Preface

I'm often asked what the "best way to improve" is. Of course, there isn't one answer that resonates with everyone. If you look at the top players, I'm sure they've all had their own idiosyncratic method of reaching the top. My own path was *extremely* distorted, as I've played a mixture of Melee/Brawl/ProjectM/Smash4 since I started playing smash competitively, and only recently (within the past 2 or so years) started showing serious improvement. Regardless, I do believe there is one "Golden Pathway" of improvement; this is the pathway that Armada (probably) took, and that many players with an insane amount of improvement (Zain, Crush, etc.) are also (probably) taking. People find success with other methods, though other methods lead to inconsistency (think Westballz, no offense). I think I've discovered a way to articulate how to approach this "Golden Pathway," and what it takes to set yourself on the path to becoming the best in the world. This guide is Melee-oriented, though you could easily apply these ideas to any Smash Game, or likely any competitive multiplayer game out there. Enjoy!

Who am I?

My name is Arjun Malhotra, also known as lloD. I've been playing Smash competitively since 2005, and I am currently a top 50 SSBM and SSBPM player in the world. I main Peach in Melee, Brawl, Project M, and Sm4sh, though recently I've only been playing Melee and PM. In Melee, I can comfortably play all of the high/top tiers (yes, my Falco isn't as bad as you think it is). I consider myself an extremely consistent player, as I rarely lose to people worse than me, and often rely on adaptation to clutch out tight sets (as opposed to gimps, combos, or even worse, *wobbling.*) I credit my consistency to my neutral game (which I consider the best aspect of my gameplay) as well as the method I've used to improve over the past couple years. Since I started playing, my "improvement" happened in waves:

- I started in Melee as your average "bad player"
- Later, Brawl taught me neutral game, bumping me up to a "mid-high-level player"
- Later, PM taught me combos, which pushed me to a "high-top-level player"
- Sm4sh didn't teach me anything (RIP)
- Finally, Melee in 2015 was when I put everything together to start my journey to become a "top player"

2015 was also when I created my college's Smash Club. Part of the reason I've improved so much since then was because I devoted a lot of time and effort into teaching the members of the club how to improve, and in the process, I learned a lot myself. I presented several lectures to the club, which helped me articulate the idea of "improvement" into digestible components. These lectures led to many many many discussions with my peers about improvement, pushing my theories of improvement further and further. After two years of bouncing these ideas around, I've finally decided to write out this "Guide to Improvement." I hope the Smash community

benefits from my ideas, and I hope I can improve even faster through the discussions this guide will induce.

Steps of Improvement

Now we get to the fun part. Improvement in Melee is incredibly difficult, as I'm sure we all know how high the learning curve is. Here are the steps that I believe will keep you close to the "Golden Pathway."

Step One: Learn Your Character

A little obvious, but probably the step that most people struggle with. I often tell people that they "don't know their character well enough." I'm not talking frame data or anything, though learning your frame data definitely wouldn't hurt. Instead, your first step to improvement should be learning the in's and out's of your character. This involves a LOT of practice. Learn your character's dash speed, fall speed, jump speed, wavedash length(s), dash distance, pivot timings, aerial timings, pressure sequences, etc. Master all of your character's movement options, attack options, shield options, OoS options, recovery options, etc. If you see a better player do something you can't do, then learn how to do it. Here are some examples of Peach's movement options that I *know* I need to work on: a) Peach Bomber recovery, b) dash forward -> jump -> mid-height float -> falling FC nair, c) aerial drift offstage before I start floating. These things are easy to practice, but turns out I'm pretty lazy. There's really no end to Step One, as there are always things your character is capable of that you haven't practiced or mastered yet (y'know, like pivot tilts or all that dumb stuff), but you eventually get to the point where you're comfortable enough to put another character on the screen.

