

A Guide for New Arrivals

By Grab

The year is 2020. Fizzi, with the advent of rollback based netcode, has reinvented the online scene for Super Smash Bros. Melee forever. The faithful have, for most part, already grasped what it means: A vastly improved netplay experience with the barriers of distance/ping hugely reduced. But the introduction of random, easy to use match queries have also had an impact, and caused hundreds (if not thousands) of new players to come flocking, either because they are hungry for a genuine online smash experience, or just curious to see what all the fuss is about. In this piece, I will try to write a simple guide to starting Melee from the perspective of an experienced Melee player (and netplayer) communicating to others how to have the best Melee experience.

Getting Set Up

Simply put, these guides have already communicated in concise terms how to get the best netplay experience from a technical perspective:

<https://slippi.gg/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzawZ2nanu0>

<https://dolphin-emu.org/docs/guides/how-use-official-gc-controller-adapter-wii-u/>

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HtxpnffnQxnZezNsDlXgCxDnl-cFc1l8WtP1oMtWljU/edit>

https://www.amazon.com/Mayflash-GameCube-Controller-Adapter-Switch/dp/B00RSXRLUE/ref=sr_1_6?dchild=1&keywords=gamecube+controller+adapter&qid=1593009162&sr=8-6

https://www.ebay.com/sch/i.html?_from=R40&_trksid=p2499334.m570.l1313.TR12.TRC2.A0.H0.Xgamecube+controller+oem.TRS0&_nkw=gamecube+controller+oem&_sacat=117042

However, I will provide an extreme tl;dr for this.

1. Acquire a first party Gamecube controller and an adapter from the links above (or elsewhere). I do not recommend using an untested adapter. You should NEVER use a third party Gamecube controller. They are trash, no exceptions.
2. Download the newest slippi dolphin emulator build at slippi.gg.

3. Acquire an unaltered 1.02 SSBM .iso file (I cannot help you with this), and make the directory that contains it the default directory in dolphin.
4. Download Zadig and follow the instructions in the dolphin-emu.org link to make sure your Gamecube controller is natively supported.
5. Ideally, you have a 144hz (or greater) monitor, and set it to 144hz. The vast majority of modern machines can run Melee comfortably, and so most people will have more improvement potential in their setup at the monitor rather than anywhere else. If you are attempting to netplay on a machine that experiences rampant frame drops when running Dolphin alone, an upgrade to your computer can probably do more for your life than Melee would.

The Melee Playing Experience

You are going to get *absolutely bodied*. Look, I get it: you're going to want to jump in and try a few matches before reading too deeply into the topic. Who wouldn't? How would you know if you were really interested in learning without trying it first? And that's fair. However, after getting brutally destroyed a few times, there are a few things that you need to consider. Firstly, think about the age of Melee. SSBM is almost twenty years old. It is just months behind *Starcraft* for being the longest running competitive video game still widely played. What that means in English is that some of your opponents will have been playing Melee competitively (usually off and on) for over a decade. If it were possible for a novice to jump in and beat someone with that sort of experience, Melee would not be a very worthwhile competitive game. Furthermore, please consider the enormous skill gap potential that is central to Melee's appeal. Simply put, the number of advanced techniques, movement options, defensive tricks, and already well fleshed out punish game ideas means that the skill gap between a novice and a high level player is probably greater in SSBM than in any other currently played fighting game. If the idea of a game where the better player almost always wins appeals to you, where there is always room for improvement beyond "get better at guessing in rock-paper-scissors situations", then Melee could be the game for you. If a game where anyone can be competitive with top players with minimal investment is more your speed, you need to close this guide right now, especially now that wobbling is more commonly banned.

...Now what? If you can accept that the road to getting good might be long, what should you do? Firstly, I recommend choosing a character based on how they play in Melee, rather than based on whether you like the games that they come from. *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island* was my first video game, and Yoshi is my favorite video game character, but I do not play Yoshi in Melee. This is because he is antithetical to the way that I want to play. Yoshi is a character that gets a large number of openings by tanking his opponent's hits and counter hitting them. He has very cool combos and flashy movement, but I am a player that prefers to use movement

and defensive moves to avoid getting touched entirely, so he is a bad fit for me. Marth, by contrast, is a great fit for me, with his amazing dash dance and range making him one of the hardest characters to hit. Personally, I find Marth's characterization in Fire Emblem to be the storytelling equivalent of doing my taxes, but the way Marth allows me to express myself in Melee is far, far more important, and resonates with my innermost self. If you are unaware of how a character in Melee typically plays, I recommend looking at the list of the top 100 Melee players (<https://liquipedia.net/smash/SSBMRank>) and looking at how people who play the character in question seem to play. If your chosen character is not represented by a top 100 player, I recommend that you pick a different one for reasons I will shortly explain.

