

Team Ben:

A Year as a Professional Gamer

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Prologue

Looking at a picture of Benjamin Vassiliev, a person can't help but notice that his features do not agree with one another. His eyelashes are much too long for a masculine face, but with a jaw line too square to allow it to be feminine. His long hair sits styled in a way you might describe as pretentious, if his lips didn't rest naturally in a smirk that seems to mock himself as much as the person looking at him. He is the funniest person I've ever met.

I moved into Ben's neighborhood in the 7th grade and we immediately became best friends. We climbed trees, talked about girls, beat the crap out of each other, and generally did the things boys do when they have lots of time on their hands. We would organize games of jail break with the neighborhood and run around in the dark until somebody called the cops and we had to go inside. Summers together were endless fun for us, and some of the fondest memories I have.

Ben had a wiry frame, but his posture was intimidating to me and I always had the impression there was a lot of power hidden behind the t-shirts that hung off of his shoulders. I liked to be around Ben because he made me laugh, and because he was somehow mysterious - he seemed to know things about life that I didn't.

The summer before high school we spent all of our time together and wanted for nothing. There were girls around, and we talked about them a lot, but there was an understanding between us that we weren't seriously interested. Other of our friends were more adventurous, but we enjoyed the security of each other's company and were in no hurry to leave it behind. But then high school came, and I think it was lonely at first for both of us. I know that most days I ate my lunch by myself; I have a clear memory of sitting on the grass outside reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The world suddenly seemed much bigger, and Ben and I didn't hang out as often. Video games were our constant, but that time was threatened by school and extracurriculars - and when Ben was the first of us to get a girlfriend, it became the only thing we didn't have in common.

Caroline was her name, and I had set the two of them up, if somewhat by accident. She had very pale skin, and light blond hair with light blond freckles to go with it. They would hold each other in the hallways as though he were about to ship off to war, which was so surprising for me because I'd never seen him look like a twat before - but he was lost in her, and that was that.

High school brought out a brooding, artistic side to Benjamin, which would have been more annoying if he weren't also suddenly so talented. He began writing books and drawing portraits; he acted in shows at school; he enrolled in a martial art called Gumdo. One day in his living room he began casually

picking out songs on the piano, despite having never been taught to play, and I remember noticing something else that separated us - I had never felt creative or artistic like him. And despite all these new hobbies, Ben somehow found the time to be everything to everyone. We were the best of friends in that Good Will Hunting, I'd-lay-down-in-front-of-a-truck-for-you kind of way, but his feelings for Caroline burned intensely in a way that I didn't even understand as a senior in high school. Her ditziness did not seem to bother him and all his philosophizing; he wanted nothing more than to make her happy.

Incidentally, Caroline had taken in a charity case of sorts, in another classmate of ours named Ryan. Ryan was a lonely boy, and quite attached to Caroline. He would spend time with her, though invariably melted into the background when other people came around.

Caroline felt bad for Ryan, and so asked Ben to include him as often as possible. Ben obliged fairly often, but I would typically make myself scarce when that happened. To put it plainly, I had no patience to spend time with someone who didn't interest me. But here again was something that separated Ben and I - he had a worldliness about him and a gentle understanding of things that did not narrow his passion.

Senior year of high school was so perfect it felt like a parody of itself. I had come into my own, doing a lot of theater and finally dating someone. Ben and I hung out every day, along with his little brother Erik

(who just started as a freshman) and our other good friend Kevin (whom we snuck into our school by faking residency at my parents' house). Each morning Kevin would come pick me up in his ridiculous station wagon, then we would pick up Ben and Erik and ride to school blasting "I Get Around" through open windows.

The four of us were inseparable during school hours, too. We had classes together, we ate lunch together, and three nights a week Ben and I would drive to the school for play practice (he was the Oberon to my Lysander). He and I were also meant to perform Monty Python's "Dead Parrot" routine at our school's talent show.

On Friday, January 3rd, 2003, the four of us left school together as usual. We stopped at 7-11, as usual, then went back to Ben and Erik's place, as usual. Except on this day, Ben was having Ryan over, so naturally Erik, Kevin, and I had plans to clear out as soon as that happened. We were practicing our a capella routine for the talent show in the kitchen when Ben told us that he would actually be going over to Ryan's house instead, allowing us to just stay and hang out. So around 4:00 he left, said goodbye, and that was the last thing I ever got to hear him say.

It was just a small amount of Cyanide that did it, which Ryan had slipped inside a can of Coke, that ended Ben's life. Just a sip is all. It is remarkable, I think, how a life can be lost, or rather taken, so effortlessly, without any screaming or bleeding or

anything. Just alive one moment, and not the next. All the memories, the thoughts and opinions, the plans for the future, the jokes, songs - all erased by a chemical a high school student can research and then buy off the internet.

Ben was flown to Johns Hopkins, but there was nothing to be done. The doctors and the police asked their questions, but no one had any answers. He was over and he was gone. Ben donated his organs, and he saved three lives - we were told someone even got his eyes. He was 17.

When I found out the doctors were giving up on Ben I was out in the falling snow, in the street. It snowed more that winter than it had in 70 years.

Beginnings

A Grassroots Community

My very first video game tournament experience was at a run-down old house in Alexandria, VA. My friends and I found out about a tournament being hosted for the game we all played in our free time, Smash Brothers Melee, and we thought we would go just to check it out. We may have been going partly for a laugh, I can't recall, but I know that I wasn't expecting much to come of it. So it is astounding, then, how dramatically the course of my life changed that day, despite what a crap factory the event itself was.

The house was at the end of a cul-de-sac, in a neighborhood about as poor as you can find in Northern Virginia, which is one of the richer areas of this country. There was a pit bull on the porch, and a shopping cart in the front yard. The whole scene was dirty - the neighborhood was dirty, the house was dirty, and the people . . .

It was like entering a different world. There was a musk - maybe not a stench but the air quality was decidedly different - of body odor. The house was crowded, but nobody seemed to be talking to each other; there was just the sound of buttons clicking and the symphonic music of the game. We paid our money and began to sidestep around the room, taking it all in. I noticed slumped shoulders, matted down hair, ill-fitting t-shirts with words on them. Not

a girl in the whole house. In a word, it was depressing. In a color, it was brownish-yellow.

It sounds cruel to offer such a bleak assessment of this situation, but to be any kinder would be false. However, I can unabashedly say that I found some incredible friends in this community over the next 10 years, people I will never forget. And as far as the people with whom I just couldn't make a connection, well, I still consider myself lucky to have met them. It broadened my horizons, and, more importantly, it taught me the importance of diversity.

Speaking of diversity, the first person I played that day happened to be one such friend, Christopher McMullen. He would have been 16 at the time. Chris was Asian, despite his overly Irish name, and exceedingly shy. Over the next few years we would become good friends and teammates, and he would make a name for himself as one of the greatest players of all time.

He was known as the "Master of Diversity," because he could play all 26 characters in the game with equal skill, something no one before or since has been able to accomplish the way he did. Rather than learn the ins and outs of one character at a time, the way the rest of us did, he just . . . understood it all. He must have seen the game differently than other players, at an elementary level. He did this with other games too, casually and humbly earning nation-wide top scores on puzzle or racing games. In fact I'll venture that he saw most of life that way, with a heightened sense of clarity.

He was eccentric, too, if you took the time to get to know him. Strange would be another word for it. When we went out to restaurants, and I don't know whether it was the shyness or the eccentricity that lead him to do this, but rather than ordering something off the menu he would just ask one of us to get two of whatever it is we were getting. He made thousands of dollars from tournaments, but he just let the checks pile up on his desk. He treated them like parking tickets: you can't really throw them away, but who feels like dealing with them? He also had an incredible sense of humor, though his shyness often kept it hidden. And he never complained, not about anything.

Chris also didn't sleep - if you wanted to go over and practice with him you had to bring a friend in hopes that the pair of you could keep up. I would drive to his house with Kevin; we would play for hours together, then I would take the first sleep shift from midnight to 4am while Kevin played him. Then he'd wake me up and say "okay, it's your turn to play, I'll sleep for a while." I'd hobble out of bed, onto the couch, and play until the sun came up.

So, back in the brown-yellow house in Virginia, I had no idea what I was up against, sitting down to play with Christopher McMullen, Master of Diversity. Each match he played that day, he would "ditto" his opponent, meaning to pick the same character (much the way he would ditto your order in a restaurant). While this was certainly not his intention, it was particularly insulting to be beaten with your own

character. He danced circles around me, crushed me, and I think I made some sort of superior remark to him as I left. Nerd.

My first foray into competitive gaming was a disaster. It was embarrassing just being there, let alone not winning a match all day. I was dejected. The best part of my day was hanging out with the pit bull, which ended up being a pretty sweet dog. Turns out the dog, like gamers, shouldn't be held to stereotypes.

There was no gradual progression into the next phase of my life. No shades of gray. I think it was the taste of failure that really set me off, but I was also interested in this subculture that I never knew existed; immediately after that tournament I went home to find another. I started to practice. I would go to another tournament, do just a little bit better, and get motivated all over again. A competitive spirit inside of me had been stirred and there was no going back. Do the research, watch the videos, learn the tricks.

The game is simple. Two players (or four in a doubles match) are put on a stage and given four lives each. The game is two dimensional, and so the stages have an edge on each side and typically a few platforms. A player attempts to get his opponent off the stage and keep him off, thereby taking his life. The first player to take all four of his opponents'

lives is the winner. Tournaments are held in a double elimination format, with pools beforehand for seeding into those brackets. High level matches are best three out of five games.

Its simple nature makes Smash Brothers Melee a great game for parties, and a common reaction when I tell people about my game of sport is “ohhhhh, yeah, I played that one all the time in college!” Admittedly, it’s also great for kids. But the game actually proves to be a ridiculously deep well of subtle tactics and technical skill. The game, at a professional level, looks different each year than the year before, and the champions of previous years often look silly when measured against modern players.

It is my wish to share with the reader some of the complexities of advanced play, because this was much of the allure for me when I first started. However, in an effort to maintain readability I have split that educational material up into two parts (the second included much later on).

Advanced Melee is built around split-second timing. So much so that it cannot be played on most widescreen TVs, because there is a lag time of about half a second in converting the image. When a player is executing maneuvers that average six inputs a second, a half-second delay is disastrous.

The first subtlety of Melee one needs to master is speed. It is not simply a matter of moving faster, pressing the buttons faster, or being aggressive. To be more accurate, the first subtlety of Melee one

needs to master is learning when a character is capable of movement, and this is not obvious. Partly it requires paying very close attention to your character, and partly it requires manipulating the lag your character experiences ("lag" is any time your character is unable to move, usually due to a previous action).

To become a serious contender in this game, I knew I had to speed up. I developed a strict training regimen:

First, learn to L-Cancel. By pressing the L button at the exact moment an aerial move hits the ground, lag following the attack is eliminated. Do it 100 times in a row without missing.

Found a tournament in a high school gymnasium in Trenton, NJ. Placed second to last - need more practice.

Next, learn to short hop. Press the jump button extremely quickly and your character will jump half the normal height. Short hop 100 times in a row without making a mistake.

Drove to a rec center in PA. A church in West Virginia. A shopping mall in Ohio. Could not break into top 16.

Now learn to dash dance. Hold the joystick down and your character will run - but if he runs too far

he won't be able to turn around and run the other way without skidding first (this is lag). However, run back and forth within a specified distance and the turnaround is swift, giving yourself flexibility in your movement. There's a rhythm: back, forth, back, forth. Close your eyes and do it without visual clues, just feel it. Back, forth, back, forth - dash dance without stopping for 5 minutes.

Spent a weekend in Manhattan - I started bringing a notebook with me, and took careful notes on what I saw.

Piece it together. The following maneuver should take less than 1 second: short hop, down air, fast fall, L-cancel, shine, wavedash, short hop again.

Drove 13 hours through the night to Lansing, Michigan. Slept on the floor of somebody's basement. Earned 17th place - almost there. Then I began to build on the successes - 5th place at Baltimore, 4th at Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Within a year of beginning my training I was consistently placing top 10 at local tournaments.