Step Two: Learn Your Character's Combos

Let me set the stage for this one: You are playing your main character. Your opponent is playing character A. Your opponent is at B %. You are playing on the stage C. Your opponent is at position D at stage C. You hit your opponent's hurtbox E with hitbox F of your character's move G. Your move has staleness H. Your opponent's DI is I. Your ports are J.

This should scare you. Every time you hit your opponent, there are that many variables in play. However, you should be able to tell me if/how you would convert off of any combination of those variables. For example, if I'm Peach and my opponent is Fox at 0 % on Final Destination in the center of the stage, my unstale Uthrow (hurtbox and hitbox are irrelevant) will convert into a Dsmash if my opponent DI's forward and I have 1st port. Of course, no one will ever know how to follow up on every possible combination of variables. However, you should either **know** or **have a good idea** of how to follow up on **the important** sets of variables, such as Peach's/Marth's confirmations off of Uthrow on Spacies on FD, or Sheik's confirmations after ftilt/dash attack, or Fox's confirmations after Utilt. The combinations are endless, and 20XX is your best friend for getting ideas of how to extend your combos. Step Two is important for Step

Five (Neutral Game), because Step Two determines how to **weigh your options** in Neutral, as most of the time, you want to land a hit on your opponent that leads into the most devastating combo. Learn your character's combo game by watching how better players convert off of their openings, and practice practice practice.

Step Three: Learn Your Opponent's Character's Combos

Just like how you need to know your own combos, you must learn your opponent's combos. Step Three is easy to explain, as it's pretty similar to Step Two; you're just on the other side now. Learn what happens after your opponent hits you with one of their combo-starters, so that you know which moves to avoid for Step Five (Neutral Game).

Step Four: Learn Your Character's Interactions With Others

Step Two only involves your character's moveset and how each move leads into combos based on those millions of variables. Step Three focuses on your opponent's movesets, so that you know for which moves you should look out. Step Four hones in on how your character's moveset interacts with your opponent's character's moveset. The way I think of this is by imagining two characters standing a little bit away from each other, and both characters throwing a move at each other. Like Step Two, there are several variables you need to consider, but we can break them down into *timing* and *spacing*. Timing refers to components such as who starts the animation first and how the hitboxes/hurtboxes change based on the frame progression. Spacing refers to the distance between hitboxes and hurtboxes at each frame, progressing until one character's hitbox collides with the other character's hurtbox, causing that character to "win" the interaction. There are (close to) an infinite number of possible move interactions in Melee, as you can endlessly change the micro-variables of timing and spacing. However, just like your combo game, you should **know** or **have a good idea** of how your character's moves interact with your opponent's **important moves** with slight variations of spacing/timing. For example, if Fox and Marth are standing in front of each other, then Fox's SHFFL'd drill will *beat* Marth's dtilt, though Fox's shine will *lose* to Marth's dtilt. The asterisks are there because I'm sure there is some combination of timing/spacing out there that the situation would be in the other character's favor. I hope you get the idea, though. To master Step Four, you need to play around with this idea and think about which of your moves should be chosen to combat your opponent's threatening moves. A lot of Step Four can be done without a controller in your hand. I've spent many lectures in college mapping out how Peach's hitboxes relate to other character's, such as how my float Bair interacts with Fox's drill or Sheik's Fair. If you find yourself struggling against a particular move against a particular character, then take a step back and think: if you 100% know that your opponent will use that move, then what moves do you have that would *beat* their move, and how/when do you have to start your move to beat theirs. If your answer is that you "don't have a move that beats theirs," then either your character isn't viable or you don't know your character well enough . Just like the other steps, there is no end to Step Four, though you can get "good enough" to the point where you have an answer or could make up an answer to all of your opponent's possible options.

Step Five: Learn Neutral Game

"Who are you, lloD, to tell me what Neutral Game is?" I'm glad you asked. Before I tell you, let's define some terms.

1) **True Neutral Game:** Two Foxes, Final Destination, no items, both standing on opposite sides of the stage. Not really, but pretty close. I consider "True Neutral" the point in time in which neither player has positional advantage. Both characters have access to *all* of their options, and neither is limited by percent, stage control, etc. True Neutral rarely happens.

