

“John”: A *Rich Point* Linguistic Analysis

Abraham Miller

The Rich Point topic that I will be analyzing is the word: “John”, specifically as it is used by the community of players who competitively play the video game *Super Smash Brothers*. Most commonly used as a verb, “to John” roughly means “to make up an excuse for losing rather than admit defeat”. I found this word interesting because firstly, I myself have noticed this phenomenon both in *Smash Bros.* as well as other games and competitions. Also fascinating about this word is that to anyone outside of the Smash Bros. community, John is simply a name, but to a player, it is a complex idea with deep emotional context. In this paper I explore how players utilize the word to prevent unfair comparisons of skill, and the implications of the rich point with regards to how the Smash Bros. community views skill and fairness in competition.

Super Smash Brothers is a fighter style video game created by Nintendo. The second iteration of the game, *Super Smash Brothers: Melee*, was released for the Nintendo Gamecube in 2001 with immense worldwide success. *Super Smash Brothers: Melee* would go on to become the best selling title for the Gamecube, and one of Nintendo's most popular games of all time. The overwhelming popularity of *Super Smash Brothers* certainly produced great profit margins for Nintendo, leading to the eventual creation of two more modernized iterations of *Super Smash Brothers*. But more importantly, it also facilitated the start of a competitive *Smash Brothers* community, wherein players compete against one another for valour and occasionally large sums of money. Fourteen years after the release of *Melee*, the competitive *Super Smash Brothers* community continues to grow at an astounding rate, with 3,284 unique players competing in the most recent annual “EVO Championship Series” Global *Smash Brothers*

Tournament, which held brackets for Melee as well as the most recent title: *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U*. The total combined prize pool for both games was \$37,950 (3b).

The community of *Super Smash Bros.* players is massive. Smashboards, an online forum dedicated to discussion of the game, claims that over 200,000 Smash Bros. players contribute to forum conversations. Any large group can develop a culture, and competitive *Smash Bros.* is no exception. After fourteen years of mutual interest and focused discourse surrounding the game, a rich culture has formed around *Super Smash Brothers*. Hundreds of neologisms have been created within this community. If an outsider were to listen in on a conversation between two avid *Smash Bros.* players, they would be completely unable to understand the interaction due to lack of cultural context and knowledge of *Smash Bros.* jargon. In this paper I will attempt to bring some light to just one Rich Point in the *Smash Bros.* culture.

In order to fully understand the word as it is defined by cultural insiders, I decided to take to the internet and analyze the usage of John in online *Smash Bros.* communities. Smashboards, and the *Smash Bros.* fans on Reddit proved to be the online communities with the largest player bases. I also went to a meeting of the UW *Smash Bros.* Club and interviewed club members about the rich point to gain further insight.

The Smashboards online community discusses news about *Super Smash Bros.*, and techniques or strategies for the game as well as conversation about professional competitive Smash Bros. events. Smashboards is definitively the largest Smash Bros. online community, and a great sample for the culture of the Smash Bros. community. After sifting through a few threads about Johning, I quickly understood that Smash Bros. players are very disapproving of Johns. Many threads were devoted to making fun of Johns, some were made to try and

convince people not to John. One poster, in a discussion simply labeled “john” gave a humorous list of the most popular Johns that can be used while playing (2a). Some Johns were based in the game, like, “your character is better than mine!” Others blamed reasons for their loss on the controller such as, “my controller is broken” or, “my buttons are sticky.” Johns can be wildly different, but I believe it is clear that all Johns have the same goal of justifying a loss without admitting a difference in skill.