The first tournament I won was in Virginia. I was playing well, to be sure, but I was outmatched in the finals. My opponent had been around longer and was wholly more talented, but I had the element of surprise on my side, so I thought my best bet was to exploit that. To tell the story, the reader needs to

know that I played one character - Peach. My team partner, Kevin, played one character as well - Marth. Typically, Marth is Peach's most difficult matchup, but endless hours of practice had made me an exception to the rule. I ate up Marths like ½ priced appetizers.

My opponent in the finals could play several characters, but I knew I'd only really stand a chance against him if he played Marth. Luckily for me, he followed conventional wisdom and chose Marth first. A minute into the first game I knew I had him. I could tell I was way more comfortable than he was, so I just played with him a little, sort of tiring him out the way a boxer might. I let him get the better of me, and dropped the first game intentionally. In a best three out of five set, I had room to lay out my plan.

When he beat me I cursed, and started the second game right away. Then I proceeded to drop the second game, at which point I turned to Kevin in fake frustration and said, "I don't know what to tell you - he's doing different stuff than you do, I don't know how to get around it." I made sure to win the third game by a small margin, and then the fourth too. Now the match was tied at two games apiece, and my opponent had a decision to make. The first two games he crushed me, so wasn't Marth his best bet? Why challenge convention? He took a long time to decide, but ultimately decided to stay Marth for the fifth game of the match.

Big mistake. I revealed what I had been hiding: an unprecedented understanding of the Peach vs. Marth

metagame. I played on my instincts and soundly won the match, and the tournament. First place! If my initial failure playing Melee didn't do it, my first real victory certainly tipped me over the edge. I made a decision to become a national top ten player, and that was that.

The tournament I had won was simply a local (which is smaller than a regional, which is smaller than a national), which means that it took place in some kid's basement. I can tell you that my victory buzz was only slightly harshed when upon leaving I had to thank the host's parents for letting us come over . . . but I had grander plans. Off to Texas.

My first national was in Dallas, in January of 2005. In fact, this was technically an international, marking the first time Europe came to the US to compete - The Netherlands and Sweden were represented at this event, as well as talent from both coasts and Mexico. It was the biggest tournament to date with 127 attendants, and for me an incredible weekend.

MOAST (or Mother of All Smash Tournaments) was not only my first major tournament, but my first time off the east coast and my first plane ride. I was 19 years old and had managed to never have been on a plane, and the first thing that got me in the air was a video game tournament. I also learned a thing or

two about the kindness of strangers, southern hospitality, and grace in victory.

By this time, Smashers (as we affectionately called ourselves) had already formed a strong community, even if it wasn't that big yet. Primarily through online forums, a person could find a smasher in any part of the country and ask for housing, whether for an event or not. In fact, since 2005 I have not ever had to pay for a hotel room when I didn't want to, having no trouble finding friends to house me whenever I leave my state. This I think is a truly wonderful thing. And so for MOAST I simply got online, indicated I had three people in my party, and as easy as that I had a home in Dallas. But I suppose a detour about these three people is necessary before going any further . . .

Team Ben

Creating an Identity

Back at my first tournament, with the pit bull and the shopping cart, I was asked which “crew” I was with. I learned that having a crew, usually regionally based, ensures you won’t meet your teammates early on in competition and was common in competitive Melee. I wasn’t prepared for this question, but I answered without missing a beat or looking to my friends for confirmation - “We’re Team Ben,” I replied.

What else could it be? What else was there? At that time Ben was all we thought about, all we dealt with. Ben’s life, Ben’s death, Ben’s family. Ceremonial events and court proceedings took up not only our emotional reserves, but also our days. The unavoidable grief and the drama which accompanied it was all-consuming. From the moment I got the first phone call, my whole world changed.

I keep a journal - I have since I was a kid. Having a journal is nice because reading it can really put things in perspective for you. Perhaps that time in your life or the relationship you were in really weren’t as perfect as you thought they were, for example. But rereading the entries leading up to January 3rd, 2003, a sentiment from The Fountainhead comes to mind - it is positively indecent for a person to be this happy. Everything in my life was going just the way I wanted. And what

really iced my cake is that I had just recently met a girl.

Back in high school, back before everything, I was a hopeless romantic. Only hopeless doesn't quite cover it - I was an irreconcilable romantic. I waited and waited for the right girl to come along so I could buy her flowers and hurry up and graduate college and have five kids.

Now the girl isn't as important to the story at hand, as it turns out. I didn't marry her, and in fact to write too much about her would eventually make her an antagonist, which also isn't the point of the story. But at 16 years old Maria completed my picture of contentedness, and I don't have to consult my journal to remember the afternoon of January 3rd.

Ben, Kevin, Erik and I left high school that day like we were fucking T-Birds. I don't know how I could have felt higher. As we strolled through the parking lot to the ridiculous station wagon we rolled through town in, I passed Maria and she blew me a kiss. I actually caught it and put it in my pocket, that's how farcically care-free and happy I was. I hung out with Ben Erik and Kevin after school as always, until Ben went to go over Ryan's house. He said goodbye to us for the last time, and Kevin, Erik and I got to practicing our song for the Fall talent show - the aptly chosen Weird Al Yankovic a capella song, "Since You've Been Gone."

Later that night I received a phone call from Ben's mother. Now she was something of a worrier,

so when she asked me to come to Howard County General Hospital I figured it was due to some gross overreaction. But when I got to the hospital and saw the looks on everyone's faces, the gravity set in. I was quickly ushered into a room with Ben's parents, all of Ben's close friends, two police officers, and a doctor. They wanted to know what drugs Ben was taking that caused him to be rushed to the hospital. They said, "We can't save him if we don't know what's wrong."

And that's when he was murdered a second time. Because Ryan was there in the room with us, he sat there with his arm around Carolyn and said he had no idea what happened. He had a chance to confess and save Ben, but his silence murdered Ben for the second time in one night.

Out in the lobby Kevin and I tried to work it all out. The four of us hadn't had so much as a drop of alcohol between us, so we couldn't imagine Ben taking any drugs - willingly, at least. We had our suspicions, but who listens to emotionally compromised high schoolers? No one, and probably for good reason. So we waited in the hospital for as long as they would let us, until eventually we had to go home and Ben had to be flown to Johns Hopkins. I rode home shoulder to shoulder with Ryan in the backseat of a car, rubbing up against . . . it's so unsettling that I can't bring myself to narrate it.

To give credit where credit is due, Howard County's finest confirmed Kevin's and my suspicions almost immediately. Ben's heart was still beating

when Ryan was arrested. They learned it was cyanide that was destroying Ben's body, and traced it to Ryan's house, but it was too late - his brain was already dead. I'm thankful that Ben had parents who believed that without the thoughts in his head, the blood pumping in his heart meant nothing. The doctors kept him alive long enough for us all to say our goodbyes, and to rescue as many organs from him as possible, but no longer.

I can remember only flashes from the night it all ended, and my life changed forever. I was in Ben's house awaiting news when a family friend told us there would be no tomorrow for Ben. Go to the hospital to say your goodbyes now, she said. I ran out of the house, and into the street. It was snowing, I remember that, and after about 50 feet I just fell to my knees and wept openly. Eventually a pair of arms lifted me up (to this day I don't know whose) and brought me back into the house.

It's amazing how cliched acts don't feel cliched at all when real-life drama happens. No part of me was secretly enjoying the cinematic color to my actions. I hid myself in my arms for a long while, and the next face I saw was Maria's - it was the middle of the night but someone must have called her. She, Kevin, and I walked through the heavy snow to my parents' house and we woke them up and told them.

"Ben is dead. It's 2am. We have to drive to the hospital and say our goodbyes now. Yes, I'm okay."

There is only one more part of this awful night I would like to share, and I do it only out of hope that

it will give the reader a sense of that night and what Ben meant to us. Erik, Ben's baby brother and only 14 at the time, got me alone to let me know he hadn't given up on Ben. "I know everyone else thinks it's over," he explained to me in a hushed voice, "but I know Ben can still pull through. I have hope." I don't remember what I said to Erik, but I know that when I said my goodbye to Ben that I promised him I would always take care of his little brother. Hopefully he would agree I've done an okay job.

Right, so crew name? Team Ben. That was already our crew even if we didn't yet call ourselves that. I wish more than anything that Erik was with us that day, and that he spent the following decade with us as a part of Team Ben, but the competition factor always turned him off. It just wasn't his style. Instead, Team Ben began as me, Kevin, and Manus O'Donnell the 7th.

Manus looks more than a little bit like Ben, and he was Ben's good friend before I met either of them. He, Ben and I all went to the same middle school, but then Manus went to a different high school and I lost track of him. In fact I didn't really know much about Manus pre-tragedy; Ben's death had the unforeseen consequence of bringing all of his friends and acquaintances closer together. In Manus' case, he would become one of my best friends for

years to come. Something good coming from something awful, it might be said.

If Ben was the funniest person I've ever known, Manus is undoubtedly the smartest. He's clever as all get out, which also makes him hilarious, but most impressively he is a sponge of information. He soaks up facts, made more impressive by the way he never brags about them. But ask him a question and it's like a Google search result in .23 seconds. Manus, how far away is Saturn? Manus, why don't the back windows in my car go all the way down? Manus, why can't we time travel? Kevin and I were incessant with our questions. Well, Kevin was incessant with his questions, and I just enjoyed egging him on.

Kevin is in many ways the opposite of Manus. Where Manus is tall and lanky, Kevin is short and muscular. While Manus avoids confrontation at all costs, Kevin will argue with you about the color of the sky, if you'll let him. He once said he didn't believe in Helen Keller.

I've known Kevin since 4th grade gym class, and by the time we started competing we had written a good deal of history. We had performed together, worked together, grew up together. Starting with my first recess fight in elementary school all the way through Ben's death, there was a lot we survived only by being a team. Now I can also recall a lot of times when he wasn't there, but he is someone I've called my best friend at more than one time in my life, and all we've been through has created a truly impressive synergy between us and an exceptional

ability to communicate. We were the competitive doubles team for Team Ben, and we would go on to be one of the best-known teams to play competitively.

So that was us - Team Ben. It would later grow, to four and eventually six people, before shrinking down to just Kevin and me, after Manus decided he no longer wanted anything to do with the scene, for reasons I've never truly understood. But during the years that this underground community began to take shape, we benefitted from his humor and perspective.

Competitive Melee came at the absolute perfect time for the three of us, providing an outlet for all our stress, and also bringing Manus close to Kevin and me in a way that I don't know anything else could have. We became a team, and still are today. As of this writing I can't say I am quite as close with either of them as when we were playing, but we established a solidarity that has lasted throughout the years.

So the three of us arrived in Dallas with no idea what to expect from our first national, or from the person we had never met who was trusting enough to invite us into his home for several nights. Corey was his name, but I don't remember much more about him than that. His mother on the other hand, her I remember. When she came home from work, she was appalled to hear that we hadn't eaten and

immediately started to work on dinner. Over a nice meal together, she learned about us and we learned about the whole family - Corey and his sister Cali and his brother Jordan. It was such a wonderful, lovely experience breaking bread with total strangers. So endearing.

It only took a couple of days to feel at home. On our second day there Jordan took us to see the place where JFK was shot, and on our third day, we drove their car to go pick up Cali from school. On the east coast, in DC, it's not safe to trust people - certainly not with your car and your children. But things were different in Texas - that much was clear just by the way strangers talk to one another. This was all entirely novel to me, and it was far from the last time my horizons were broadened by an opportunity given to me by competitive gaming.

Texas was wonderful. The weather was perfect, plenty hot but refreshingly bereft of DC humidity, and the neighborhood in which we stayed was beautiful. I fondly remember spending time just walking around the area by myself and counting the people who waved hi to me. And for anyone who has never been to Texas, everything really is bigger. The people, their personalities, their cars, and their stores. Team Ben visited a Wal*Mart that was the size of a small town and we spent almost an hour there just running around and marveling at its size and scope.

