a new product and/or service by an individual or group of individuals who are also innovative users of that product and/or service"(7) and differs from general entrepreneurship in that users participate in collective, creative activities in the social context of the user community they are part of. Such user communities are characterized by voluntary participation, the free flow of information and knowledge, and low hierarchical control structures.(8) In these communities, the collective creativity of users with various backgrounds and access to different resources is vital for the innovation process.(9) Users tend to be especially entrepreneurial in industries where products and services are considered fun and enjoyable, as they are motivated to spend time on activities they are genuinely interested in.(7) User entrepreneurs and their environment are characterized by: Unique and inimitable knowledge through a system-of-use perspective, non-monetary motivation, industry characteristics and collective creative activities of user communities.(7) Access to such communities is a unique resource for the user entrepreneur, being built on mutual trust, and impossible to achieve for an outsider of the community. The sharing of ideas without the primary intention of gaining financial benefits can lead to clear improvements and word-of-mouth marketing in the user communities, culminating in a commercially viable output.(7, 9)

User involvement is a primary characteristic of esports, as users tend to be energetic, enthusiastic, and dynamic.(10) Still, esports studies within the entrepreneurship context remain limited,(11) despite numerous success stories of esports gamers that have become entrepreneurs, such as streamers, tournament organizers, or inventors of gaming-related products.(1) The processes underlying value co-creation in esports and how esports communities empower and motivate users to create value remains poorly understood.(12, 13) Many esports competitions and communities are grassroots initiatives – sponsors with substantial marketing budgets do not organize them, but their core audience with a vested interest in social gaming.(14, 15) The socio-emotional connection between players and the community is a critical element in triggering entrepreneurial engagement from the users.(16) Game publishers are an essential stakeholder in esports as they hold the intellectual property rights for the games yet regional and amateur esports actors increasingly shape the esports markets through real-world events and activities.(17) The esports community is an essential stakeholder within the industry, as it is a primary driving force for its grassroots development.(1, 15) Members of esports communities participate in a voluntary and collective process aimed at creating and expanding knowledge about games, tournaments, and players. Many community members dedicate time and resources to organize and review different parts of the game, such as rules, regulations, and anecdotes.(18) This practice conveys a sense of responsibility and reciprocity, based on player involvement and identification with specific games in esports. Thus, esports encourage grassroots entrepreneurship for players who want to leverage their passion for gaming into commercial activities. Their entrepreneurial mindset is fueled by their commitment to the future of esports.(10)

Super Smash Bros (Smash), published by Nintendo, as an esport franchise exists in the genre of fighting games consisting of 5 individual titles. The most successful titles are; Smash Melee (2001) as the best-selling game for the GameCube(19, 20) and on the Switch, Smash Ultimate (2018), as the best-selling fighting game of all time.(21) The release of Ultimate has seen an increase in interest in the franchise as an esport with 5.36 million hours viewed in July 2020 across Twitch and Youtube, making it the top viewed game in the fighting genre.(22) Gamers often cite Melee as one of the major titles that helped esports to grow to its current state(19, 23) and until the release of Ultimate, Smash Melee remained the preferred version for use in tournaments despite the release of Brawl in 2005, with the scene kept alive by community run tournaments in the US and Europe.(24) It was users acting as entrepreneurs who organized and ran competitions, supported by stakeholders such as the Evolution Championship Series, providing support for the games inclusion in their events.(24)

Smash as a competitive esports scene has faced many challenges which at times have been compounded by the intermittent involvement of Nintendo.(23) These included the communities' lack of structure, regional fragmentation and in the case of Melee, differences within the US and European versions of the game and potential investors discouraged by the lack of involvement by Nintendo (Budding, 2019).(23) Furthermore, the game was designed to be played for fun and not as a competitive sport meant that the community had to address issues of balance within the game.(24) Occasionally the scene has seen moments of wider support such as in 2004 when the Major League Gaming in the US incorporated the title within events (23) yet it is only recently that the franchise is receiving significant interest. The first 'Smash World Tour' will launch in 2020 featuring tournaments throughout the world for titles and a prize pool of 250k USD, supported by Twitch.tv and Smash.gg as official partners.(25) This commercialisation has occurred through collaboration between key community figures and industry.(26) Despite recent increased involvement by Nintendo in the official esports scene for Smash(27) it has been the grassroots player communities in the US and Europe that independently developed the initial structures and tournaments that make up the history of competitive Smash.(19, 23, 24)

Given the characteristics of user entrepreneurship(7) and how the community has increasingly realized the commercialization of Smash to this point, we conceptualize that leaders within the Smash community have acted as user entrepreneurs. As Europe has remained an under supported region for the Smash community relative to the US(27), we propose the following research question to understand user entrepreneurship in the esports industry:

How is user entrepreneurship enabled through user-specific attributes and environment-specific characteristics within the European Super Smash Bros esports scene?