Next, I suggest that you pick a good character. This is not an invective that everyone should play Fox (anyone posting the Fox only Final Destination meme in 2020 should be shot), but rather a simple argument that you are hamstringing both your competitive potential *and your enjoyment of the game* by picking a low tier character for the sake of being different. Melee low tiers are not like low tiers in Smash Ultimate or many other modern fighting games. Melee low tiers are *bad*, and some of them are so bad that they really cannot win at all at high levels. Even more importantly than winning, however, is that they do not have options. Characters like Bowser and Zelda have no real ways to attack an opponent safely (or even quasi-safely), and instead rely almost exclusively on impatience and sloppiness on the part of their opponents to get a hit, and even then have very limited options when it comes time to follow up on said hit. This necessitates gameplay that is extremely linear, especially relative to the possibilities provided by better characters. This often grows predictable and stale for both parties, lessening fun all around. Indeed, "having options" is not some nebulous term elitists use to describe pressing more buttons; it genuinely leads to more fun for everyone. If you are struggling to visualize/think about this, just consider: Leffen and iBDW (two top ten players) have more variation and "personality" differences in their Fox play than exists between every competitive Kirby player in the world.

You may ask now "where on the tier list is the cutoff for 'acceptable' characters?", and the truth is that it is not cut and dry. As previously mentioned, Zelda and Bowser are pretty solidly irredeemable, but Doc players like Franz and Ganon stalwarts like Kage are still breaking into the top 100 in the world. Axe and Amsa play mid tier characters but are top 10 players with wins against the best. The list of viable characters in Melee certainly extends past the traditional top 7/8, but please be aware that looking too far down the list has the potential to lead to stale, boring gameplay and people avoiding matching with you.

Improvement

If you have made it this far, completing your netplay setup, accepted that you will not be competitive with experienced players in a matter of days, and chosen a character that is both (at least kind of) good and agreeable to your playstyle interests, then congratulations: You have already put in a considerable amount of work, and can now focus on actually learning the game. Fortunately for you, there are more resources on this topic available than anyone could ever realistically need. I will give my thoughts here, but the links at the end of this section will probably be of the greatest use to you. Before you skip ahead though, consider this simple ranking of priorities on what to learn when picking up Melee. It is something that I wish I had had four years ago when I started playing.

The most important thing to learn in Melee is movement. If you cannot move your character when/where you want them to be, you cannot play the game. This encompasses a great deal of what people in the community call “tech skill” (which I think is a useless term), but it is really just the ability to manipulate your characters’ position and action state in an advantageous manner. These techniques include but are not limited to L cancelling, wavedashing, wavelanding, dash dancing, platform dropping, shield dropping, pivoting, run canceling, air dodging, moving out of shield, and many others. If you cannot position your character effectively, you cannot execute your punish game, you cannot play neutral intelligently, and if your opponent moves well it will feel like trying to fight Superman as a child wearing manacles.

The second most important thing to learn in Melee is punish game. In Melee, punish game refers to both true combos that your character gets off of an opening, and extending your advantage when your hits put your opponent in a bad position. You can think of your punish game as how hard you can hit in a boxing match. If your punches deal no damage, you cannot win, no matter how many of them you land. Likewise, in Melee, your neutral game matters little if the openings that you find don’t actually amount to anything against your opponent. The ability to hit hard is the difference between having to win neutral once or a dozen times to take a stock, and that makes all the difference in the world. As well as the resources linked at the end of this piece, I generally recommend watching videos of top players to learn about punish game. Their livelihoods depend in part in how hard they can hit in game, and hit hard they do. While there is something to be said for creativity and not just copy pasting your combos, there is also a lot to be said for not reinventing the wheel and standing on the shoulders of giants who have come before. Try not to lose sight of either perspective.

The next most important thing to learn is defense. When I say “defense” in Melee, I mean the appropriate application of DI (directional influence), smash DI, all kinds of “teching” on the

ground, sliding off of platforms when getting hit, crouch cancelling, using your shield, and recovering to the stage when knocked off. These things are so important because they are the difference between getting zero to death punished every time you lose neutral by every player on netplay versus only getting zero to death punished *sometimes* by players on the cutting edge of the competitive world. Defense may not be the flashiest or coolest thing to focus on, but as they say in football: defense wins championships...or in this case random netplay friendlies. But hey-you can dream!