2) **Limited Neutral Game:** You can guess what this means. For whatever reason, one character has more options than the other, *relative to True Neutral.* Examples include one character having stage control, one character being on the ledge, and one character being off stage. I also classify a lot of situations as Limited Neutral that you probably wouldn't even consider a part of "Neutral Game," such as edgeguarding/recovering situations, escaping combos/techchases, etc. In all of these situations, both characters have options, but usually the number of options is heavily skewed in one player's favor (such as techchasing, in which the tech-chasee only has 7-10 options, while the tech-chaser has many many more). I still consider these situations "Limited Neutral Game," as it is *possible* to come out on top if you make the right choice.

3) **Reaction Time**: The time it takes for you to react to something. We aren't robots, or else Melee would be no fun. Each player has a different reaction time, and each player's reaction time is constantly fluctuating. Some say the average is 12 frames, others say it's 20 frames, and honestly I don't really care what the number is. The important part is that you as a player can react to certain things, and you as a player cannot react to certain things.

4) **Mixup:** This term plays right off of reaction time. Mixups only exist because we aren't robots. A mixup occurs when both players pick an option to which the opponent cannot react. For example, if a Fox and a Marth are running straight at each other (one of the closest examples of True Neutral I can think of), and right before they reach each other, the Fox drills and the Marth dtilts, then the Fox and Marth each just performed a Mixup. The take-away is that neither player knew which option the opponent would pick. The Fox could have drilled, dtilted, WD back'd, running shined, grabbed, shielded, etc. The Marth could have dtilted, grabbed, SH faired, SH naired, WD back'd, shielded, etc. Each character has a web of options that each beat and lose or tie with the other character's web of options. The point is that neither character can *react* to their opponent's option.

5) **Whiff Punish**: This word is thrown out a lot, but I have a very specific definition for it. If you are standing somewhere, far away enough from your opponent that none of their moves will hit you, and your opponent throws out a move that does not hit you, then you can "Whiff Punish" your opponent with whatever you want (assuming you hit them before their animation ends).

6) **Prediction-Confirmation**: My favorite term (and the term for which W&M Smash has made fun of me endlessly for using). This is similar to a Whiff Punish, though in this case, you *predict* your opponent to throw out a move(s) and then *confirm* upon that move by punishing. Note the difference between this and Whiff Punish. For a Whiff Punish, you did not make a specific prediction regarding which option they would pick. You just stayed far enough away that they couldn't hit you with *any* of their moves, and punished their move on reaction. The problem with a Whiff Punish is that you need to be ready to react to ALL of your opponent's moves. Prediction-Confirmation helps you out by limiting the options you *think* your opponent will use, therefore priming your reaction senses to react to those specific options. You can think of there being a spectrum between Prediction-Confirmation and Whiff Punishing, as Prediction-Confirmation keeps a few of your opponent's options in mind, while Whiff Punishing keeps all of their options in mind. For example, if I'm Peach dash dancing in the middle of Battlefield, and my opponent Falco just landed on one of the side platforms facing away from me, there's a good chance that my opponent will subsequently fall through that platform with a falling Bair. If I *predict* that Bair and prime myself to react to it, then as soon as he uses that falling Bair, I can *confirm* with a dash attack. Another example is me floating in the air as Peach with my back towards my opponent's Luigi. I *predict* the Luigi will WD in with a Dsmash/ftilt/jab/grab (note that there are now 4 options for which I'm primed), and I *confirm* with a falling FC bair. There are endless examples of Prediction-Confirmation, but the important take-away for now is that you can choose how many options for which your prime yourself by choosing how many options you think your opponent is considering. I predicted 1 of Falco's options, but 4 of Luigi's. The trade-off is that generally speaking, the more options from which you think your opponent will choose, the harder it will be to react to each one.