Though, truthfully, it wasn't even the highlight of the trip, the tournament was also quite excellent. I'd

never seen so many TVs my life - the walls were lined with them, just intense gaming going on for 50 yards in every direction. I'd also never seen such a collection of nerds before! It was several hundred people in one grand gaming center (people were there for other games besides Melee), and it was ripe for people watching.

Ken Hoang was there, the champion from California, and if this story has a villain, we surely meet him now. Ken was the undisputed best in the world for many years - to see him lose at all was quite rare. However, Ken was not humble, or really a nice person at all. He had a palpable air of smugness about him, and not just concerning the game at hand, but people in general.

Ken is my age (which would make him about 20 - 22 during the timeline of our story), Vietnamese, and wore a persistently sour look on his face. I fail to describe him better than this: to me he always looked like he was in the middle of eating something really terrible. He not only made it on the Gabon season of Survivor, but actually made it to the top five (the clever bastard). So if anyone saw that season of the show, I trust they know what I mean about the smugness.

But he was immensely talented. His gameplay itself never impressed me, which was what was so impressive about him. You could never put your finger on exactly why he was so dominant; he just knew how to cut through people and get right to the win. I admired that, the way I admire prowess in any

field, and Ken certainly had that. He was undefeated in doubles play with his partner Isai, and virtually undefeated in singles play. MOAST was no different, and he tore through the competition that day without breaking a sweat.

Ken was my rival, not only as a result of mutual disdain, but also because of the characters we played. Ken was another Marth player to my Peach, which meant by definition I was not afraid of him. In fact, I saw it as my destiny to beat him at a major tournament.

My chance came in November of that year, at Major League Gaming's 2005-2006 playoffs tournament in Atlanta, GA. It was a big day in my competitive career. My first match of the day was against my long-time mentor, the person after whom I modeled much of my Peach tactics, Mike G. I had lost to him at least three times in previous tournaments, but here, on this day, the winner of our match got to face Ken. So I did what I had to do and I bested Mike that day and it was nothing short of momentous for me. My strategy was simple: I knew by then I was mature enough to understand his tricks, even if I wasn't as good as he was, and so I tried a different tactic with him. I watched him very carefully during our games, as opposed to watching myself, and basically did my best to mimic his movements, and tried to stay a bit ahead of him.

My strategy proved more effective than I could have hoped, and I beat him in three games straight, and with a handshake and my heart in my throat, I

prepared myself for what might be the biggest match of my life. Ken knew damn well how epic it would be, but when I approached him to say "OK, let's do this" all he could muster up was a sort of groan of acknowledgment. He was playing with a friend, and showed no intention of getting up, so I stepped in front of the TV - I had waited years for this and I wasn't in the mood to wait any longer.

We plugged in and started the first game up, and right away he started to wail on me. He took my first two lives before I took his first, and I'm sure to onlookers I looked like just another of Ken's play things. But the truth was that I felt cool as a cucumber. Nothing he was doing was surprising me; I felt completely in control. So I let my instincts take over and made the comeback - no sweat.

But then, in the second match, Ken came back hard on me with his counterpick stage. In competitive Melee, the loser gets to pick the stage, and so Ken chose the stage on which Marth has the greatest advantage. He didn't realize that Marth's best stage would also be my best stage, and like a fool fell right into my trap. I took game two as well, and at this point I was poised to take out my Peach idol and the best player in the world in six consecutive games. Unfortunately, the weight of all this started to set in and I started to get nervous.

Ken then switched from Marth to Fox and took game three from me, although it was very close. Then he switched back to Marth and somehow took game four as well. Then I started to get *really*

nervous. This was the most high profile match I had played up to that time, and I was *not* equipped to handle the pressure. My hands started to shake and my breath started to catch.

Game five began and I came out strong. There was no back and forth, but rather I found a way to stay consistently ahead. The game was near an end when Ken had only one life and I had two. But my mind was miles away - I was playing out in my head what it would be like if I won, and what it would be like if I lost. He began to close the gap little by little, but I remained ahead. All this time I was going crazy in my head: "Ken is ready to die, he's ready to lose. I'll be the first player to take a major set from him. Just one more hit and the match is mine." But I simply - could not control - my character. Peach would not do what I wanted her to do, not with my shaking hands.

In the end I couldn't hold on and I lost. The defeat hit hard and I didn't handle it gracefully.

That game has nearly 10,000 views on YouTube, and I can tell you none of them are mine - I can't bear it. I often think how my entire competitive career would have been changed had I beaten Ken that day. Instead, you can hear a string of obscenities come from my mouth as a blow my golden opportunity - I never again got the chance to play him in tournament.

Rappers have probably just one thing in common with competitive video game players: they have pseudonyms. There are those rappers who abstain, who just use their real names, but more common are rappers with names like Eminem, or Ice Cube. Puff Daddy. 50 Cent. Snoop Dogg - Snoop Lion. These names sound ridiculous by themselves, but it's something we generally just accept - and a person called Puff Daddy can sell \$150 concert tickets.

And so it is with gamers. They have names like ManaCloud, or Tink. QDVS. Rock Crock. Take the names out of the context of a tightly-knit subculture and they sound silly, but being a part of said community one completely forgets that they are weird. The names mean something different entirely; they can carry a lot of weight or be intimidating, but this is something that doesn't translate into the real world. It makes it hard to brag. People look at you with something short of envy when you tell them you beat Dr. PP, even though they should be damn impressed.

I came up with my pseudonym before going to my second tournament, and I saw it as something of a joke. I didn't think I would spend much time at these tournaments, and I *certainly* didn't realize I was creating an alternate identity to which I would become permanently affixed. I played Princess Peach, and in Smash Brothers Melee you can pick your color - and instead of the trademark pink, I always chose the white costume. I took a look at the girl in the long white dress and thought . . . Wife.

There's a very talented player out of Kansas whose pseudonym in Darkrain. How cool is that? Darkrain. I'm Wife. My team partner? Husband, of course, and our team was The Newlyweds (this was partially a tongue-in-cheek reference to Nick and Jessica's show on MTV at the time).

Wife. If I could go back and choose more carefully, yes, I would. If I knew the name I picked was going to appear in newspaper articles, and on a plaque hanging in my bedroom, it most assuredly wouldn't be Wife. If I somehow could have known that more people would know me by my gamer name than the one my parents gave me, that people would recognize the Wife alias in Canada and Europe and Japan, I could have picked something cool and intimidating. I could have saved myself having to explain 2 million times, "No, I'm not gay. Yes, I know how it sounds."

And I could have saved myself a lot of embarrassment - but I'm glad for it. I'm glad for every time I had to tell someone from the real world that I go by Wife in another world. I'm grateful for every time that my secret became known, even though I tried to hide it, like when I was outed at work by one of my employees who happened to follow competitive Melee. He knew about Team Ben, and eventually one day in the office he put it all together and exclaimed, to my horror, "oh my god, wait - you're Wife!!"

Another time a local newspaper wanted to write an article about Kevin and me. After he met with us

and got his interview, I started getting anxious because I realized my girlfriend's family, and whomever else, might read it. I didn't feel confident enough to admit to my alter ego, and I went so far as to call the reporter and ask him to omit our pseudonyms from the article. He did.

I'm ashamed that I didn't have the courage to own up to something so inconsequential as a name. What's in a name? But I was shallow enough and self-conscious enough to be embarrassed - and that was truly the emasculating part. Thankfully, I've since found in myself the integrity and the *sincerity* to keep my chin up and my voice clear when I talk about my time as a competitive video game player . . . even the nomenclature.

Sidebar: What is Ken's pseudonym, you ask? He didn't have one; he just went by Ken. This tells us two things about Ken. The first, it tells us that he's boring. The second, and you have to give him credit for this, it tells us that he was such a powerhouse that his common first name was enough to create a reputation.

But the upside to having a pseudonym is the opportunity to create a second personality - how many people get to say they've had that chance? Because while I was venturing into the world of competitive gaming, I was also maintaining a (relatively) normal life at college. I went to parties, I had my non-gamer friends . . . I did normal people things, too. It seems somehow unfair that I so freely choose one world to call the "real" world and one set

of people the “normal” people, but that’s the perspective which seems inevitable. I’ve certainly prided myself on my ability to walk in these two different worlds, but if ever I was being honest, I would admit to my preference for the world of competitive gaming.

And the reason is adventure. Competitive gaming was one big adventure - one with heroes and villains, uncharted territory, and training montages. It seemed like everyone in the real world was living slightly different versions of the same story, while in my secret world I was constantly approaching new frontiers. Who could resist that?

And yet one world was real, the other a fantasy. Status quo is a powerful thing. But pushing aside the psychological implications made here, the worlds were astoundingly separate. And so followed two astoundingly separate people. Chris was silly, humble, and aloof. Wife was aggressive, intense, and a leader. I always liked Wife better - he had it in him to be more successful than Chris, I figured he was just waiting for the right venue . . .

MLG New York

Season Opener

By 2006, there was a very strong little community in place. There was a kinship between players all across the country, and, despite little rivalries, people seemed to act like they were members of one big fraternity. In fact a new mentality was gaining popularity around that time, one of camaraderie and good faith - which I happened to think was bullshit.

This newly-found brotherhood exhibited itself in a new kind of tournament format, also bullshit, which placed a greater emphasis on pool play. Rather than just throw every entrant into a double-elimination bracket and wish them luck, tournament organizers could boast “more matches for your money.” And slowly but surely, the community at large became soft.

To anyone who would listen, I would expound upon the virtues of traditional competition and the cut throat competitive spirit that I started out in. While I empathized with the draw of inclusivity, I saw it as a threat to the competitive spirit that drove progress; I liked it better when the only way a player could earn respect was to produce results. Then, to my horror, a trend developed where the remaining two or three players in a tournament would consent to splitting the winnings and claiming a tie for first place.

Bullshit. Not only did I not subscribe to this hippy, free-loving mantra, I became more and more aggressive in an attempt to combat it. At a tournament in Philadelphia, I was playing in the grand finals for doubles, with the odds severely in my team's favor. When I plainly refused to agree to split the pot, one of my opponents said, "come on, I have bills to pay." I fired back, "well then I guess you better play your best."

This attitude of mine, shared by Kevin and to a lesser extent Manus, earned us a reputation for being elitist (which we probably were). It began to separate us from the community, especially our local one, which was a shame. Still, we believed progress to be of paramount importance, and we believed Melee a gorgeous and structurally perfect game. We saw no reason we couldn't make a career out of it.

The Melee community suffered perhaps its greatest step backwards as tournaments became so centered around socializing that people started bringing along alcohol. Competitive Melee was regressing into something that resembled an every-other-Sunday ultimate Frisbee league, when I was trying to turn it into a legitimate sport. So when Major League Gaming provided an avenue to make this happen, all I needed to know was where to sign.

Several upstarts had tried to turn competitive gaming into a mainstream sport, the way it is in Korea, but the first to gain the attention of the general public was Major League Gaming (MLG). Team Ben had attended many of its 2005 - 2006

season events, but there were far grander things promised for the 2006 - 2007 season. This season was announced to encompass seven events in major cities around the country - five regular season events, playoffs in New York City, and the championships in an unannounced location. And lots of prize money. The company was already gaining momentum, but when it was awarded \$10 million in venture capital in February of 2006, MLG suddenly became poised to dramatically and permanently change the face of competitive gaming in the United States.

On April 17, 2006, MLG announced its television series. I was at work when I got word of the TV deal, and I just read and reread the press releases, unable to make any sense of them. There is no apropos way to behave when a fantasy comes true, except to suspect you have misunderstood the news you have been given. Apparently there would be seven episodes, covering each event of the season, and it would air on USA, which was the most watched cable network at the time.

The story was picked up by The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, the Times, the Post, and all of the major news networks. CNN called it “a new type of entertainment . . . taking video game playing to a whole new level,” and the Hollywood Reporter said the series would “bring professional video gaming to a broader audience this holiday season.”