Method

To answer our research question of how user entrepreneurship is enabled through user-specific attributes and environment-specific characteristics, we conducted a single case-study of Smash.(28) We explored the phenomenon in-depth by combining different data sources through an embedded case-study approach and triangulating interviews with narratives posted in online forums. We selected content analysis as an appropriate method for filling in the gaps of existing academic knowledge about a bounded phenomenon that is currently deficiently and limited researched.(29, 30) We interrogated the collected data for the presence, meaning and relationship of main ideas and concepts that are suitable to answer our research question.(31) Therefore, we followed a deductive approach of systematically structuring our analysis in a way that is operationalizing previous existing knowledge(29, 31) about user

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entrepreneurship, the esports industry and communities that we deem suitable for answering our research questions.

We conducted semi-structured interviews via Discord with 12 actively involved and influential members such as community leaders and tournament organizers between February and April of 2020. Consisting of eleven males and one female aged between 21 and 35, they live and operate professionally across seven different countries in Europe (Table 1). Sampling of interviewees started from personal contacts to active individuals in one Smash community located in Sweden. To gain access to influential tournament organizers and active community members in Europe, snowball sampling was used to tap into the networks, an appropriate sampling method for a community-based data collection due to its effectiveness for studying organic social networks.(32) A semi-structured interview guide was developed through a combination of our research purpose and key findings from our literature review. Nine key initial questions were identified (Appendix 1) that allowed us to engage each participant in follow up questions relevant to their own experiences. All participants were presented with a detailed explanatory consent form before engaging in the project and interviews lasted an average of 72 minutes.

Table 1 - Interview Information

Interview	Role	Working nation
INT 1	Esports Project Manager	Sweden
INT 2	Organizer Smash Events	Europe
INT 3	Tournament Organizer, Community Leader; Co-Founder	Germany
INT 4	Tournament Organizer; Community Figurehead	Sweden / Denmark
INT 5	Founder; Tournament Organizer	Germany / Switzerland
INT 6	Tournament Organizer and Board Member	Sweden
INT 7	Tournament Organizer	Sweden
INT 8	Head Tournament Organizer; Community Leader; Smash Commentator	Denmark
INT 9	European Smash Ultimate Community Leader; Head Tournament Organizer	Great Britain
INT 10	Community Leader; Head Tournament Organizer	Italy
INT 11	Tournament Organizer and Board Member	France
INT 12	Head Tournament Organizer	Sweden

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We complemented the interview data with narratives by casual community members from selected online forums (Table 2).(33) We analysed existing discussions and also initiated forum threads, where we asked forum members about their motivations to join the Smash esports scene and their impressions of it. Relevant threads, comments and responses were collected to compliment the interview data. Finally, members of the research team attended both amateur and professional Smash events and tournaments to develop a sense of the community in action.

Table 2 - Online forums included for triangulation

Forum	Forum characteristics	Geographical location
Smashboards.com	Internationally used Significance in early Smash days > 350.000 forum threads > 20 million messages > 250.000 members	International, strongest in Northern America
Smashlabs.de	German Smash scene > 7.000 threads > 230.000 messages > 6.500 members	German Smash Community
Reddit.com/r/smashbros/	> 70.000 members	International
"Smash ultimate Sverige: onlinekrigarnas discord" discord channel	> 800 members	Swedish Smash Ultimate Community
"German Smash Com" discord channel	> 3000 members	German Smash Community