7) **Hard Reads:** This word is thrown out a lot, but again, I have a very specific definition for it. Most people use this word to describe a situation in which you correctly guess which option your opponent will pick, and pick your option accordingly. For example, you're Falco, and you've just knocked your opponent down in front of you. You think he's going to roll behind you, so you input a backwards Fsmash the moment they start the roll. Turns out you've timed your Fsmash well so that your Fsmash connects. *I do not consider this a Hard Read.* I consider this interaction a "Mixup," as neither player could react to the opponent's option. The Falco couldn't react to the Fox's roll, and the Fox couldn't react to the Falco's Fsmash. "Mixup." Instead, here's an example of a Hard Read using my own terminology. Same situation, you've just knocked down your opponent as Falco. *You start charging your backwards Fsmash.* Pause. The opponent can react to you charging your backwards Fsmash by doing literally anything besides rolling through you. If, for whatever reason, they roll through you, then congrats, you just performed a Hard Read. Why would anyone fall for that charged Fsmash? Who knows? Maybe they didn't master Steps Three or Four, or they mis-executed, or they're being lazy. My best guess is that the opponent didn't consider your option as one of their Prediction-Confirmation predictions. Maybe the opponent was already holding in to roll

through you because they didn't expect you to even consider charging an Fsmash. This is how good players get hit by really dumb things.

8) **Stage Control:** Pretty simple concept that is difficult to implement. The general idea is each character has an "ideal" place on the map that they want to be. The closer you are to that position, and the farther your opponent is from theirs, the more "Stage Control" you have.

Alright, we've defined our terms, so now let's build up Neutral Game. I like to think of Neutral Game as layers.

The **lowest layer** is pure randomness, in which both players press random buttons. Not much to say about this one, besides that it's easily beatable by Whiff Punishing. This layer blends into the **2nd layer**, which is Hard Reads. This is how you catch players worse than you. You charge your Fox Usmash as they fall right into your grasps, even though they could have jumped out on reaction. You lay there in wait as Jigglypuff as they roll right into your rest. *You shield grab *gasp.** These options capitalize off of your opponent's mistakes, though they won't get you far in the long run, as your opponent simply needs to react to get out of these situations.

The **3rd layer** is where real Melee begins with Prediction-Confirmation, specifically having one Prediction in mind. Going back to the earlier example of punishing a Falco's falling bair with my Peach's dash attack, I had one specific prediction and one appropriate confirmation. Layer 3.01 involves having two specific predictions with appropriate confirmations. Layer 3.02 has three specific predictions. This is the spectrum I mentioned that blends into Whiff Punishing, which is the **4th layer**. I spend most of my time somewhere in this spectrum, especially when playing against players worse than me (yes, even mid-high level players), as I have a pretty good knack for knowing which options my opponent is considering, which ones to which I can react, and how to appropriately confirm off of those options. If you've ever wondered why top players pick "non-committal options" such as powershield, dash dance, dash back, or WD back so much, it's because they're playing somewhere on the Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish spectrum. Just note that a lot of the time, you don't even need to react to the start of a move's animation. Instead, you can react to the build-up to that move, such as an approaching short hop or the moment someone transitions from dash to run. This layer will beat the 2nd layer of Hard Reads as long as the option your opponent picks is one of the options you have primed yourself to which to react. For example, if you predict that your opponent will charge an Fsmash, and your opponent charges an Fsmash, then you can confirm with whatever you want. However, if you predict that your opponent will do one of 12 things and *none* of them is charging an Fsmash, then you will lose to a charged Fsmash. Just know that the player in the Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish spectrum has complete control over whether or not they can beat the player in the Randomness Hard Read spectrum; you just need to keep all of your opponent's Hard Read options in mind.