Smashboards let me see of glimpse of the popular opinion of Johns and some brief explanation, but, the *Super Smash Bros.* Reddit community I think had more valuable insights about the word John and its implications. Also a forum-like online community, The *Smash Bros.* subreddit is an alternative to Smashboards as an online place for discussion of all things Smash, although it is much less focused on just discussion of gameplay. I found one post asking players their opinion: “When does a John become legitimate? What is your definition of a John?”(1a). The original poster, HallowedBeThyBrain, claimed that a John is “an illogical excuse that has no inherent effect on your play” and that “A John no longer becomes a John when it genuinely affects the player.” HallowedBeThyBrain gave the examples of “I just had hand surgery yesterday” and “someone unplugged my controller” as legitimate Johns. Responses to the post generally agreed that Johns could be split into two distinct categories: legitimate John, and illegitimate John. However, the community response about whether or not a John is acceptable seems to rely on a different categorization. Reddit member, AbidingTruth, claims “Saying that X happened and that’s why I was playing bad is a lot different from saying X happened and that’s why I lost. When someone starts saying that they lost because of whatever reason they bring up, I typically just call that a John.” Other Smash players on the thread agreed with the

sentiment that a John only is deemed offensive when it seeks to invalidate an opponent's victory. One Member named Groating contributed: "I only care [about a John] if the player is implying that they would have won if the conditions were different. 'I would have won but I only slept 3 hours' is way worse than 'I played pretty bad... I only slept 3 hours last night'." In both of Groating's examples, a player is using a lack of sleep as a John for poor performance, however only the first example shows an affront on the opponent's skill. The first example shows a John being used to implicate that under normal conditions the person saying the John would have won, while the second example shows a John being used to excuse bad play without directly saying the lack of sleep would have made a difference in the outcome of the match. What I have learned from my online research is that *Smash Bros.* players find Johning to generally be annoying, but when a player Johns specifically to devalue an opponent's win is when people get legitimately angry. This makes sense, since generally an attack on a person's ability is likely to produce a negative response.

Next, I took my research to a more personal setting. The *Smash Brothers* community at the University of Washington is quite large with approximately 100 active members and more than 600 people subscribed to the Facebook group page. When I arrived, the club was in the middle of a tournament. The club hosts a large double elimination tournament bracket during each of their weekly meetings. It seems quite clear that within the culture of this community, one's skill is highly valued, and it is vital for the members to all measure their *Smash Bros.* abilities against each other every Tuesday. *Smash Bros.* players love to compare their relative abilities to each other, there is even a ranking system which keeps track of the best ten players

in the club based on their past tournament standings. Not surprisingly, the highest ranked player, Rustin, managed to win the tournament.

I found a group of players who did not arrive in time to enter the tournament playing some of what they call “friendlies”, or non-tournament matches, in the corner, and I asked them a few questions about Johning. First I went around and asked each of them what their definition was for the word John. The responses were unanimous: Johning is making an excuse. Gary, a Smasher who graciously agreed to an interview, eloquently described Johning as, “placing blame for a loss anywhere but your ability as a player.” He gave the example of complaining that your controller is broken. A player named Isaac clarified, “Johning can be done proactively, as well as after a loss.” Essentially, if you know that your opponent is more skilled, you can John before the duel starts, making an inevitable loss appear more justified. This is sometimes referred to as a “pre-John.” I later on found some additional commentary about pre-Johning online; a member of the *Super Smash Bros. Melee* subreddit gave his opinion on pre-Johning: “People who pre-John when they know they're going to lose are the worst. That's my main pet peeve”(1a). Johning, or making an excuse to avoid admitting defeat, is hated by everyone in the *Smash Bros.* community. I also asked the players how they felt when someone Johned after losing to them. Gary told me that he “wouldn’t want to hang out with them.” Another *Smash Bros.* player in the club, Tomo, responded, “When someone Johns against me, I find it interesting that they feel like they need a reason for why they are losing,” and after a pause he told me that “people John when they don’t want to admit that their skill is less than mine.” I can conclude that Johning is heavily frowned upon by Smash players. Not surprisingly, being denied the glory of a win can be quite frustrating. To combat Johning, the *Smash Bros.*

community has acquisitioned a simple counter phrase: “no-Johns”(1b). This can be said before the start of a match to dissuade an opponent from Johning or after an opponent Johned to call them out for trying to avoid admitting defeat. This even further cements the fact that Smash players want to prevent any affront on their perceived skill level.