The transcripts were read through process of immersion.(30) First impressions and thoughts about the data were discussed before coding. Then two of the authors coded the first interview together, using ATLAS.ti as a tool to provide inter coder reliability. During this process, the researchers agreed on codes deemed necessary for answering the research question. The remaining interviews were coded separately using the determined codes as well as adding new codes via ATLAS.ti. Throughout this process of individual coding, the researchers closely discussed the codes and updates. After completing the first round of coding, the results were examined to derive a joint interpretation of the findings. As a result, several codes were adjusted and the corresponding data were recoded. Next, sub-categories that emerged from the data were generated and then grouped into generic categories according to their inherent theme and meaning. In the final step, the generic categories were then connected to the main categories to provide an answer to the research question. The resulting data structures are visualized in Figure 1 and 2.
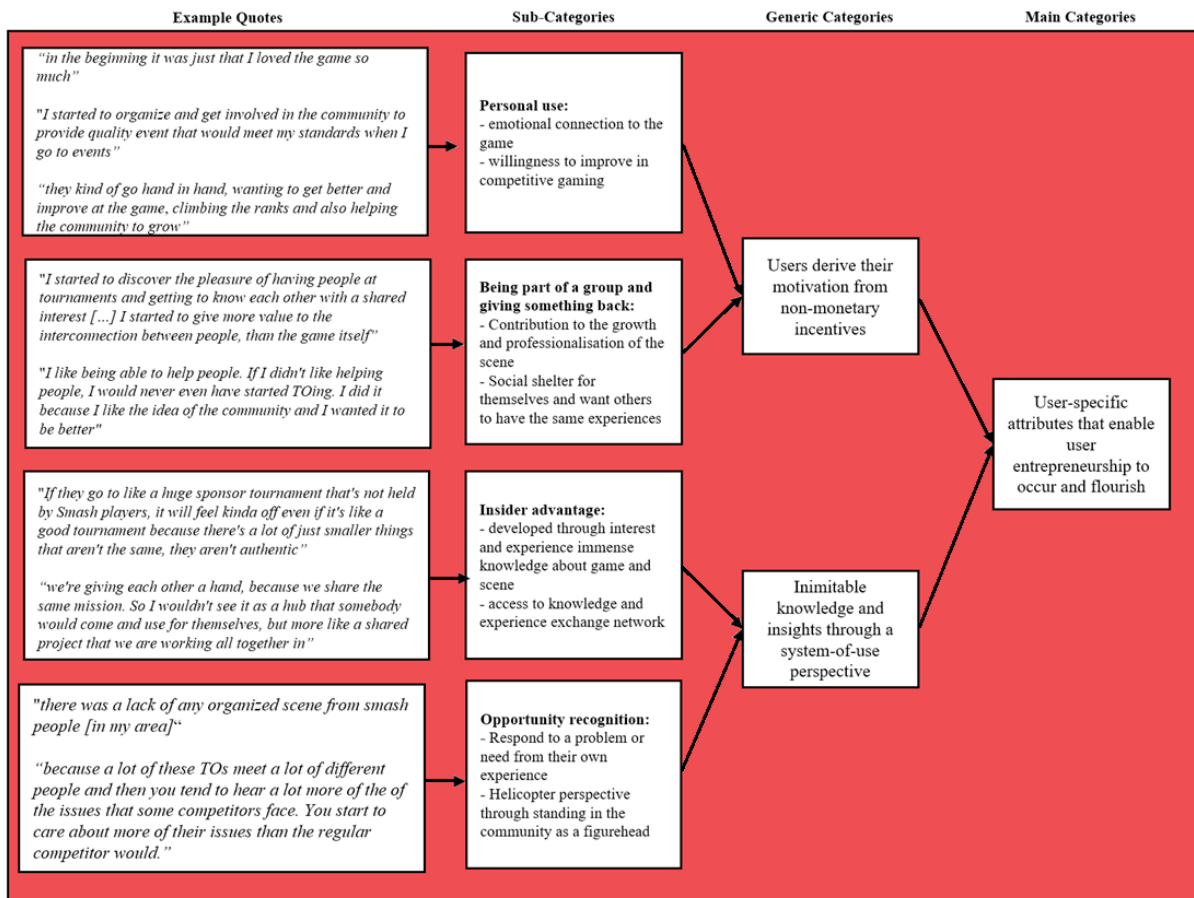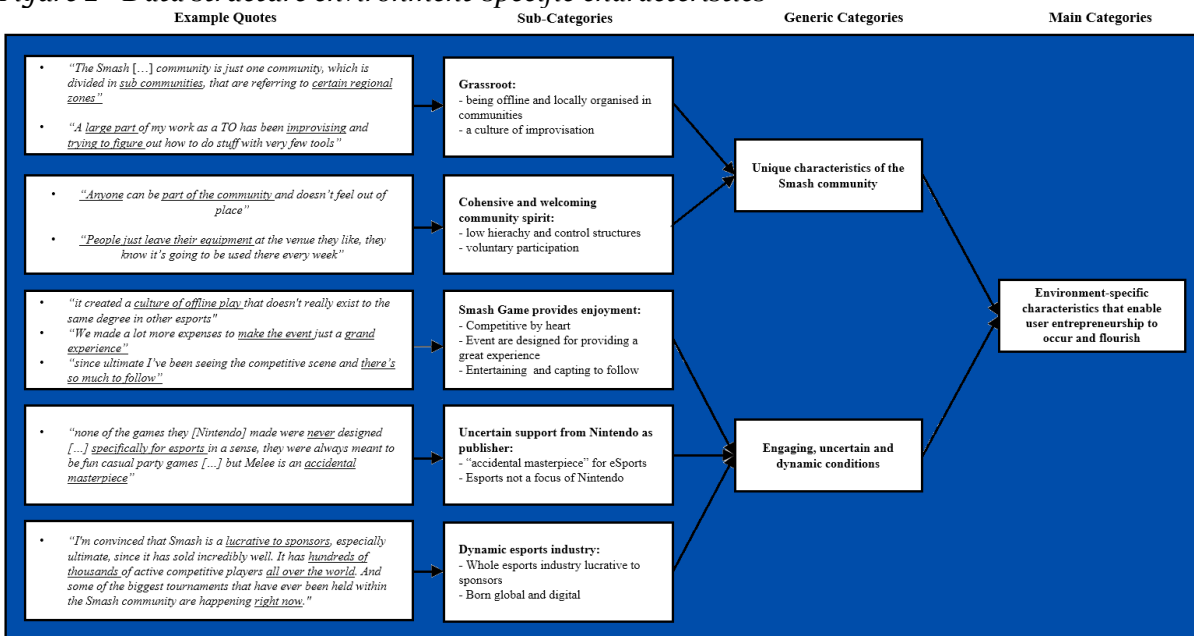
Figure 1 - Data structure user-specific characteristics