The **5th layer** is where most of top Melee occurs. This is the "Mixup" Layer. Remember that Mixups occur when both players pick an option to which neither player can react. The Mixup

game is pretty much expanded RPS. Assuming you're playing a viable character, then if you set yourself up into a Mixup situation, you have a web of options that beat/lose to your opponent's web of options. Some options are easier to execute than others, but you should have some way to counter all of your opponent's options. Mixups are often hard to force, especially as a slower character, as it often feels like the faster character is always able to Prediction-Confirmation all of your options (Marth vs. Peach comes to mind…). However, all viable characters are capable of forcing these interactions in some manner. To master mixups, you MUST understand Step Four, or else you will not understand why you win/lose certain Mixup interactions. Similar to how the Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish spectrum has control over the Randomness Hard Read spectrum, the Mixup layer has control over the Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish spectrum. Remember that your (viable) character has an appropriate option for all of your opponent's options. This includes the "non-committal option," which is often the option picked in the Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish spectrum. For example, if my opponent (Marth) thinks that I (Peach) will dash attack right into Marth's face, then he might dash back (the non-committal option) to Prediction-Confirmation. However, to force a Mixup, I decide to keep running towards him, to the point where he would no longer be able to react to my dash attack. Now, we've entered a Mixup situation, because we both need to pick an option to which the other cannot react. I can do an overextended dash attack to try to catch his dash back, or an overextended grab to catch his shield. Or (and here's where things get real fun), I can pick a non-committal non-reactable Mixup option myself, such as wavedashing in place or pulling a turnip. This non-committal non-reactable Mixup option is the reason why Mixups > Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish spectrum. If we both commit to a non-committal option, guess who has stage control. ME! From this point on, the next neutral interaction will be in my favor, as by gaining stage control, I've increased the number of options that I can pick, and decreased the number of options that my opponent can pick.

If you've made it this far, go take a break, because that was a lot to digest.

Step Six: Apply Neutral Game

To summarize Neutral Game so far:

Randomness-Hard Reads < Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish < Mixups

Just remember that the above statement is not always true. You can beat someone who uses Mixups with Pure Randomness. You can beat someone who uses Prediction-Confirmation with Hard Reads. You are just *more likely* to win if you prioritize using Prediction-Confirmations, Whiff Punishes, and Mixups, as these options give you control over the situation by letting you determine which of your opponent's options you will consider countering, and not letting your opponent react to your own options. *However,* one thing to keep in mind is that a lot of the Prediction-Confirmation, Whiff Punish, and Mixup options don't give you as strong of a punish due to the nature of the moves. For example, Marth's Dtilt's range and short animation is perfect

for Whiff Punishing and Mixups, though it doesn't directly lead to as strong of a punish as, say, Marth's grab (which is harder to land but gives you a stronger punish). This leads us to my final definition:

9) **Distribution of weights:** When determining what your possible options are in any given situation, all of your options have differential a) *likelihood of winning the neutral interaction*, b) *combo-starting potential,* and c) *potential of getting combo'd*. To determine the *likelihood of winning the neutral interaction,* we need to combine what we learned from Step Four and Step Five: think about the *timing* and *spacing* of your and your opponent's moves (Step Four), and how they counter the options you think your opponent will use (Step Five). To determine the *combo-starting potential,* we look back at Step Two, and to determine the *potential of getting combo'd,* we go back to Step Three. For every neutral interaction, you can assign an arbitrary value to each of the three components we've discussed in this paragraph: a) chance of winning the interaction, b) what happens if you win the interaction, and c) what happens if you lose the interaction. You want to maximize (a) and (b), and minimize (c). The arbitrary assigned values change on many factors such as percents and position, as we'll discuss later, but for each upcoming neutral interaction, I'll refer to the differential options as the **distribution of weights,** as each option has pros and cons.

So for each neutral interaction, you want to weigh all of your options so that you have the best chance of hitting your opponent with the best possible combo starter / finisher. Let's go back to setting up some variables (though I won't be obnoxious with colors this time).