My experience at the Smash Club, my interviews, and my online research, all informed me to the fact that the *Smash Bros.* community culture is obsessed with skill. The rich point that I’m exploring was born out of this obsession. The concept of Johning exists in any test of skill. Whether it be calling attention to a loose racquet in a game of tennis, or complaining about a lack of sleep during a chess match. In the Smash community however, perhaps due to the extreme focus on player input speed and absence of room for small errors, the frequency of making excuses for poor performance is high enough where they made their own word for it. The existence of the word “John” in the community allows *Smash Bros.* players to call out and prevent an attempt at softening a contrast in ability, so that two player’s skills can be compared without any irrelevant information being taken into the measurement. John, in one word, conveys the idea that an opponent is trying to detract from your victory by claiming some extrinsic event prevented them from performing at their maximum skill. Without this word, the victim of a John either has to ignore the implication that the outcome of the match was not a reflection of the true relative skill levels of the two players, or they must attempt to articulate the idea from scratch. *Smash Bros.* players want their skill to be compared to others fairly, as do all humans in any competition, and the creation of a term to facilitate fair competition reflects this truth.

If you enjoyed my paper and are interested in this rich point, please read the aside below the Works Cited about how “John” originated and my thoughts on why the term is exclusive to *Smash Bros.*

References

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2 *Smashboards.* N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2015. <<http://smashboards.com/>>.

a) <<http://smashboards.com/threads/john.79482/>>

3 *SmashWiki, the Super Smash Bros. Wiki.* N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2015.

<<http://www.ssbwiki.com/>>.

a) <<http://www.ssbwiki.com/John>>

b) <http://www.ssbwiki.com/EVO_2015>

A John is an unjustified excuse for losing which invalidates the opponent's victory, that much has been made clear through my participant observation, and online research. Although it does not really develop my paper, I additionally researched the origin of the word. A thread on the *Smash Bros.* Subreddit asked this question: "What is 'johns' and where did it come from"(1b). All the answers had the same general idea: a *Smash Bros.* Player named John always made excuses for his losses, and people started to use his name to describe the phenomenon. Interestingly, several regional variants of the word John have cropped up either alongside or independently to the English version. Smashwiki reports that Smash communities in Sweden, Spain, Italy, and Germany have generated synonyms to John in the same manner as the American variant was originated (3a). In Sweden Yuna can be used in place of John, a reference to a Swedish Smash player named Yuna who, like John, made a lot of excuses for his losses. In Spain there apparently exists many John analogues, each named after players famous for the same behavior showed by John. The pattern repeats for Smash communities in Italy, and Germany. The concept of making an excuse to escape admitting defeat exists in practically every competitive endeavor. So why have *Smash Bros.* communities coined a term for this idea rather than more established sports and games with larger player bases?

My hypothesis is that most competitive pastimes do not take place in the medium of a videogame. To play a physical game such as tennis successfully, a diverse skillset of strength, endurance, hand-eye coordination, and strategy are required. A defeat would be hard to pin down to any one of these parts of play. Hand-eye coordination and strategy are both also a part

of competitive *Smash Bros.*, however, without the precise timing of complex sequential inputs, a player will be unable to compete at a high level. This means that any disruption at all of a player's ability to hit the correct buttons during play could lead to a loss. In a competition with so little forgiveness for any input mistake, extremely small errors can become the reason for the loss of an entire game, and thus rationalizing a defeat by selecting a single specific reason becomes quite easy. For example: not getting enough sleep. In other words, the way that *Smash Bros.* is structured as a game enables frequent Johning. Due to the frequent Johning, we can assume *Smash Bros.* players in competitive communities will often encounter the phenomenon, which would explain why *Smash Bros.* communities would invent a term for it and other communities would not.