

Making Mario

Shaping Franchise History Through Paratextual Play

RENÉ GLAS

INTRODUCTION

A gameplay video shows Nintendo's company mascot and cultural icon Mario running and jumping through one of his iconic side-scrolling levels. While doing so, the characters, blocks, and backgrounds transform from the old '8-bit' look to contemporary graphics, showing the various iterations the SUPER MARIO BROS. (1983-) series of games went through over time. More so, while Mario runs from left to right, the level itself appears to spell "30th Anniversary" written in the air, the lettering created out of the various block-based platforming elements of the series. The gameplay video, presented during a Nintendo Direct broadcast on April 1, 2015, by the company's late CEO Satoru Iwata, commemorated the 30th anniversary of the first SUPER MARIO BROS. game.¹ It formed the start of a months-long anniversary celebration in which Nintendo would organize special events like concerts, and release tie-in merchandise like a Super Mario Encyclopedia, playing cards, and even a limited edition luxury watch retailing at close to \$20 000.² The apotheosis of the festivities would, it turned out, be the release of SUPER MARIO MAKER

1 Nintendo Direct 4.1, April 1st, 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lMedqo8mLaQ&feature=youtu.be&t=9m>

2 For an overview of all SUPER MARIO BROS. 30th Anniversary celebrations activities and merchandise, see: https://www.mariowiki.com/Super_Mario_Bros._30_th_Anniversary

(2015), a game which allows you to actually create the type of levels the video showed. Here, you do not simply play a Mario game, you are allowed to create one using the elements of old Mario games as building blocks.

The release of SUPER MARIO MAKER and its eventual 2019 sequel SUPER MARIO MAKER 2 (from here on SMM and SMM2), then, do not just present new titles in the long-running series. By looking back at their roots, they are closely bound up with Nintendo's celebration of the Mario brand. It was this brand which, as part of Nintendo's new line of home consoles, formed a key factor in the creation of an international 'Nintendo generation,' a new market of players following the infamous 'great video game crash' of the early 1980s which ended the medium's initial golden age.³ The first SUPER MARIO BROS. games set the company apart from the competition in form and style. As Kline, Dyer-Whiteford, and De Peuter explain,

"while many earlier and later games—from SPACEWAR! (1962) to DOOM (1993)—obviously display their deep affiliation with military-industrial culture, Mario appears to be made of different stuff, a stuff of purer playfulness, wit, and humour."⁴

The SMM games both actively return to these roots as a form of retrogaming but do so by allowing the player what it meant to—and means to—actually *make* a piece of this "different stuff," a homemade Mario experience.

This chapter will engage with the SMM games' simultaneous function of commemorating the old and presenting tools to create the new. It does so by seeing the engagement with the games as a form of paratextual play. In earlier work, I have discussed making-of material of games (like behind-the-scenes documentaries, concept art, audio commentaries) in their paratextual capacity.⁵ Paratext here is borrowed from Genette, who defines them as any textual production accompanying or surrounding a particular narrative object "in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest

3 Kline, Steven/Dyer-Whiteford, Nick/de Peuter, Greg: *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2013, pp. 109-111.

4 Ibid., p. 118.

5 Glas, René: "Paratextual Play: Unlocking the Nature of Making-of Material of Games," in: *DiGRA/FDG '16—Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, DiGRA 2016, pp. 1-13.

sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption."⁶ Making-of material, especially when originating from the same source as the main text (like the design team, publisher, or marketing department), is often created to shape our interpretation of the core text within games. It is meant to promote the main text, either before its release (to sell it commercially) or after (to sell it artistically), and in a predominantly positive matter highlighting creative and commercial successes rather than failures.⁷ With games, it is no different. Such material has, however, found its way into games themselves, for instance, as non-diegetic inserts into game worlds or as achievement objects to be collected, influencing play directly and collapsing text and paratext into integrated experiences. With such paratextual play forms, I argued, paratextual material does not just shape interpretation but also play itself.⁸

While the SMM games have received critical attention from the perspectives of participatory culture, co-creation, and the political economy of the gaming industry,⁹ my primary focus here is how the games fare from the perspective of historiography, being games that allow playing with the history of the franchise. As I have noted before, "[s]eeing the paratextual qualities of making-of material merely as uninteresting marketing material would underplay their role and function as part of the contemporary gaming experience."¹⁰ The often-uncritical tales and trivia found in making-of material serve a purpose beyond shaping the interpretation of a core text and that text

6 Genette, Gerard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, London: Cambridge University Press 1997, pp. 1.

7 Cf. work on DVD extra's: Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Practices*, New York: New York University Press 2010; Hight, Craig. "Making-Of Documentaries on DVD: The Lord of The Rings Trilogy and Special Editions," in: *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 56 (2005), pp. 4-17.