- Your character __ at __ % with Port __
- Your opponent's character __ at __ % with Port __
- Stage __
- Positions __ and __

For the moment, let's say that the game just started, that both players are playing the same character, and that both players have 0%. Here's what it would look like:

- Your character **Fox** at **0** % with Port **1**
- Your opponent's character at **Fox** at **0** % with Port **4**
- Stage **Final Destination**
- Positions **Left Side** and **Right Side**

Theoretically, both players have the same sets of neutral options (pretend port doesn't matter). Theoretically, if both players have mastered Steps One-Three, then both players' sets of neutral options have the same **distributions of weight.** This means that both players have the exact same risks and benefits of picking each move, as their potential combos are the same as each other's (like how in a Fox ditto, both Foxes want a grab at 0% to start the chain throw on FD). So, both players will be trying to hit their opponent with a similar web of moves that maximize benefits and minimize risks. Now, what happens if you 3.02 Prediction-Confirmation your

opponent into a grab? Well, you ideally starts a chain throw (and let's say ends at 40% for whatever reason), and then both players are back on opposite sides of the stage. Now let's look at the variables again:

- Your character **Fox** at **0** % with Port **1**
- Your opponent's character at **Fox** at **40** % with Port **4**
- Stage **Final Destination**
- Positions **Left Side** and **Right Side**

So think about what's different. The obvious difference is that your opponent's Fox is now at 40%. This means that you and your opponent's **distribution of weights** are now different, as your opponent still wants that juicy grab, but now you have a bunch more cool options to try, like dtilt, dash attack, and utilt. Now, if you've mastered Step Two, you would know the priority of moves you're looking for (such as dtilt > utilt > dash attack, don't quote me, I suck at the Fox ditto). There's another difference compared to the start of the game that you might not have noticed, however. The difference is that one "True Neutral" interaction has occurred, and that both players have that data point to influence their future decisions. You won the first interaction with a 3.02 Prediction-Confirmation. Both you and your opponent have that datum, and need to extrapolate into Neutral Interaction #2. Maybe you'll go for a 3.06 Prediction-Confirmation, or go for a non-committal mixup to gain stage control, which would swing Neutral Interaction #3 more in your favor.

These factors are why Neutral Game is so difficult. Your **distribution of weights** is affected both by the physical characteristics of the status of the game (percents, stage position, etc.), but ALSO by all of the interactions that have happened in the game/set up to that point. You must always be considering at which Neutral Game level your opponent is, and at which level they're likely to be next. One reason why Armada is so consistent is because he's constantly interpreting the data his opponent gives him, and extrapolating this data to influence his future decisions.

Step Seven: Practice, Learn, and Implement

If you've made it this far, then your framework is set and you can be on your way to the Golden Pathway. I read a mini guide somewhere on Twitter about Overwatch improvement that I really liked, so I'll summarize it (this is the real link: https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DMW_ULJW4AAiUln.jpg):

Every player starts out with a board of red lights. Each time an interaction occurs and you understand why you won/lost that interaction, one of the red lights turns green. The players that improve the most efficiently are the ones that convert their board to green lights the fastest.

This analogy is 100% applicable to Melee. Every time an interaction occurs (True Neutral or Limited Neutral {edgeguards, combos, recovery, techchases, etc.}), pause. If you've mastered Steps One through Six, you should be able to verbalize why you won/lost that interaction, as

well as what you/your opponent should have done differently in that specific scenario. If you cannot, then you need to go back and study some more. If you can, then one of your lights just turned green.

Go ahead and watch a video of your favorite player. As soon as someone is hit for the first time (don't count lasers), pause. What happened? What level of Neutral Game happened? What were the character's positions? Why did the player that won/lost do what they did? What could they have done differently? Did they convert optimally? If not, what could they have done differently? Ask yourself these questions every time a neutral interaction occurs.

Next, watch a video of yourself. Do the same thing.

Finally, play a match against someone who is willing to discuss the guidelines of this guide with you (or someone who lets you pause and think mid-match). Pause after your first neutral interaction and think. Same questions as before.