This news was somehow gift-wrapped just for me. Not only did the idea of cameras and lights and spectators make me giddy with excitement, it also spoke to my desire to see competitive gaming properly packaged, monetized, and sold. I sat at my computer, at my desk, with my eyes wide and my mouth open like an idiot. I wanted nothing more than to be brought to a larger audience this holiday season, MLG - how did you know?

Reuters highlighted the brand new sponsorships from Boost Mobile and Scion, which meant a lot of money coming in. Money draws competitors, competitors draw spectators, and spectators draw more sponsorships . . . thereby attracting more competitors. I let my imagination take competitive gaming to mainstream levels, where star players could be household names. As then-CEO Matthew Bromberg liked to say, “(competitive gaming) is where poker was two years ago, or NASCAR 15 years ago.”

FOX news even called competitive gaming “a serious sport for professionals.” Now, I had been to a lot of tournaments, and there were very few people I had met who deserved the descriptors serious or professional. It suddenly occurred to me that the community might not be ready for something like this - but there was no time to worry - console gaming had its first nationally televised event in five days I intended to be good and ready.

At 9:00 am on Saturday, April 22nd, at the Meadowlands Exposition Center in New Jersey, the line of gamers wrapped around the building. Because of my ranking from the 2005 - 2006 season, I was entering the first event with “pro player” status; pro players, I learned, are not subjected to waiting in line. After being brought right to the registration desk, a staffer gave me my credentials, asked me to sign a waiver for USA, and finally presented me with my pro player ID badge. It was pretty and it was laminated and it made me feel quite important.

Stepping into the venue was surreal, in no small part because of the grand scale. There were dozens and dozens of 32” TVs, lined up in neat rows, separated by red velvet ropes. Cameras on giant cranes glided across the arena, 20 feet in the air. I remember being surprised to see so many people moving around with purpose - so different than the feel of the fan-run tournaments I had been to. There were Red Bull girls, cameramen, and a Toyota Scion parked right there in the venue.

The centerpiece of the arena was the main stage, where the most prominent and exciting matches were to take place. The stage was spotlighted with warm blue and purple lighting, with eight big screen TVs set up and rows of bleacher seating for spectators. Behind the players’ chairs hung jumbo screens to broadcast the match to the whole arena.

I wandered around in awe for a while, taking it all in, until I came upon the Pro Players lounge. This

is a roped off area, entrance to which is offered exclusively to players boasting “Pro” status. At this, my ego heart grew three sizes. There were red leather couches, a refreshment area with drinks and a full spread of food, and classic arcade machines. There was even a security guard standing outside to make sure no riff raff got in.

I loaded up on some snacks, then laid down on one of the couches and closed my eyes. When I opened them there was a photographer, a young blond girl, taking my picture as I lay there. And I remember clear as day thinking to myself, “This is it. This is what you’ve been working for. Enjoy this, Christopher.”

The glamour suited Team Ben quite nicely, and I played on point that day. The Newlyweds were on fire, burning through teams I wouldn’t have thought we could beat, including a rival team from Crystal City, Texas. Our team made it all the way to winner’s bracket semifinals, where we were pitted against a top ranked team from New York City.

NYC fans and players have a reputation for being rowdy in the world of Melee just like in the real world, so we knew we were in for it. And being on their home turf, at the first event of the season, meant we were subjected to lots of shouting and trash talk. Normally I would just keep my headphones in and tune everybody out, but with the cameras on things were different for me. They brought out an even more fearless version of Wife, and I didn’t want to miss a thing.

The match was tied up at two games apiece, and as we headed into game five I found myself actually shouting down our opponents while I played. All the commotion brought more spectators, and the spectators brought more cameras. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed the producer calling for more cameras to film us, and the boom mic operator edging closer to me - all of which I swear improved my play. While we didn't pull out the win, it was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my career.

The main event of any tournament is the singles competition, and the MLG season opener did not fail to deliver. Ken, predictably, made it to finals, but his opponent was a bit of a surprise. In the other corner was a player called PC Chris, named for his hometown of Port Chester, NY. PC Chris, real name Chris Szygiel, is honestly just a great guy, the kind of person who is everyone's friend. He was approachable, humble, and talented in the inherent kind of way. The story is that PC didn't even own the game, and yet played it like he had been practicing all his life. He was already earning a name for himself in the tristate area, but to say he was the underdog in the match to determine first place would be a gross understatement, as Ken's title of champion was only seriously challenged by one person: Christopher McMullen, our master of diversity from Chapter 1, who will henceforth be referred to

be his tag, “Azen.” Azen unfortunately had gone missing as of late, and besides, the lights and commotion of this tournament would have suited him ill.

So Ken was the overwhelming favorite going into MLG New York, but came upon quite a surprise in PC Chris. PC had a truly unique play style, in which he would simplify the game down to its basics; he just made wise and patient decisions. I have also always been a fan of the way he speeds up and slows down during any given game, which makes him hard to predict and also disrupts the rhythm of a match. Somehow PC’s style was just too much for Ken and the giant, to everyone’s shock, fell. The games went back and forth, but ultimately PC Chris edged out Ken for the victory, \$2,000 in prize money, and MLG and Smash Brothers Melee history. It made me feel better about losing to his team.

The Newlyweds earned a 4th place finish at the season opener, which is a respectable placing and a decent paycheck, but more importantly I had gotten what I truly came for - the sport.

MLG Dallas

The Sport

For the 2006-2007 season, MLG introduced a new competition format. By introducing “amateur” and “pro” brackets, players ranked top 16 only had to play in the final half day of competition, rather than wading through a few hundred participants to get to the crucial matches. This did two things: the first, it made our competitions more like a mainstream sport. Professional athletes don’t compete for two days nonstop, and they certainly don’t bother playing opponents who are out of their league (speaking literally, not figuratively). The second, it freed up committed players like me to double as commentators, officials, and coaches - characteristics trademark of a “real” sport. By MLG Dallas, the number one question on my mind is: how can I transform our budding pseudo-sport into something out of which I can make a career? Because one thing’s for sure, I don’t want to go back to a life where I’m not a pro gamer. So let’s get to work.

First, commentary. What professional sport has no commentary? Thankfully, MLG was prepared with the resources, and we were able to set up a beautiful commentary station where my co-commentator and I could watch the match on a separate screen and offer analysis of the players. This commentary was not only recorded, but also livestreamed out to fans with a subscription to MLGPro.com. Brilliant.

Next up, coaches. What is an athlete without a coach? Team Ben championed the movement to introduce coaching to the game, and we insisted on having another member of our crew nearby to talk us through the match, like a coach would do for a boxer. "That's it, in and out, in and out. When he goes after you just feign out and then in, don't let him catch you standing still." Halfway through the season MLG decided to make coaching legal only between games, which must have had something to do with our antics.

Next, sponsors. A true athlete isn't worrying about how to buy his plane ticket, because he has Tide or whomever paying him money to wear their logo. Why should gamers be any different? So I worked for months to get us a sponsor - I must have written to over two hundred companies, explaining the benefits of the exposure they would get. I had an untapped market, I would explain in these letters. Eventually I found our sponsor in none other than White Castle; they paid for t shirts with our names and their logos on them, and funded our travel expenses. Bingo.

Publicity - I scored an article in my local paper as well as in an online gaming publication, to get the Team Ben name out there. Rankings - I helped found and operate an independent ranking system that aggregated the opinions of top players from each region to create a list of the top 25 players in the country. Training camp - Kevin and I began offering

lessons for \$20/hour to train the next generation of pro players. Then I began looking into the future:

Spectators? They'll come in time. Uniforms? No, people aren't quite ready for that yet. Celebrities? Well, we might be dreaming a bit big there.

I invested all of my time and energy into these projects. I felt an ownership over competitive Melee and I was committed to helping it gain momentum so it could be the great sport I knew it could. This hobby was growing into something more, and it offered all of us in Team Ben an outlet for all of our energy and frustration . . .

Life back in the real world was difficult, to offer an understatement. I was dealing with the aftermath of the grieving process, and putting back together the life I had before the tragedy was made ever more difficult by the seemingly endless parade of nonsense related to Ben's death. I had lost loved ones before, but in those cases there wasn't much to do but cope, and move on. But in the case of a murder, there is oh so much to do. For years to follow.

Indeed, there was the trial. I had moved away to college at this point, but was obliged to come back to my hometown not only for the trial itself, but for other necessities like meeting with attorneys ahead of time to practice my testimony. The days of the trial coincided with my exams, and I had to move them up. So instead of partying the day after finals

like everyone else, I packed up early and served as a key witness in a 1st degree murder trial. Such things can make a person bitter.

But the trial was just the start. There are also appeals - so many appeals - which consist of a man in a cheap suit who cannot pronounce Ben's last name correctly trying to argue that his murderer is ready to be released back into society. The same society in which my little brother lives. Such notions can make a person sick.

Then there are the little things one wouldn't think to expect. Like the media, digging up the whole mess for a good human interest story. Or even stranger events, like when some clown, having never met any of us, decided to write and stage an off-Broadway play about the events surrounding Ben's murder. He invented his own drama, in which we were all characters, and used each of our real names without so much as a warning; I found out about it on Facebook. Who are these people who do this sort of thing? Such questions can make a person tired.

Then there is the simple fact that *you know a murderer*. This changes everything. You catch yourself thinking what you'd do if you saw that person in the supermarket one day . . . but I digress. Suffice it to say, there was plenty to run from in the real world, and I had found a mercifully separate world in which to escape.

It wasn't so much that the gamers who created this other world didn't know about my situation, but that no one cared. Gamers don't really make small

talk, and they don't feel obliged to do things like ask questions to which they don't want to know the answers. If forced to mention that I missed a tournament to go to a parole hearing for a murderer, a gamer might consider this for a moment and then just leave it be - without the overly sympathetic eyes and the furrowed brow, and without several unpleasant follow up questions.

The competitive Melee subculture is in fact made up of nerds, many of whom are indeed very socially awkward, but to me this makes them blissfully easy to spend time with. No one tries to impress each other, there aren't really cliques, and silence is okay. I like silence. If players don't feel like talking they just don't, because the game is enough communication by itself.

So escaping to MLG Dallas for the second event of the 2006-2007 season was all I could ask for. I was grateful for the comfort of being around other nerds and just letting my guard down, complemented by the glitz and glamour of Major League Gaming's grand venues and perks. For my fourth place finish in doubles at the season opener, I was given a stipend to spend on airfare and hotel accommodations, which was pretty sweet.

I had a reasonably good singles run, beating my long-time local rival Chu Dat, and The Newlyweds placed 5th in doubles. Plus it was just fantastic to be back in Texas. For this tournament I volunteered as a staffer, helping to run the event and perform commentary. And, as expected, the rematch

between Ken and PC Chris was the climax of the tournament.

Here we see the difference between the two players - PC played mostly on instinct, whereas Ken was a more conscientious player - the kind who plans ahead. Ken hadn't planned, I don't think, for the contingency that was PC Chris at the season opener, and PC's unique and difficult-to-follow style took him off guard. However, Ken used the time in between events to study the videos and prepare for their rematch.

Something in those videos inspired Ken to dust off an old move called the "counter," which was rarely used in tournament play. When executed properly, Marth's counter takes his opponent's attack and turns it into a hit of his own, sort of like his parry as a swordsman. However, if Marth uses this move and it does not connect, there is a lot of lag which leaves him exposed, which is why it was rarely utilized.

So going into the first game, PC Chris was as surprised as the audience when he got countered over and over again. The tactic was beautiful, as it used PC's aggressiveness against him. Ken's ingenuity really impressed me - and it made me think that he could be a good coach one day. PC Chris was not able to find an answer to the counter before the match was over, and Ken reclaimed his crown.

MLG Anaheim

Love of the Game

The first two events of the season were a dream come true. The bright lights and the big screens seemed to be put there just for me, to spotlight the game I loved so dearly. To date, and I know this is controversial, but to date I think it's the best game ever created.

I think it's better than football. There, I said it.

I think the game holds a beauty that is unmatched by other sports. I think the game - when played at its highest level - is a work of art, more so than sports like football or baseball. High level matches are extremely fast-paced, without breaks of any sort, and they appear to be choreographed like some kind of dance.