Figure 2 - Data structure environment-specific characteristics

Results

In answering how is user entrepreneurship enabled through user-specific attributes and environment-specific characteristics within the European Super Smash Bros esports scene, we have identified several key findings of value that can enrich user entrepreneurship and esports industry theory.

User-specific attributes

The results of our study indicate several user-specific attributes enabling user entrepreneurship. One of the unique attributes that characterize users of Smash that act entrepreneurially is that motivation is not purely driven by financial incentives: *"In Italy, esports in general, but Smash in particular, is not developed enough to build something for a living [...] you have to work on an amateur level most of the time, and that is what I do"* (INT 10). There is not a lot of money in the Smash scene in general, as user entrepreneurs acting as tournament organizers tell: *"you pay a lot from your own pocket. So, you collect the money and often you spend most of it to pay for the venue and other stuff [...] it's not an income you can live from"* (INT 3). Instead, the motivation to act entrepreneurially stems primarily from their personal use as well as from being a part of a community they want to give back to.

Typically, user entrepreneurs within the Smash scene started their engagement based on their use of the Smash games. After building an emotional connection to the game, players began to play competitively with their friends but soon sought out other players at a similar skill level. *"At first, I played it online. But at some point, I was like, I want to get really good at this game, it's fun and all, so I started to look around more"* (INT 8). Many of our participants had notions similar to the following: *"Offline play is just far superior to online play for Smash and always has been and there was a need to kind of have offline events to have a sort of legitimate scene"* (INT 8), they were not satisfied with just playing it online or with their friends.

Many of our participants noticed a lack of local offline communities and events with existing communities and tournaments often not living up to expectations: *"I noticed that the Smash scene was a cluster that's really small, that we can develop and put some structure in to make it grow. And that's how I started to organize and get involved in the community, to provide quality events that would meet the standard I expect when I go to events"* (INT 11). Thus, the desire to compete in a game that they have a connection to and passion for. This created an initial motivation for these individuals to act entrepreneurially, a motivation deriving from their personal use of the product.