The more you ask yourselves these questions, and the more you think about what you *should be doing instead,* the faster your green lights will light up. If you continue to light up your board, then congratulations, as you are on the Golden Pathway.

Step Eight: Compete

The final step is to throw yourself into the fire and start competing. If you've truly entered the Golden Pathway, then your improvement will continue until you reach the #1 spot in the world (assuming you put in the effort). Of course, you will have to deal with competitive factors such as nerves, crowds, etc., but as I mentioned before, if you use the Golden Pathway as your guidelines, then you will achieve great success and consistency.

Deviations from the Golden Pathway

So Armada (supposedly) found his success and consistency through the Golden Pathway. What about the other top players? I can't really tell you how people like Mang0 and M2K achieved their success, as I don't really understand their playstyles nearly as well as Armada's, but one statement I truly believe is that the more one deviates from the Golden Pathway, a) the less consistent they will be, and b) the sooner they will reach their skill cap.

Picture your local Ice Climbers player. Chances are that they've had decent success thanks to wobbling. The problem with wobbling against low-level players is that most wobble setups capitalize on the opponent's mistakes (think shield grabbing missed L-cancels, missed SDI attempts to get out of dthrow dair regrab, etc), and that low-level players make plenty of mistakes. So, those ICs players get away with living in the Randomness-Hard Read spectrum, or the low levels of the Prediction-Confirmation Whiff Punish spectrum. They don't learn the

Mixup games necessary to play against high level players (as they coast through locals capitalizing on mistakes), and then suddenly hit a brick wall, as they can't seem to take sets off of the better players in the region, who (hopefully) understand neutral game, option weight distributions, character interactions, etc. This is an example of a deviation from the Golden Pathway. These ICs players have high variance, as they often lose to players much worse than them, and don't show as steady of a rate of improvement as players that do follow the Golden Pathway (or smaller deviations from the Golden Pathway). Other examples include that "Down-smashing Peach," that "Tech-chasing Sheik," that "Falco-Master," etc. We all have them in our region, and most of them are NOT on the Golden Pathway, as they have either hit their ceiling or are close.

Some people do find great success, even if they don't follow the Golden Pathway. Westballz comes to mind, for as someone for whom I have no idea how his Falco works beyond crazy blip blip tech skill, he's one of the top players in the world. He also has terrible consistency, however, compared to someone like PPMD Kreygasm. For someone that has deviated from the Golden Pathway but wants to return to the Golden Pathway, they have to get worse for a little bit as they go back and learn some of the skills on which they had missed out in Steps One though Five. If Westballz wants to return to the Golden Pathway, I think he would have to spend some serious time in Step Five.

If you think you're on a deviation of the Golden Pathway, by all means, don't fret. Just think about if you want to go back to the Golden Pathway (which again, takes serious physical and mental effort), and if so, how you can backtrack sufficiently and efficiently to get back on the right track.

Conclusion

There is no easy way to improve, but there are ways to improve efficiently and effectively. If you follow the steps dictated in this guide, then you will be right on your way to that #1 spot. Consistency is an important ideal that the Golden Pathway will provide, as those who follow the Golden Pathway have low variance in skill. I trust that even on my bad days, I still play well enough to win most/all locals, as I have very low variance as a player. Armada's consistency should also prove how ideal consistency is. Just set reasonable goals for yourself along the way. If you ever ask a player for advice, don't ask for "general advice" after a set. Instead, ask pointed questions, to help you with Steps One through Four. For example, after I lose to Axe at SNS3, I asked him about some of the Pikachu-Peach interactions of which I had no idea, such as how my nair interacts with his Up+B and his my WD back CC dsmash interacts with his overshoot SHFFL nair. If you ever find yourself struggling in a specific matchup, then break it down into digestible interactions and go from there. Finally, practice thinking! Neutral game is the one part of this guide that is truly a guessing game, and you only get better at guessing by

practicing guessing and practicing extrapolating. Good luck out there, smashers, and I am always happy to answer any questions.

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