Undoubtedly, the point opponents of my theory would make first is that football players are athletes. Players who have prowess on the field and create awe in the rest of us. But professional gamers are athletes too, just of a different kind. They have some skills they are born with, some they spend hours crafting.

In 2006, a silly little game was floating around online that tested a person's reaction time by having him click a large dot as soon as it changed colors from red to green. There were thousands of people playing this game, but the top names on the ranking

chart were also the top ranked names in competitive Melee and competitive Halo.

With football, the differences between an amateur player and a professional one are often measured in huge lats and 250 pound bodies, whereas with gaming differences are measured in fractions of a second, which makes their skills harder to recognize. In an effort to bridge that gap, let us together explore some of the nuances of competitive Melee.

The speed and efficiency of a player's character is paramount, and it rests on his ability to utilize every frame available; pressing down at .3 seconds as opposed to .5 seconds after leaving the ground can separate a great player from a spectacular one. It takes a long time to become comfortable enough with the finger movements required to move with speed and adaptability, which is the first thing a new player should learn. But once speed is attained there are whole other worlds of technical skills to be explored.

To begin with, there is directional influence, or D.I.. D.I. is the single most important technical skill for a player to possess, though it necessarily comes with experience and not just practice. This requires an understanding of weight, gravity, and percentage. To explain:

When a character is hit (or thrown), the game's coding dictates how far and in what direction the character will fly through the air, and this is dependent upon the struck player's percentage. Each

time a character is hit, he gains a predetermined amount of percentage; the higher the player's current percentage, the farther the character flies.

Therefore, an experienced player will need to anticipate how far his enemies will fly, so that he might predict where they will land, so that he may follow up with another hit to create a combo or apply pressure. Through experience, he learns how far Marth will throw Peach at 20%, 30%, 90%, 140%, etc. And this is different than how far Marth will throw *Mario* at 20%, 30%, 90%, 140%.

Easy enough so far, but here's the trick: a player can influence where his character is sent by holding a certain direction on the joystick. This serves two purposes: the first is to avoid combos, and the second is to avoid dying.

To understand the first purpose of D.I., imagine that the stage is a box (a rectangle, to be precise), and that you need to stay inside that box - if you fly off the edges you lose one of your lives. So if you are hit by something powerful and go flying, you'll want to use the joystick to influence the direction in which your character is hit so that won't happen. If your character is threatened to die upwards, try to influence his direction left or right; if your character is threatened to die off the sides, influence your direction upwards. It is quite difficult to a) know exactly which way every move will hit you and b) anticipate which move your opponent will do, because there is a very small window of time for a character to apply D.I..

And there are more subtleties still, if we delve deeper. There are shades of increasingly impressive D.I., which often inspires awe in educated onlookers as they watch characters survive impossible scenarios. For starters, a player can get a “power D.I.” if he inputs the direction at the exact moment he is hit. But the real key to spectacular D.I. is instinctually guiding your character the optimal degree. Imagine your character is hit to the left, hard, and your only hope to survive is to guide your character to the upper left corner, where there is the most room before the box ends. This requires extreme precision, because holding the joystick a millimeter clockwise could cause your character to disappear off the top, but two millimeters counter clockwise would cause him to disappear off the left.

To understand the second purpose of D.I., imagine that you are playing against a Marth (whether it’s Ken or Husband or Azen, that’s up to you). The Marth grabs you and throws you upwards, and when he does so, you have the chance to influence your direction. So there you are, up in the air, and Marth is waiting below you with a sword - where do you want to be? Well, you could try and D.I. away as far as possible to get out of range of his upward attack, except then he might use a powerful and far reaching forward attack to catch you, and when he does you will be holding away, and so will fly farther away from the stage. So you could D.I. toward Marth instead and try to get behind him, except that then he might just turn around and grab

you again. It depends on what this Marth is expecting you to do. And your character. And your percent. And, for that matter, how talented your opponent and how strong his spacing.

Another key element to advanced gameplay is something called spacing. Spacing is putting the optimal amount of space between you and your opponent when you attack, and at its most elementary this means the maximum amount of space. This makes sense fundamentally: you would want to be as far away as possible from your opponent to land your hit, so that retaliation would not come as swiftly if you missed. However, things get more complicated when moves have different properties when used at different distances; again, we look to Marth for prime examples of this.

Sidebar: I believe Marth to be the epitome of high level Melee. I do in fact believe him to be the best character (though this theory is not widely accepted), but more importantly I feel he just represents the best of Melee. Aesthetically, who can match him? He has a flowing cape, an elegant sword, and he's manly enough to wear a headband to tame his wild hair. Functionally, he glides all over the stage and makes his combos look effortless. To educated readers, I say to you that Marth *is* the best, because if played perfectly he will never be hit. To non-educated readers, I encourage you to find in Marth the essence of intricate and exact and stylish video gaming.

But back to our lesson on spacing. The very tip of Marth's sword behaves differently than the rest of it, and Marth is required to position himself with the proper spacing so that his opponent is hit with the area of his sword that he desires. On the ground, we see the tip send opponents flying very far, while the rest of the sword is much weaker. In the air, we see the tip if Marth's sword send his opponents upward, but the rest of the sword sending them forward. Choices, both for the Marth and for his opponent. Because all the while the Marth is choosing where to hit his enemy with his sword, said enemy must be anticipating the hit so that he may D.I. properly.

And it is not until a player has a firm grasp on complex skills such as these that he may truly begin to implement what we call mind games.

The one on one format of the game is best compared, I think, to fencing. A sport in which the position of your feet or a tilt of your head might influence your opponent's choices, and the two competitors are locked in a battle of wits to see who can better stay in control. Is your opponent easily shaken, and will aggressiveness throw him off balance? Or is he impatient, and will crumble quickly if you wait him out?

Mind games are of course decisions like this, but Team Ben and other eccentric players implemented more unconventional versions too. For example, I made a habit of consulting with a coach between games simply to break momentum, if I felt my opponent would suffer for it. I'd just lean over and

whisper about lunch plans. Husband sang while he played, a habit which he was perfectly aware drove his opponents nuts. I knew a player who would actually manipulate the noises his controller made, in case his opponent was consciously or subconsciously making decisions based on those sounds.

Gaining influence over your opponent's actions through pressure and mind games is a skill with no ceiling. Reaction time and skill with the controller can theoretically be mastered, but I don't think Melee has seen any "masters." I've been watching the game for over 10 years as of this writing, and I've not seen the ceiling, even as far as technical skill goes. Each year the players look faster and are even *inventing* new maneuvers.

And on top of these (somewhat) accessible tactics are a myriad of technical maneuvers that would be too much to explain in a book meant to hold a narrative of some sort. There is wavedashing, chain throwing, platform canceling, jab-reset, Wobbles, The Gentlemen, etc., each of which are used to reduce lag, increase movement, or immobilize your opponent. This list of complex tricks - some of which were put in the game by the designers, some of which are glitches forced into existence by the players - grows every year. And then there is style - Melee is a game with so much style.

Often times a player's personality is reflected in his form; in other cases, like mine, a person might have a style that is completely contrasting to his

personality. I was a pretty nice and unassuming guy in real life, and particularly in 2006 I would have much rather listened to a conversation than started one, but as a gamer I was hyper aggressive. In fact, I don't know that anyone played Peach like me - she is supposed to be a reactive character, and defensive. But with me it was always go, go, go. Nothing but offense. I think ultimately it held me back as a competitor, but I just couldn't find pleasure in steady, measured movement - the joy came from playing Peach like she was Tom Cruise in the last 20 minutes of MI:4.

God I loved that game. I mean I still play it now, but when I was 20 years old I really, really loved that game. I think Maria worried I loved it more than her, which is why she fought it so much. She hated when I went away to tournaments. But that's silly, right? Who would love a game more than a person?

Right?

But I digress . . .

Suffice it to say in 2006 Melee was coarsing through my veins, and to have these grand events in these beautiful cities was more than I could have asked for. MLG Anaheim was the greatest event yet - California culture was clearly present in the design, as it was simpler than other venues and very stylish. And sightseeing around the area felt very cool:

"Want anything from Dolce & Gabbana? Because I'm going to swing by Rodeo drive before my video game tournament."

But best of all, on Sunday before the pro bracket started up we were asked to participate in a charity event called Gamers Give Back. Disadvantaged children from the area were brought to the tournament to get autographs and play with the professionals. Perhaps our profiles were built up a bit when this idea was initially marketed, but for the kids who attended we must have seemed like celebrities.

There were children with both mental and physical disabilities, ranging in age from 5 - 12. It was just a free play scenario, where everyone roamed around and picked up games with whomever. I got to fool around and have fun with the younger kids, and go over some advanced techniques with the older ones.

The gamers in the smash community are, by and large, the lazy and irresponsible type. Not to mention the fact most of them don't go to bed at any kind of reasonable hour - which is why I was so touched to see so many players volunteer their time at 9:00 in the morning, the morning of the final day of competition, to be a part of something like that. That remains one of my favorite Melee memories of all time.

MLG Anaheim was the first time I really saw Melee become a spectator sport. PC Chris and Ken fought through the most challenging bracket to date,

quelling talented underdogs like SilentSpectre (who beat me) and KoreanDJ (who beat him). For them to meet up in the finals for the third tournament in a row, after their record was tied at one tournament win a piece, was a perfectly dramatic climax for the main stage.

The rafters above were lit up in blue and purple, and the stage itself really looked like an arena. The TVs were in the center, with plenty of space roped off around the players; this gave the competitors breathing room, but also had the effect of creating a sort of battlefield. The tech crew created a setup where each player in a 1v1 match had his own TV, with jumbo screens behind them broadcasting the action to the crowd. Bleachers surrounded the stage on three sides, ready to hold hundreds of people.

At the season opener where he beat Ken, PC Chris was in his hometown, and while perfectly mild-mannered himself, PC Chris' fans were relentless against Ken, the champion from the West Coast. At MLG Anaheim however it was the reverse, with Ken playing the part of the hometown hero. All the hype for the match really got California's fans amped, and during this match was in fact the only time I've seen a crowd get in a frenzy over old Ken.

The players' appearances contrasted quite nicely, with Ken in an ill-fitting sweater and a face that, well, didn't exactly benefit from a lady killer smile like PC had. PC was sporting a graphic tee and a Bieber flip, before such a thing existed. Both players were near silent as the games ticked by.

PC Chris had upset Ken at the season opener, but Ken had come back and embarrassed PC in Dallas, sending him to a 3rd place finish. For their reunion, no one would doubt that Ken was the more prepared of the two. Ken had just returned from several weeks in Japan, playing with Asia's best, including a contender for best Falco in the world in the 14 year old prodigy Bomb Soldier. With PC likely choosing Falco against Ken's Marth, the odds were not in his favor.

The match is a best of 3 out of 5 game series, but since PC Chris was coming from the loser's bracket, he had to defeat Ken twice. With a longer series like this, the audience gets to better experience the power of momentum and also gets to influence the outcome of the match.

Ken came out of the gate with a victory, but barely so. PC Chris wiped his hands on his jeans in a customary attempt to rid them of sweat and chose his counterpick stage. Something changed for him, or changed for Ken, as he crushed Ken the next game. Crushed, meaning he lost only one of his four lives. With that the momentum changed, and PC Chris briskly won the next two games and the first best of five set.

Here the reader should remember that Ken was winning tournaments before PC Chris was even a recognizable commodity. PC Chris, while inherently talented, is undeniably standing on the shoulders of giants, where Ken *invented* most of the stuff he was doing. He even has a move named after him. Here

we see the momentum change again, and I suspect experience kept Ken tethered to the ground while PC Chris' world must have been spinning.

Ken played a solid first game of the second set, while PC Chris got a bit overzealous, lost control for just an instant, and gave up a sound lead which eventually contributed to his loss. He again wiped his hands on his jeans. At fan-run tournaments where PC got his start, especially in New York, PC would have his friends in his ear giving him advice. On this finals stage, however, his closest friend wasn't even within earshot, so he just kept his eyes on the TV. Ken claimed the second game of the second set soundly, and all the while the crowd was beginning to go wild over Ken's impending victory - just one more game.