Through joining or creating a community, these individuals found a group of people perceived as welcoming and tolerant, that they could relate to regarding interest and passion: *"The vast majority of the Smash community were outcasts. So, for people that don't have a lot of friends or weren't really good at social things, the Smash community was really open; you see so many different kinds of people in the tournaments, so many different faces"* (INT 11). Feeling a sense of belonging to this community, they develop affection and care for its members and obtain satisfaction through recognition by them: *"There's nothing more gratifying than seeing people super happy at the end of an event or just having a great time and smiling and everything. It's the best feeling"* (INT 8).

This care for the community also enhances the desire to improve it: *"I like being able to help people. If I didn't like helping people, I would never even have started my venture. I did it because I like the idea of the community and I wanted it to be better. And then I wanted more to happen."*

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(INT 9). Thus, they strive for the growth and professionalization of the scene: *"We're still doing it for fun since we don't get much money out of it. But it surely feels more professional, now we have semiprofessional contacts with people, and we have a professional attitude in regards of players and production value and all that kind of stuff, but it started very lightly"* (INT 8). Overall, feeling connected to their community of Smash players, caring for them and wanting the community to grow and professionalize, are strong foundations for individuals to engage in user entrepreneurship.

One characteristic shared by Smash players that enacted opportunities for user entrepreneurship is the unique knowledge and insights gained through their system-of-use perspective of the game and its esports scene. Through their own experience with the product and community, they encountered and reflected on problems and needs that actors external to this scene would not recognize. This insider knowledge provides them with a better understanding of the community as a consumer, allowing them to organize events that are perceived as authentic. The importance of this becomes evident from several failed attempts by community outsiders to host tournaments: *"[a major esports organization] got priority for this event, but it wasn't accepted at all. [...] They had a lot of problems doing this, and the backslap of the community was also high. The community wasn't satisfied with the tournament at all"* (INT 3).

User entrepreneurs from the Smash community also acquire inspiration from other communities and events: *"a lot of my ideas for my tournament (...) come from when I attend events for other fighting games"* (INT 9). Thus, experienced community insiders develop a system-of-use perspective that equips them with unique, intimate knowledge and insights about the Smash community as a basis for their user entrepreneurship.

Environment-specific attributes

The environment around the Smash community has some unique characteristics which facilitate user entrepreneurship. Especially noteworthy are the community's grassroots character and its cohesive and welcoming community spirit: *"The entire community is just grassroots, people volunteering their time"* (INT 12).

The activities of the Smash community are not limited to tournaments and large streaming channels, many of its activities remain true to its grassroots and are offline: *"The Smash [...] community is just one community, with regional sub-communities"* (INT 10). The community holds weekly and monthly get-togethers in which members come together, practice and socialize: *"We have a lot of people who are attending Smash tournaments on a weekly basis, there are thousands of people just in Scandinavia that go to a tournament every week"* (INT 12).

Compared to other esports titles, Smash's online mode is rather poorly developed, further shaping a culture of offline meetings and get-togethers. The community culture allows members to connect and share their passion: *"I think that the lack of an online scene really makes a difference. While Smash has an online scene nowadays, its roots in the offline meetups have really shaped how the community mentality developed around this game and around this community"* (INT 4).

In the amateur-driven grassroots scene, a culture of improvisation developed. Moreover, *"most of the people that play Smash are young adults or students"* (INT 11), an age in which experience in other commercial fields or event organization is generally not yet developed: *"you don't instantly become an expert in event organizing. That takes time and experience, (...) and I had no*

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background in organizing events of this size" (INT 1). Hence, the grassroots spirit in the community allows more active members to test ideas.: *"Putting in your time and your effort is the greatest resource you can put into the community"* (INT 12). Entrepreneurial endeavors of all types that might enrich the community are highly appreciated. Members are encouraged to take on new roles and responsibilities, to be innovative and to try new things. *"A large part of my work as a tournament organizer has been improvising and trying to figure out how to do stuff with very few tools"* (INT 9). Through this culture of improvisation, active community members are not afraid to ask others for help.