8 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

9 Cf. Lefebvre, Isabelle. "Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities: Normative Interfaces and Discourses in Super Mario Maker," in: *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, Vol. 10, No. 16 (2017), pp. 196-213; Witkowski, Emma/Manning, James: "Playing With(out) Power: Negotiated Conventions of High Performance Networked Play Practices," in: *DiGRA '17—Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference*, DiGRA 2017, pp. 1-18.

10 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

within a larger franchise history. More so, they also shape the fandom of such a franchise. As film scholar points out in relation to DVD extra's, their appeal to fans suggests that "one of the major foundations of fandom—the accumulation and dissemination of the smallest details involved in the production of media objects—is substantially informed (though not wholly determined) by industry discourse."¹¹ Fans thrive on such content, and it is offered to them in abundance—especially in games like SMM, which celebrate Nintendo's heritage. Within games, the accumulation of dissemination of knowledge is often associated with gaining and having proficient literacy and cultural capital among gamers.¹² Playable making-of material then has the potential to shape the core gameplay experience, but also its ideal fan-player.

My previous effort on the topic of paratextual play actually concluded using SMM as an example deviating from other games using making-of material. It suggested that if making-of material aims to convey how the creative process of a game took form, SMM actually presents a situation where one could try out the process oneself. It can be considered, *as a whole*, a making-of of Mario.¹³ This chapter, then, follows up on that consideration. It approaches the SMM games through paratextual analysis first and foremost, seeing how they fit within the larger SUPER MARIO BROS. franchise as new additions, at the same time shaping the interpretation of it as a whole. The approach is to see the games as texts with their own paratextual surround, where I have looked at promotional material, related merchandise, interviews, and other paratextual material released prior to and after the games' release. As much of the material initially 'selling' the concept of SUPER MARIO MAKER in relation to the franchise's history is linked to the first SMM, the primary focus lies here. The second SUPER MARIO MAKER is similar in setup but further expands upon some of the first' SMM's core concepts. I will also see the games as paratextual in their own right to see if and

11 Klinger, Barbara. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2006, p. 73, referenced in: R. Glas: "Paratextual Play."

12 Cf. Walsh, Christopher/Apperley, Thomas: "Gaming Capital: Rethinking Literacy," in: *Changing Climates: Education for Sustainable Futures, Proceedings of the AARE 2008 International Education Research Conference*, Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology 2009, pp. 1-12.

13 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

how they function as playable making-of material of the larger Mario franchise. Approaching the SMM games through the perspective of paratextual play conveys the ways in which Nintendo has pulled the ‘Nintendo generation’ experience of yesteryear into the present in a playable format.

MAKING FRANCHISE HISTORY

Before looking into the case of the SMM games themselves, broader insight into the political economy of game history is needed. Since its early days, the gaming industry has always been a heavily technology-driven one, with an economy of perpetual innovation which primarily looks forwards.¹⁴ In his work on dealing with the history of games, Newman points out that due to this constant focus on moving forward, looking back at old generations of games mostly is primarily a means by which to assess the present: “what was once cutting edge and new is recast as a benchmark by which subsequent development may be measured.”¹⁵ At the same time, however, the industry also needs its past as it offers familiar brands, genres, and proven strategies through which consumers engage with the medium. Even though constant innovation remains a fundamental characteristic of the gaming industry, “the reality of the situation is a balancing act that simultaneously invokes the revolution of innovation and reassuring familiarity of continuity of form and function.”¹⁶ With its long-running and established history, Nintendo has been engaged in this balancing act for decades. Nintendo celebrated the 30th anniversary of Super Mario, but as a company, it has a much older history.¹⁷ It has been in existence as a successful producer of hanafuda playing cards

14 S. Kline/N. Dyer-Whitford/G. de Peuter: *Digital Play*, pp. 66-67.

15 Newman, James A.: *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*, London: Routledge 2012, p. 52.

16 *Ibid.*

17 SUPER MARIO BROS. marked the first game in the main series in the larger Mario franchise but Mario as a character has appeared in even earlier games. Mario’s earlier outings included the DONKEY KONG-series of arcade games which started in 1981, the MARIO BROS. arcade game from 1983 which also featured his green-colored brother Luigi, and a host of portable GAME & WATCH games featuring Mario from 1982 onwards.