Still, PC Chris rallied and took the third game, then the fourth, by turning up the aggression. The match was now eight games deep, with the ninth and final game deciding the winner. The crowd was going wild. I was going wild. Team Ben screamed for PC, but Ken's fan's drowned us out.

The game was back and forth, back and forth. When either of them would gain a lead, the other would take it away. In the end, each player had one life left. Ken comboed PC Chris across the right side of the stage, just bouncing him around. But PC Chris escaped by doing a "walljump," which is exactly what it sounds like and not very common in competitive gameplay, to survive. He comboed Ken right back, now across the left side of the stage. Both players are one move away from first place

when Ken executed his namesake maneuver - an aerial combo ending in a spike which finished the match.

The commentators' voices disappeared in the crowd's cheers. PC Chris immediately showed Ken his broad and gracious smile, always the good sport and probably relieved that the match was over one way or another. The players shook hands as the crowd came down from the bleachers to congratulate Ken. Here, and I couldn't believe this when I saw it, here the crowd actually lifted him up on their shoulders and chanted his name. And then even I smiled, in spite of myself, overwhelmed by the grandeur of it all.

MLG Chicago

Demons

MLG Chicago was a dark tournament. I drove 13 hours by myself, stayed in a terrifyingly cheap motel, and was probably the cause of The Newlyweds placing 9th, our lowest doubles placing of the season. I could swear the venue itself was even dark and drab, though that could just be my memory coloring things for me again.

My depression, something that I had lived with since Ben died, was becoming more and more potent, despite the thrilling phenomenon I was involved in with competitive gaming. I'll remember Chicago as the low point of the season.

Winston Churchill referred to his depression as the black dog. He would write of the dog's arrival and departure in his life, and I think that anyone who has been depressed - I mean clinically depressed - knows his pain. For me, depression isn't a part of who I am but rather a completely separate entity that won't leave me alone.

My depression doesn't live inside my heart, or anything poetic like that. More accurately, it just hovers very near - passive but still destructive. It is so much so a separate entity that it is impossible to feel lonely because there are always two of us: my

depression and me. My depression has been with me through my ups and downs, for years and years. And how can I hate something that's so close to me? Even though I've spent much of my life battling it, I cannot help but feel a vague sense of longing for it when it isn't with me.

If I can temporarily rid myself of the depression, through medication or otherwise, I feel almost . . . unprotected. Sure the crushing weight has been removed from my shoulders, but who am I without it? It's like Linus with his blanket - he thinks he wants to be rid his crutch and stand independent, but life is scary on your own. It is during these periodic absences that I am better able to let loved ones into my life, and welcome their real and healthy love, instead of the cold permanence of the beast.

At the tournament and in my life, I tried to hide what I was feeling; people who have not felt real depression cannot understand its power. When I was in high school, flying high with Ben, Kevin, and Erik, I saw life as a series of challenges. Some people were up to the fight, and others, less amazing, were not. I was unwilling or unable to feel even pity for those who were struggling, let alone any kind of sympathy.

I'm not proud of the superiority I felt. I saw people's faults as nothing more than lapses in willpower, which was despicable to me. I saw happiness as a choice; I didn't know that there were demons lurking out there, powerful ones who rob you of your reason and strength.

I was 17 when Ben was murdered and everything fell apart. The tragedy changed me, but sadly did not humble me. The first year after his death was filled with plenty of misery, but also so many events, like the school-sponsored ceremony where I gave an impassioned speech or the first degree murder trial where I was a key witness. To be honest, it felt somehow like being a celebrity - I could feel the eyes staring at me as I walked through the halls of my school in the weeks after Ben's death, and if I wept in the middle of class that wasn't strange, it was just sad. I was what they call a homicide survivor, a term that is only slightly asinine. But it was widely known how close I was with Ben, and everyone in school seemed to offer a free pass to grieve. I missed a lot of class.

Gradually, the grieving gave way to depression. Whereas before I was a "homicide survivor," eventually I was just "an asshole." It was very confusing for me, trying to reconcile what I knew about the grieving process with the emptiness that started to grow inside of me. When the cinematic grief disappeared, it was just me and a poisonous depression. I withdrew inside of myself, offering less and less to the people around me. At some point I all but stopped talking; I can remember days going by without my saying a single word. For several years, I was only able to feel truly happy when I was by myself. At the time I thought that was kind of sexy, this independent streak, taking vacations by myself

and only trusting myself, but now I'm grateful that I'm relearning how to make connections.

Of course I know now that the depression would have come anyway. Onset for depression like mine is usually around 18 years old. If anything, it was masked by Ben's murder, taking longer for it to be diagnosed. It wasn't until my anger and fear began to manifest itself in a wicked temper that I decided to see a doctor. I was put on Lithium, a drug that earns its reputation, and then from there I was moved to a parade of other medications aimed to make me feel normal. Prozac, Pristiq, Wellbutrin, Lemotragin . . .

And so began the battle that I still fight. Trying to feel normal, trying to just get on the same page as everyone else around me.

But all the while I had Melee. Where college social situations were draining for me, Melee competitions were invigorating. Where I stood shyly by at parties, at MLG events I was a leader. It's no wonder I made my escape into the world of "Wife," "The Newlyweds," and "Team Ben." They were happiness to me.

Two good things came out of MLG Chicago: the return of Azen and my proper introduction to KoreanDJ.

Azen had been largely MIA during the season, even at local tournaments, and had not made an appearance at any MLG events thus far. As a new era

of Melee was ushered in, Azen must have seemed to many new players more like a legend than an actual threat. But here he was at MLG Chicago.

Azen is far from intimidating in stature, being short and skinny, but his presence at this tournament did not go unnoticed. Wherever he played, crowds gathered around. Did you see Azen, the Master of Diversity? I heard he can beat you with every character. The master was rusty, though, and he earned only a modest fourth place. Not bad for a washed up legend, but I was watching him closely and hoping for an upset first place finish.

I have always been a big fan of Azen, for his unique playstyle and his endearing personality, so I was happy to be able to boast about his return. As far as I was concerned, this meant the current talent at MLG was officially put on watch.

Especially you, Ken.

Then there was KoreanDJ, or just “DJ,” a fireball kind of player from Massachusetts. He brought an unprecedented intensity with him to tournaments that instantly made me take notice. My earliest memory of him comes from a regional northeastern tournament where he was just starting out. He asked me for what we call a “money match,” \$5 to the winner of a best of three set, and I said sure - I like to patronize the local amateurs, after all.

The first set came and went as I expected - I trounced him in front of his friends, accepted my fiver as graciously as I could, and was about to walk away when he stopped me. “Again,” he demanded. I

beat him handily once more. “Again,” he insisted. And so this went on and on until he was finally out of money. I told him that paying me was unnecessary, that I would have just played him for an hour if he wanted, but he let me know he was training - putting the money up was worth it to make sure I was trying my hardest so he could learn properly. And it is precisely this attitude that took him to the top and would eventually make him, in the author’s opinion, the best player to ever hold a controller.

At MLG Chicago he fought his way to 7th place, but it was getting to know him that really made me fear him as a competitor. I considered myself to be a pretty intense player, but his passion, energy, and dedication were awe-inspiring. He was a renaissance man, bringing this force to a long list of hobbies. After his gaming career ended he started his own business.

He took me to the pro lounge where he showed me how he could play Guitar Hero on expert - backwards. Meaning, he faced *away* from the screen. I remember thinking, “who the hell is this guy?”

MLG Orlando

Friends, or, The Return of Azen

The spotlight of competitive Melee has always rested on singles, and this book follows suit accordingly, but far more important to me was always doubles play. I got to enter tournaments with my best friend - who could ask for more than that? Besides, there is something particularly rewarding about the way cooperative gameplay demands high levels of communication. A team that cannot effectively communicate will not reach its full potential.

But more than that, the cooperation that goes *unspoken* is what makes a successful team. With four players on one screen all moving at split frame speeds, there simply isn't the time to announce your movements, so your partner must anticipate them. How is this accomplished? Well, ideally, through a decade of getting each other's back.

I met Kevin when I was 9 years old, which means at the time of the 2006-2007 season we had been growing up together for 11 years. Which means we've played video games together on every system since the Sega Genesis, but it also means that if I start singing Build Me Up Buttercup, Kevin is there with background vocals.

The point is, we were one tight team with impeccable teamwork. Groundbreaking teamwork, and possibly even superlative teamwork. A scan of

top 10 results from the singles events at these MLGs won't often include the names Husband or Wife. But we were consistently ranked as a top 5 team because our teamwork allowed us to create a product that was greater than the sum of our parts.

Kevin and I stayed acutely aware of the other's position, so that we could poise ourselves to execute the team combos we had designed ourselves. I needed to not only notice if Kevin was setting up for a kill combo, but anticipate his movements so I could space myself properly. We also had plays we could call, which was my favorite part about doubles. There was "caged animal Wife" where I would just go non-stop aggression while Kevin stayed back and waited to pick up the pieces. There was "MLG NY" - where we replicated the style that almost beat PC Chris and his partner at the season opener, where we just team up on the greater player if we estimate his partner will be too slow to keep up.

Our routines proved successful in Orlando where we took home our second 4th place finish of the season, bouncing back from our low placing at Chicago.

In fact, everything about MLG Orlando was bright and fun and wholesome, and the opposite of Chicago.

Kevin and I flew out together, just the two of us, to Sunny Orlando right smack dab in the middle of summer.

When we got off the plane and out of the terminal, right away I saw a cute girl holding up a big blue and yellow sign, all done up with glitter and such. I must have looked at it twice or three times before my brain could catch up and really believe that it read "Wife." I couldn't process what was happening. I noticed that my sign even replicated the colors of my trademark, custom-made controller, baby blue and yellow. There was an equally glittery sign help up next to it that said "Husband." As absurd as it would be, my first thought was that they were our first groupies - they had found out which flight Husband and Wife would be on and decided to wait for us. Actually they turned out to be something even better: friends.

Instead of getting a hotel for this tournament, Kevin and I wanted to kick it old school and stay with smashers. We were offered housing by some local players living on the FSU campus, and instead of letting us take a cab to their apartment, they spent the day making signs and surprised us at the airport. The gesture was truly touching.

We went back to their place for many hours of Melee with their other friends, where the game created an instant bond between the whole lot of us. It was like we had all been friends for years. The next day we all went to Disney World together and had an amazing time. These guys (and the one girl who got dragged along) were hilarious. This story takes place before smartphones, and they had a system worked out where they would call each other

when they were out and say “can I speak to the internet please?.” If the person on the other end was by a computer he would reply, “this is the internet, go ahead.” Which I thought was quite clever.

MLG Orlando marked the first sign of Ken’s fall from grace. Ken was first upset by KoreanDJ in winner’s bracket, and was then taken out of the tournament by his own team partner, Isai.

And with his arch-rival Ken out of the way, Azen was left to run straight over the rest of competition. I mean he cut through them like a hot knife through butter, and earned himself a first place victory before anyone could say “Azen Comeback?”

Watching Azen take the title at MLG Orlando reminded me how much I liked him. As he displayed his trademark shyness, grace, and humility, I was also proud that he was representing my region. It reminded me that I was also making and building friendships at these tournaments.

I was never closer with Kevin than at these events, and that time is important because only a year later, a girl would come between us and force us apart, though not in the way girls usually do. We weren’t on speaking terms for over two full years.

So all these MLGs were not only fulfilling me professionally, but socially. And partially because of this I felt more and more justified in letting the “real world” slip away . . .

MLG New York

Playoffs, or, The Carbon Sweep

All those other chapters in this book? They were forgettable. The other tournaments? Unimportant, when compared with the playoffs. This was the tournament to separate the sidekicks from the heroes, the tourists from the legends.

Well, really the champions would be determined at the final event of the season, but playoffs are a player's last chance to earn themselves an invite, and there were several players who still needed to clinch a spot. Besides, the location of finals had finally been announced: Vegas, baby. The stakes were raised.