The last truly major thing to focus on in Melee is the neutral game. For the truly uninitiated, neutral game simply refers to the phase of the game when neither player has obtained an opening, and both players are moving freely through space jockeying for a way to hit their opponent. Do not be fooled by the fact that neutral game is listed as the “last” thing here. It is not less important than the other areas. On the contrary, at high levels I believe it is the *most* important thing in the game, as at high enough levels everyone hits hard, everyone moves well, and everyone executes their defense nearly optimally. However, neutral game is informed by and shaped by the other areas of play. As mentioned, it does not matter how clever a player is at finding hits if they cannot make those hits amount to anything, and it does not matter how craftily they evade their opponent if they always die in one hit. Even more, having an especially good punish game can change the way the neutral game is played on an even deeper level than that. If an opponent knows that a single grab can mean death, they will be forced to play in a much more controlled, cautious manner, giving their opponent space and not opting to take wild risks because of the potential consequences. Likewise, if someone’s defense is sound, they can approach the opponent and take risks more liberally, knowing that the resulting hit, should they mess up/get outplayed, probably won’t end in their death.

Links to various resources:

Training resources:

20XX – The classic Melee hack pack that enables an incredible variety of practice options. More has been written about it than I ever could here.

<https://smashboards.com/threads/the-20xx-melee-training-hack-pack-v4-07-7-04-17.351221/>

KJH’s guide to 20XX – 20XX is so versatile and complex of a tool that top player KJH made a hour long guide to using it. That is not a joke. It is that useful and feature rich.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkp9bbmzgmY>

Uncle Punch's Training Mode – A collection of isolated training situations in Melee that are prepackaged and easy to use. Not as versatile as 20XX, but much easier to use and contains some unique functionalities to boot

<https://smashboards.com/threads/training-mode-v1-1-updated-1-11-19.456449/>

Guides on theory and improvement in Melee:

Llod's improvement guide – A guide written by multi-game top player Llod on how to improve. Simple, detail-oriented, and one of the more modern guides of its time. Highly recommended.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xwPP5AgM_qw6AlwGnP2t7n2hlyb3j2K--JDMIOPx_bA/edit

Drastic improvement – One of the classic melee improvement articles. More abstract, but things from this era that are not abstract are often dated. Also highly recommended.

<https://smashboards.com/threads/drastic-improvement.311129/>

Improved drastic improvement – An extension of the above, updated and more specific. The entire blog Alex's Puff Stuff is worthy of exploration, even if you have no interest in Puff specifically

<https://alexspuffstuff.blogspot.com/p/improved-drastic-improvement.html>

SSBM Tutorials – Probably the most well known Melee improvement video channel on the web. Solid resources by competent players communicated well. What more could you ask for?

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC46ZTid4t2ctB6osM0WTiJA>

Hax's Youtube – Recently, Hax has been posting extremely exhaustive videos on advanced, meta-defining techniques for Melee. This is often too technical for novices, but the production is

excellent and can give people an idea of how deep the rabbit hole can go for seemingly simple things

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVJOIYceclVO96ktK0qDKhQ>

Melee Library – Parts of the Melee Library are old now. Parts of the Melee Library were never good. Still, there is much gold in it. Articles by PPMD, DruggedFox, Kadano, and Magus are all very much worth reading. In general, be cautious of older (pre-2012 or so) content written by people who are not well known. The character guides in particular are often somewhat questionable.

<https://www.meleelibrary.com/>

Time Muffin's Bakery – TimeMuffin isn't a top player or particularly well known in the Melee world, but I think this article is useful for anyone trying to make the leap from "bad" to "on the come up", which is arguably most Melee players.

<https://timemuffinsbakery.wordpress.com/category/the-melee-handbook/>

Smashcords – You will notice that I have linked a lot of older forum posts and Youtube channels here. The reason for that is that much of the discussion and theory on both the game and specific characters is now centered on Discord channels. This site is an easy to use reference for most relevant Melee discord channels.

<https://smashcords.com/melee>

How to Save Your Hands – Melee, for a video game, is oddly physical. If you get involved in your local scene for any length of time, you will probably meet someone who has had hand/wrist/nerve issues caused in part by playing the game. This is overwhelmingly caused by two things: extreme binge playing sessions and poor self-care. I can do nothing about you engaging in the former, but here is a good resource covering the latter.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/186GE0Dk34-NV6ReiuGRGPWMrRD1yz1UVMYn4eO450Xk/edit>

Ikneedata - This is an advanced tool for calculating knockback, hitstun, percentage thresholds, move staling, and many more things. Probably not the most useful for beginners, but too powerful to ignore

<https://ikneedata.com>