Another characteristic of the Smash community that plays a vital role in fostering user entrepreneurship is its cohesive and welcoming spirit, being inclusive in its approach to accommodate newcomers. Apart from some selected events on the highest level, there are hardly any invitational tournaments for Smash: *"that is what I personally like and (...) when I first started, I received a warm welcome into the community"* (INT 10). This welcoming community spirit also attracts some people who otherwise struggle to 'fit in': The Smash community attracts people from different backgrounds, cultures and ages: *"Anyone can be part of the community and doesn't feel out of place"* (INT 12), as in the Smash community *"we are part of one big Smash family"* (INT 11). It is because of this spirit that most community members enjoy attending community events, build trust and volunteer their efforts and resources to help the community: *"People just leave their equipment at the venue they like. They know it's going to be used there every week"* (INT 9). In this atmosphere, user entrepreneurs receive a lot of appreciation for what they are creating: *"the delayed gratification icon – you've been slaving away for six months for an event to happen. And it finally does happen. And you are nonstop showered with appreciation of how much people enjoy going there and the fact that it even exists, that will keep you going for a year."* (INT 1).

One of the peculiarities of Smash is the uncertainty caused by the lack of support of its developer Nintendo: *"None of the games Nintendo made were ever designed [...] specifically for esports, they were always meant to be fun casual party games, [...] but Melee is an accidental masterpiece".* As a result, a unique mentality developed in the Smash community: *"I've never seen a scene that both hates and loves their publishers so much as with Smash. And I think this 'us against them mentality' has really shaped the community."*
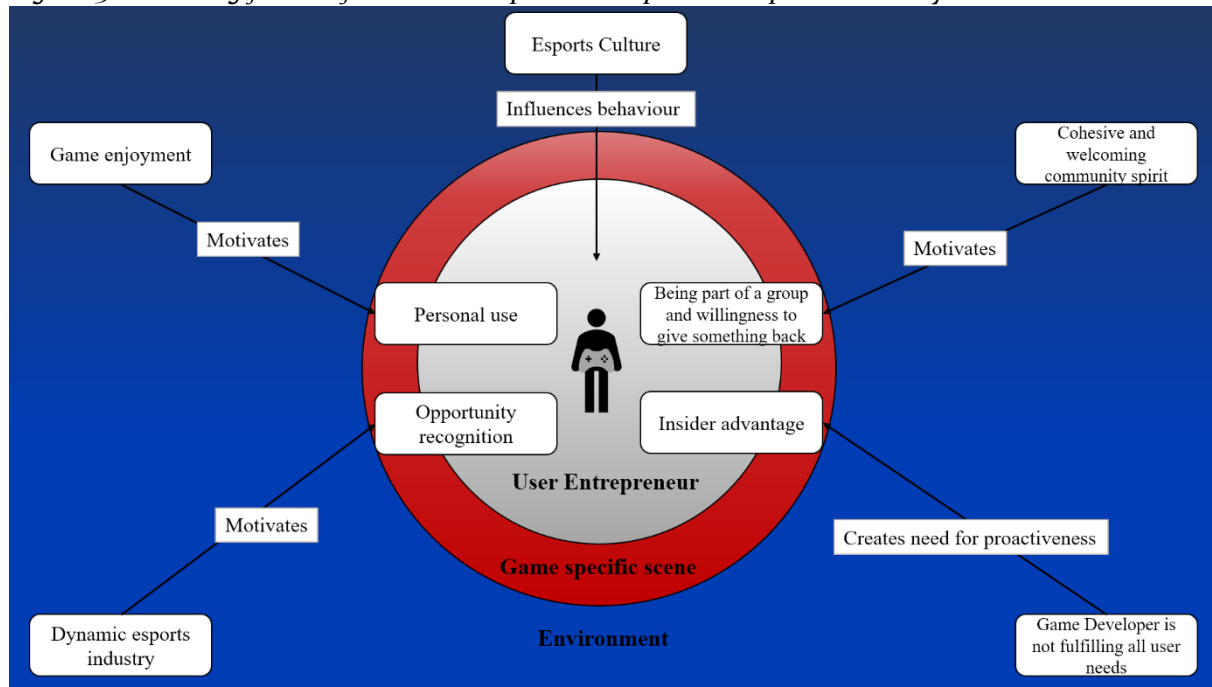
Recently, Nintendo's strategy has changed though. They have, for example, organized the European Smash Circuit, creating a system to interconnect stand-alone grassroot tournaments: *"Just the fact that there is a circuit makes people attend more events, because they're competing for these points and every event that is in the circuit benefits hugely from it"* (INT 8).