MLG ranks its players based on points that players accrue through placing at each season event. Players like Ken and PC Chris had their invites guaranteed, so NYC was just another shot at pride and money for them. But for players like Azen who arrived halfway through the season, only a stellar placing would guarantee a spot at the championships. And for players like me, this was the last chance to prove themselves and earn an impressive overall singles ranking for the 2006-2007 season.

Queue training montage.

Championships were to be an 8 person double elimination tournament, and qualifications would work like this: the top 7 players, according to points, are guaranteed a spot. The 8th spot, the wildcard

spot, would go to the winner of the level one bracket at the Playoffs, which any player could enter.

There would also be the level two bracket at Playoffs, reserved for players who earned an invite to Championships, to play for seeding and prize money.

So I set my sights on first place in the level one bracket. No problem, except that due to his late arrival in the season, and therefore a low point ranking, I would be sharing that bracket with Azen.

To beat Azen, essentially I had to hope for him to go blind during our match. Not only was he out of my league, but he trained me and so knew all my tricks. My other hope was for someone else from our bracket to beat him, which was only slightly more likely than a sudden bout of blindness.

The odds didn't bother me, however. This was to be the biggest tournament of my life, and I intended to be good and ready for it. My plan was to go out swinging, and finish my singles season strong. (Note: The Newlyweds were ranked third overall and were therefore already guaranteed a spot in the doubles event at Vegas).

To get ready, I watched videos of the players I knew would be in my bracket. I studied their styles, looked for weaknesses, and took notes in a binder I kept with me always.

I also started a cardio routine to get my body in better shape. It may sound silly, but a healthier body gives a person endurance even when he is competing in a chair, not to mention the benefits of endorphins and all that.

Finally, I took a pair of clippers to my hair and gave myself, for the first time in my life, a military style haircut - I wanted to feel like a weapon.

During all my preparation, I got a nice little surprise in an invitation to be signed on by a new sponsor, Carbon. Carbon wanted to get behind the best players in competitive Melee the way they had already done with Halo 2 for the Xbox, and sought Kevin and me out, in addition to Azen and his doubles partner Chillin. Azen and Chillin were far better players than us, but I like to think Carbon wanted The Newlyweds because we were charismatic, prominent members of the community. In short, we were more “camera ready” than many of the gamers at a typical tournament.

It is at this point that I feel I can no longer refuse to mention the competitive Halo scene. Halo 2 was Melee’s more popular, richer, older brother at these tournaments. Halo players were experiencing many of the things I have described in the previous five chapters, only on a much larger scale. When Team Ben was getting free hamburgers from White Castle, Final Boss (the top-rated Halo team) was signing a million dollar contract with Major League Gaming. Carbon’s Halo 2 team (the second best in the league) gained enough popularity to get the attention of NBA All Star Gilbert Arenas, who would actually come to the events and cheer them on.

And with the addition of Azen, Chillin, Husband and Wife, Carbon would be the first brand to extend across two games. I designed matching, red, slim cut

hoodies for Husband and myself, which read on the back, "CbN - The element that is essential to life." The pep talks I gave to myself in the mirror got a lot cooler when sporting my newest sponsor and my shaved head.

The venue for MLG NY Playoffs spared no expense. The arena was grand in scale, and the pro lounge was the nicest yet, with a beautiful spread of food and drink. This tournament cemented the professional feeling given to me by MLG - I felt like I was there to do something important.

Doubles competitions always come first. The Newlyweds had a solid run, placing fifth, but Chillin and Azen beat out their rivals Ken and Isai to take first in doubles. Kevin and I were there cheering them, our new teammates, on, and felt just as much pride when they claimed their victory. That was the first win for Team Carbon.

Halo 2 has their version of singles in a Free For All competition, with the 4v4 competition being their main event. And as fate would have it Karma, Carbon's Halo 2 front man, took 1st in the Free For All event. Win number two for Team Carbon.

The newly carbonized, weaponized version of Wife didn't do too shabby either. I entered the level

one pro bracket with all the focus and determination I could muster, and it paid off. I cut through the early levels of the bracket, taking out the players I had been training for. I made it all the way to loser's bracket finals when I hit RobMoney, another talented, mid-to-high-level player like myself.

Rob played a few different characters, but always chose sheik against me because I was classically weak against her. Rob knows this from experience, and our record in tournament matches was 3-1 in his favor. However, I had been forcing Husband to play sheik against me in preparation for this match specifically, and I came out strong and won the first game. Rob reacted by playing more cautiously, using his character's advantages against mine to combat my aggressive tactics.

Rob won the next two games, but I won the fourth, sending us into the fifth and final game of the set. I remember that my hands were sweating because I was nervous, but I didn't lose my focus. Still, Rob was too much for me that day and he took the match, giving me third place in the level one pro bracket.

Because there were seven players waiting in the level two bracket, placing third in the level one bracket essentially meant placing 10th overall. My final placing at the 2006-2007 Major League Gaming season was 10th place. 10th . . . as in top ten. Top ten, as in my ambition from the moment I set out on this journey into professional video gaming. This isn't

a definitive way to rank a player, but it damn sure is substantial, and in my eyes it is a goal reached.

RobMoney of course lost to Azen, who of course was waiting for him in the finals, making Azen the wildcard for the Championships. Terrific. But for now he still had the level two bracket to face containing the top seven players in the country. Regulation quite sensibly states that the winner from the level one bracket be matched first round against the player with the highest point ranking.

That would be Ken.

There was a great deal of anticipation for this match. The community wholly expected Azen to win the level one bracket and face off against Ken for the first match of the level two bracket, so the hype had already been building and predictions had already been made. Sure, Azen had won Orlando, but he managed to avoid playing Ken, the “King of Smash.” Here was Azen’s chance to prove himself, and represent the east coast against Ken as PC Chris had failed to do since the season opener.

Ken was waiting behind Azen as he did away with RobMoney, either eager to face his nemesis, or to just get the whole thing over with. The nerves must have been miserable for the two of them, with every spectator crowding behind to watch the giants clash.

The epicness of this matchup would be difficult to overstate. The two had been battling for the title

of best in the world since the dawn of competitive Melee. Ken the champ from the west coast, Azen from the east, and there wasn't any love lost between the two.

Azen of course is known for his prowess in the "ditto" match. So when Ken and Azen both choose Marth, it was something of a pissing contest. Azen could have switched to a different character to perhaps give him an edge, being the master of diversity and all, but even shy Azen had a streak of stubbornness, and I knew going into the match that we would see Marth vs. Marth all the way through to the end.

To make matters more cinematic, Ken played his trademark Red Marth, and Azen his usual blue. Red vs. blue, just like Darth Vader and Obi-Wan. The reader should not be surprised by this irrefutable proof that Ken fights for the dark side.

The best three of five match started off with Ken taking the first game, though barely so. Game two, Azen, then game three, Ken. With Ken leading the set 2-1 and poised to take out his rival, these two played what is one of the most talked about games in Melee history.

Game four started with typical back and forth action, and lots of momentum change. The Marths dash danced around each other (see chapter one) waiting for an opening. The player who makes the first move essentially gives something up, so the action was slow and then very fast and then slow again, like watching a snake fight a mongoose. Not

that I've ever seen a snake fight a mongoose, but I have seen *Rikki Tikki Tavi*. And *Casino Royale*. But I digress.

Ken eventually inched ahead little by little, taking the lead, and things didn't look great for Azen. Then Ken pulled ahead further, and things started looking really bleak. Near the end, Azen had only one life left with Ken still having *all four*. Eventually Azen is so near to death that you can feel the crowd start to grumble and lose interest. People are starting to walk away. I was commentating on that match, and at 3 minutes 19 seconds I called the match over, in error, when Azen got hit far off the side, but then surprised everyone by just barely surviving. Back on his feet, Azen kicked and screamed and somehow resisted being killed. For 42 heart-wrenching seconds, he forced the crowd to hold its breath and watch as he drew the match to one stock each. And then in front of a couple hundred dropped jaws, he completed the single greatest comeback of all time.

The throngs of people behind them, overwhelmingly on Azen's side, were going nuts. That 4th game was the nail in the coffin for Ken, and the 5th game was over before it started. Azen handled Ken in the last game, just took him out to the shed, and put him in a very bad position in the loser's bracket.

By bad position, I mean he had to again face Mew2King. Here is a player that deserves his own chapter - his own book probably - but the reader will

have to settle for a section about him in chapter 10. For now, suffice it to say that Mew2King was a technical guru, and his speed and frame-perfect play were too much for Ken. Mew2King took Ken out of the tournament and he finished with a *career* low of 7th place.

Azen, meanwhile, tore through the winner's bracket, not losing a single match. When PC Chris finally climbed out of the loser's bracket to face Azen for a second time (Azen put PC in the loser's bracket himself), he was faced with the task of beating the Master of Diversity in two sets. Azen, however, only needed Marth to take out PC Chris and earn his second consecutive 1st place finish.

And win number three for Team Carbon

To complete the sweep, we looked to Carbon's Halo 2 4v4 team as they emerged from the loser's bracket to face the imposing and appropriately named, "Final Boss." In an extended series that lasted nearly an hour, our boys upset the favorites and made history. At MLG New York Playoffs, the victors of every main event at belonged to Team Carbon. Such a sweep was unprecedented, and it was a rush even to be a member of such an extraordinary team.

With this most recent bit of excitement, the real world faded even farther into the background as a career unfolded in front of me. Undoubtedly my reflexes would start to dull and my fingers would get slower with age, but MLG and teams like Carbon

would always need coaches, managers . . . I saw no reason for anything else but pro gaming.

And let someone call it nerdy. I was going to Vegas.

MLG Las Vegas Championships

Las Vegas was . . . awe-inspiring. The whole city was beautiful; during the day the streets were pristine and bright, and at night, well, it was Vegas. The event itself was held in the Red Rock Hotel & Casino, the nicest hotel I've ever been in. There was actually a TV in our bathroom, in case we needed to get some last minute practice in while we brushed our teeth or took a morning dump.

For championships, competition was in the air - it was positively palpable. Eight entrants only for each event and \$10,000 for first place. Ken needed to prove he was still king; Azen had just won back to back events; PC Chris sought to topple Azen the way he did with Ken; and KoreanDJ and Mew2King were on suddenly on the map. In doubles, Ken and Isai remained the team to beat, while Husband and Wife lurked with potential for upsets.

It's at this point I'd like to zoom the camera out a bit, to gain a wider perspective on this event. Smashers, though lovely people, often don't have the social grace to talk to the waitress at IHOP - so it's crazy to picture them in a five star Las Vegas hotel with crystal chandeliers, *to play video games for money*. I don't want to ever lose sight of the ridiculousness of the whole situation. This ridiculousness, the absurdity of the whole story, is

one of the reasons I wanted to tell it in the first place

Doubles competition was first. For Husband and me, it was our time to prove our worth, and we were well-practiced for the event. We lost our first match, as we have a habit of doing, but we were a menace in the loser's bracket. We took out a few talented teams, then ended up hitting the imposing wall of Chillin and Azen in Loser's quarterfinals. Our friends and teammates, not to mention two-time MLG winners that season alone.

But Husband didn't fly 2,500 miles, apparently, to get 5th place. He played the single best match of his career that day, without comparison. He was playing with a grace and style and aggression that I'd never seen from him before, and I don't think Azen or Chillin had seen it either because they were against the ropes the whole match. Where I usually take the lead, I felt the fire coming from Kevin and just let him take us to an upset over the defending champions.

We played hard for 3rd, but just couldn't get the edge over Mew2King and his partner. The Newlyweds had landed a 4th place finish at the single most important Melee tournament of all time, and a couple years' worth of hard work felt absolutely worth it.

Next was singles, and I'll get right to it: Ken didn't win MLG Las Vegas. He didn't defend his reign, and he would never again be the king of smash. He played well and still managed a 3rd place finish, but unfortunately ran into a roadblock in the force of nature that was KoreanDJ.

The two players first met in the second round of the winner's bracket, in a fast-paced, close, and exciting match. The first game saw DJ exhibiting his characteristically aggressive style, but Ken kept pace. In fact, Ken played some of the best Melee I've ever seen him play that day, and took game one right out from under DJ's nose. The loss only added fuel to DJ's fire, however, and he couldn't get the next game started fast enough. I recall a friend leaning over to DJ to offer some advice, only to be waved away; a plan was already formed.

Go faster, apparently. DJ doubled his speed as well as his aggressiveness. For a less talented player, this attitude would have been disastrous, but his foundation was strong enough to be able to maintain integrity despite feeding off of his emotions. DJ came out of the gate so strong as to take Ken's first life while *only getting hit once*. Ken, the veteran with the unwavering fortitude, came right back and took DJ's first life *without getting hit at all*.

With the players tied at three lives each, DJ found his rhythm and Ken spent the rest of the game on defense. DJ stayed in control and came out on top with two lives remaining.

But Ken didn't lose his cool. In game three he came back smarter than ever, taking advantage of DJ's recklessness and positioning himself perfectly. Ken took game three and the lead in the set.

Game four, DJ came back with another sound victory, tying up the match at two games apiece.

In doing research for this book, I revisited the video of this fifth match and it honestly made my palms sweat just watching. Even though I know the outcome, that game was so close that I still get nervous watching Ken try every last trick against my favorite player. And that's the shame, really, is that Ken was playing so well and still lost. I believe he was playing well enough in that moment to beat anyone but KoreanDJ, but fate was not in his favor. This is why I call DJ a force of nature: because sometimes when people play him the fate of the match isn't even in their hands.

DJ beat Ken, then made it to winner's bracket finals where he lost to an upgraded version of PC Chris, who had discovered a new peak to his talent. Ken meanwhile had survived top players like Mew2King (4th place) and even Azen (5th place), to meet DJ again in loser's bracket finals. Their second matchup that day was not so close. After DJ beat Ken's Marth yet again (DJ was using Sheik), Ken tried switching to a different character for the first time all day. But his Fox wasn't able to make up the gap between the two players. Then in an act of what I'll never know was desperation or jest, chose his tertiary character, Captain Falcon. Either way, it was

the first and only piece of genuine humility I've ever seen from my nemesis, because I saw him smile as he entered what he must have known would be his last match of the 2006-2007 season. And with that loss he stepped out of the spotlight forever.

With Ken out of the picture, PC Chris and KoreanDJ were left to play for the championship. This marked the first tournament of the season to have a finals series which featured neither Ken nor Azen. Really, the significance of the match was not the contest itself but the spectacle of two younger, "new school" players fighting for 1st at the Championships. It was the beginning of a new era.

MLG Long Island

Satellite Event, or, “It’s Not You, It’s Me”

Denial is a powerful thing. I suppose if it weren’t, I would have been more prepared for when the axe fell. When MLG finally announced their 2007-2008 season several months later, Super Smash Brothers Melee was nowhere to be found. They had dropped us.

For all the intensity I felt, for all the amazing stories and interesting people and passion, our community was just too small. We couldn’t put up the attendance numbers boasted by more popular games like Halo. Essentially we had been dumped - MLG left us for someone better.

I don’t remember being all that disappointed, I think because I held out hope that MLG’s “continued involvement in the smash community” would be enough. I can be naive that way. MLG promising “continued community involvement” was kind of like a boyfriend or girlfriend saying, “let’s just be friends.” It never works that way; it should have been obvious that our time in the spotlight was over. No more crisp paychecks, no more charity events, no more crystal chandeliers.

MLG Long Island was essentially a regionally-run tournament with some sponsorship money provided by Major League Gaming, and it was the first and last “satellite event” to the regular season. Still, there

was some amazing competition at this tournament, and it offered a peek at the direction professional Melee was headed in, had we remained in the mainstream.

MLG Long Island took place almost 6 months after the championships, and Kevin and I were not adjusting well to a world without MLG tournaments. For one, the weight of winning was removed. At fan-run tournaments, prizes were usually measured in hundreds and not thousands of dollars. There were no cameras, and most importantly, no pro lounge. These losses might have been offset by the camaraderie of being back among our roots in the local DC area community . . . if those roots didn't hate us so much.

Team Ben had already set ourselves apart from the rest of the community with our callous love of competition and our (as many have said) elitism. To that I would say, "yes, well the community may resent us, but by the way it's the community that we built." Still, everyone is entitled to their opinion. And when MLG came along, tailor made for us, we embraced it whole-heartedly and said goodbye to local fan-run tournaments. So as one can imagine, we weren't exactly welcomed back with open arms.

MLG Long Island was a nice hybrid between the two, and The Newlyweds played better than we had since beating Azen and Chillin at the championships.

We started off the way we always do, by losing our first round. Somehow we got placed against Chillin and his partner Chu Dat. (Sidebar: Chu Dat was a major contender during the 2006-2007 MLG season, consistently placing in the top five. Regrettably, this book had room for only so many characters - sorry, Chu).

Their team beat us heartily, and even pulled a stunt with the sole point of embarrassing us. They essentially mopped the floor with us the first two games, to start with. Then while Husband and Wife were conspiring, they swapped characters without us noticing. So when we won the next game and felt pretty proud of ourselves, they just laughed at us, switched back, and finished up the match. Womp womp.

But that was okay, because we were just where we wanted to be - The Newlyweds do our best work when we come from behind.

See, I say things like that, and then I wonder why people think we we're gay.

But in fact we do, and we cleaned up in the loser's bracket, taking out several strong teams. In fact, we got to utilize our "MLG NY" play, where we teamed up on the all-star of the team and force his teammate to play catch up. The plan worked as it was designed to, and we got the better of both PC Chris' team and KoreanDJ's team this way. We felled the top two finishers at MLG Vegas (PC Chris did win, by the way), and we made it all the way up to loser's bracket finals. There we lost to the impossible team

of Mew2King and Isai, but to us 3rd place at a national felt pretty grand, and I'm glad we accomplished that, because it was the last MLG in which we would ever compete.

Azen and Ken began to fade from the spotlight after the 2006-2007 season. They each would go through phases of activity and inactivity, but they would ever again be a contender for best in the world. Neither attended MLG Long Island. PC Chris remained a formidable player, and placed 3rd at MLG Long Island, but the sensation of the tournament was the extended finals match between KoreanDJ and Mew2King. These two were game by game showing the rest of the community how Melee should be played. Because of these two alone, MLG Long Island could fairly be credited as historic.

KoreanDJ, or Daniel Jung, was an artist when he played Melee. He took the time to learn all he could about the game, and then he began to create. Watching DJ play, you could see him making things up as he went along - trying out brand new strategies in the middle of high stakes matches. He once compared his playing to freestyle rapping; for him, Melee was art.

Then, as if these two people were born to be rivals, we find the polar opposite in Mew2King. He knew everything there was to know about Smash Brothers Melee, frame by frame as well as player by

player. He used this wealth of knowledge to predict every move his opponents made; for him, Melee was science.

M2K, real name Jason Zimmerman, is probably not diagnosable as an autistic savant, but you could be forgiven for thinking as much. He first became known in our community for charting the frame counts for all the moves in Melee. For example, he could tell you Marth's grab lasts for 18 frames, where Peach's lasts for 12 (bear in mind there are 60 frames in a second). He didn't just memorize these, he *learned* them himself. He could also recite pi to enough digits that you had to ask him to stop.

M2K wasn't very good at fitting in, but he didn't much seem to care. He would arrive to tournaments wearing neon green shorts and an ill-fitting orange t-shirt, no matter the weather. He would say insanely inappropriate things but not bother to notice if anyone got offended.

But by the end of 2007, he was a god in our world. His frame-perfect play made the game look more beautiful than it ever had before, made it look like as the creators intended. To this day, when I watch his videos I have trouble even noticing the other player on screen because I can't take my eyes off of his character. His play is so fluid, with no movement wasted.

And not only did he know everything about the mechanics of the game, he knew everything about the people playing it, in an Abed Nadir kind of way.

“Hey Jason, I have to fight (xyz player) next round, any tips?”

“No not really. But he sidesteps after his aerals, and he has a losing record on small stages. And he misses D.I. on forward throws.”

One time I entered a doubles tournament with M2K, and it was like playing with a perfect version of Husband. He was already familiar with all of the Newlywed combos, just from watching our videos, so there was no discussion needed on game plan - I just played like I always do and he was consistently in the places I needed him to be. Only, you know, perfect.

So when the embodiment of Melee faced up against a fountainhead of innovation, amazing things happened. They had individually burned through the rest of the (very talented) competition at MLG Long Island, and so faced each other in both loser's and winner's bracket.

In winner's bracket, DJ took out M2K three games to zero. Despite playing the most gorgeous and most perfectly spaced Marth the audience had ever seen, M2K fell to DJ's aggressive Sheik two games in a row. In the third match, M2K tried his Fox - no ordinary Fox mind you - and DJ stunned the crowd by disposing of it an astounding *90 seconds*.

When they met again in loser's bracket, M2K came out with the first win, soundly in fact. I can only imagine DJ thought to himself “I must not be playing aggressively enough,” because he somehow turned up the dial another notch and launched an

ape-shit-nutso-crazytown-bananapants offensive that took the following three games and the tournament.

Sadly, there was never another MLG stage for DJ to play on, and I believe that stifled his flair and prevented him from realizing his true potential. I maintain that when speaking of raw talent, KoreanDJ is the best player to ever play the game. But for a player like him, fan-run tournaments didn't provide the incentive to make Melee his priority and bring out his best. He continued to compete at local and regional tournaments, and continued to be amazing, but if he ever truly wore the crown it was for a very brief period of time.

M2K, on the other hand, would soon begin a reign that is second only to Ken's with respect to length, and comparable to none in terms of the gap he created between him and the rest of the field. For over a year, talented players would essentially enter tournaments with the hope of getting 2nd place, as M2K remained positively untouchable in both singles and doubles competition.

Unfortunately, whereas Azen died a hero, M2K lived long enough to see himself become a villain. Humility was never one of his strong suits, and audiences cheered for underdog after underdog until someone finally removed him from his throne. And so it goes, because all good things must come to an end.

Epilogue

With MLG behind me, I was forced to readjust my dreams and realign my reality. Slowly but surely I came to terms with the idea that “real life” was now the life that mattered. While I still competed at fan-run tournaments, I gave up gaming as a career. I experienced for myself the truth in the age-old proverb, “this too shall pass.” Or the 1990s Semisonic lyric, “. . . every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end.”

After MLG Long Island, I slowly began feeling more like a real adult. I found my first “real” job at the University of Maryland, leading a team of student employees, and it gave me more joy and purpose than I would have dared hope for. I found a new world into which I could escape; when the black dog crept in close I would just pour more and more of myself into my work.

I even created a new alias for myself at this job, insisting on going by Christopher instead of just Chris. I would put on my suit in the morning, and leave behind doubts and inhibitions. After dedicating several years of my life to a game, and to a movement, I was given the chance to dedicate myself to people.

And yet this *is* a story about people. About several extraordinary people, and one in particular whose departure from my life changed everything.

2006-2007 MLG Season Results

MLG New York (Season Opener)

1. PC Chris
2. Ken
3. Chu Dat
4. Tink

MLG Dallas

1. Ken
2. Chu Dat
3. PC Chris
4. KoreanDJ

MLG Anaheim

1. Ken
2. PC Chris
3. Chu Dat
4. Isai

MLG Chicago

1. Ken
2. Chu Dat
3. Mew2King
4. Azen

MLG Orlando

1. Azen
2. Chu Dat
3. KoreanDJ
4. Isai

MLG New York (Playoffs)

1. Azen
2. PC Chris
3. Chu Dat
4. KoreanDJ

MLG Las Vegas (Championships)

1. PC Chris
2. KoreanDJ
3. Ken
4. Mew2King

MLG Long Island (Satellite Event)

1. KoreanDJ
2. Mew2King
3. PC Chris
4. Bum