Large, professionally organized esports festivals, can act as accelerators for the more grassroots-oriented Smash community since they tend to involve grassroots communities in their planning: *"We have built a network in Europe, [...], where we're working a lot with grassroots organizations, both to recruit staff, but also recruit their experience and help each other"* (INT 2). Most major esports festival organizers themselves started within grassroots organizations and therefore feel obliged to support smaller communities: *"it's also a way of just supporting this community from a moral standpoint of the festival, like, we come from these grassroots organizations ourselves, if we don't support these communities further, there maybe won't be a future scene"* (INT 2).

DISCUSSION

We have identified both user-specific and environment-specific characteristics as enablers of user entrepreneurship in the Smash esports ecosystem (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Enabling factors for user entrepreneurship in the esports industry

Several environmental attributes were identified to have a direct influence on user entrepreneurship in the Smash scene: Firstly, the game itself is an important environmental trigger, as it provides users with pleasure and thus motivates some Smash players to further develop the game experience in a way that enhances not only their personal benefit but also their willingness to share this with others. Secondly, the cohesive and welcoming community spirit leads to the social motivation of users to engage in entrepreneurial activities, as they feel the need to return value to this community. Thirdly, the esports industry itself is an important driver for Smash users to identify opportunities, as users often adapt solutions existing for other game titles in esports to the conditions of Smash. Another relevant aspect is the culture of improvisation at the grassroots level, which allows users to operate in an environment that provides security and does not exert pressure for a high-end solution but rather appreciates all improvement efforts. Lastly, the uncertainty in Smash's ecosystem, due to Nintendo's lack of support, is a direct environmental factor that facilitates user entrepreneurial activities by triggering proactive behavior to achieve improvements.

Our model (Figure 3) captures user-specific attributes and environment-specific characteristics in the esports industry that can serve as enabling factors for user entrepreneurship activities enhancing the model of the end-user entrepreneurial process(7) by putting a spotlight on the importance of specific environmental factors and by illustrating how they influence user behavior and enable user entrepreneurship.

Our findings suggest that users are motivated by enjoyment in the game and to further its growth through user entrepreneurship. Within esports, the impact of belonging to a community of people with a passion also serves as a decisive motivating factor for user entrepreneurs, as they want to contribute to the well-being of their community. User

entrepreneurship is aided by industries with adynamic and uncertain market in which users have low opportunity costs and the use of the product or service provides enjoyment.(7) In this study, we establish that this is true in esports. We illustrate user entrepreneurship as an important but underestimated aspect of the esports industry and as an important driver for its development.

Given the industry's dynamics, in which new patches, game modes, or even entire games are introduced frequently, opportunities for user entrepreneurs arise continuously. Even if the game developers are not actively involved in the early stages of user entrepreneurial activities, users and established esports organizations are often drivers for professionalization, from which they equally benefit.

Limitations include that the choice of content analysis for this research means the produced research outcome for this method of data analysis relies not only on the researcher's skills and experience but also heavily on their personal interpretations of the data.(29) Furthermore, this study examined the European scene while the American Smash scene may be bounded by separate user and environmental characteristics. Future studies could extend this research around other communities in the esports scene to better understand the degree to which user entrepreneurship is related to communities of different games and genres. Our findings provide a valuable starting point to understand other entrepreneurial aspects of esports through building on recent esports research, such as streaming and content creation,(34) monetization,(35) consumer behaviour,(36) ecosystems,(37) developing regions,(38) and integration into the wider sporting world.(39)

Conclusion

This study identifies the Smash community as a cohort for user entrepreneurship and reinforces the suggestion that esports stakeholders can benefit from engaging with and supporting regional esports actors in both commercial and non-commercial ventures. Unique aspects of the competitive Smash scene impact upon both the user and environmental characteristics that enables user entrepreneurship, demonstrating that esports is a viable platform for extending research in innovation and entrepreneurship.

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Appendix 1 - Main interview Questions

1	What were your motives to initially join or start a Smash community?
2	What are the top three factors why new members join the community?
3	Can you name the three most important factors for community building?
4	What is the main support or collaboration partners for community building?
5	How do you interact with other local Smash communities?
6	How has your community / tournament professionalized and grown since its foundation
7	How do you think the Smash scene has become more professionalize overall?
8	What are the most important milestones that have been achieved in building a competitive Smash scene?
9	What is your opinion about Nintendo's contribution to competitive Smash? How has it changed over time?

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