since 1889, and from the 1960s onwards became a proliferate creator of toys, many of which were electromechanical or electronic.¹⁸ Throughout its history, but especially in the decades it has been active as a digital games and electronics company, Nintendo has tried to give shape to its aforementioned family-friendly image. Mario plays a key part here as company mascot. Through up and downs, Nintendo has shown it can be successful in, as Suominen puts it, “raising new Nintendo and Mario player generations by combining old game characters with new innovations and playabilities.”¹⁹ Suominen wrote this sometime before the announcement and subsequent release of the SMM games, but they serve as prime examples of this trend. The first SMM was released on the Wii U and, later, portable Nintendo 3DS consoles and made active use of their touch screen/stylus option for easy use of the game’s toolbox, as well as the consoles’ integrated social networking service to create and share levels. While the Wii U turned out to be a relative failure in terms of consumer adoption, its approach to offering a portable touch-screen and social networking made it a blueprint for the much more successful Nintendo Switch console on which SUPER MARIO MAKER 2 was released. The SMM games were not the only Mario games on the consoles mentioned, though. These platforms were already marketed to the consumer through new Mario games such as SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD (2013), MARIO KART 8 (2014), and SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY (2017), all titles which have become bestsellers. Like other long-running franchises strongly associated with Nintendo, for example, THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986-) and POKÉMON (1996-), the pervasive presence of Mario shows the importance of balancing the old and the new for the company.

Nintendo then has a long history of successes with key brands, which it actively re-visits time and time again. Doing so, it also shapes its history to its own ends. As Suominen has pointed out in his work on retrogaming and the digital retro economy:

18 Cf. Voskuil, Erik: *Before Mario: The Fantastic Toys from The Video Game Giant's Early Days*, Châtillon: Omaké Books 2014.

19 Suominen, Jaakkko: “Mario’s Legacy and Sonic’s Heritage: Replays and Refunds of Console Gaming History,” in: *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global—Games in Culture and Society*, DiGRA 2012, pp. 1-18, here p. 13.

“When a game company utilizes its older products to make a new application, when the same company mentions the year it was established in a job advertisement or when it celebrates a game figure’s 20-year anniversary, the company *uses history*.²⁰

This is not just a creative strategy but also a discursive one. As Suominen points out elsewhere, nostalgia in the form of recollection is part of a broader cultural adaptation of technology, with “the repetition and simulation of earlier experiences being the aim of nostalgic product-making.”²¹ Nostalgia is baked into Nintendo’s products, both in terms of hardware (new consoles and controllers featuring recognizable features of previous ones) and, as this chapter discusses, its software. Since the early 2000s, for instance, the company has been actively utilizing its own past through the release of older games on their new consoles as retrogaming products.²² More recently, it even released “Nintendo Classic Mini” versions of their first two original consoles, with both the design and name tailored to the original region of release. Nintendo released them as dedicated consoles, meaning the games on them are integrated rather than sold separately. The consoles have 30 (for the NES/Famicom Mini) and 21 games (for the SNES/Super Famicom Mini), all emulations playable in contemporary high-definition widescreen graphics or through 4:3 aspect ratio and a CRT filter: “like an old TV, scan lines and all.”²³ Roughly a third of these games are region-specific, allowing Nintendo to specifically cater to the nostalgic needs of different international audiences. More so, however, as the original platforms featured far more titles, the inclusion and exclusion of titles to fit on these “Classic” editions of the original hardware can be seen as part of the politics of canonization.²⁴

20 Ibid., p. 1, emphasis in original.

21 Suominen, Jaakko: “The Past as the Future? Nostalgia and Retrogaming in Digital Culture,” in: *The Fiberculture Journal*, Issue 11 (2008); <http://eleven.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-075-the-past-as-the-future-nostalgia-and-retrogaming-in-digital-culture/>

22 J. Suominen: “Mario’s Legacy,” p. 8.

23 From the official “NES Classic Edition” website; <https://www.nintendo.com/nes-classic/>

24 Cf. Glas, René/van Vught, Jasper: “The Politics of Game Canonization: Tales from the Frontlines of Creating a National History of Games,” in *DiGRA '19—*

In the same way, Nintendo decides which of their older titles are available again on new consoles for purchase or, in the case of the Switch console's online service, as an extra of a subscription service, the selection of games present on the Mini consoles expresses a specific activation of its Nintendo's own past. It is first and foremost a history of winners, the games presented being primarily big hits and cult favorites. This relegates telling the history of off-beat, controversial, or merely not so successful games to collectors and other retrogaming enthusiasts, which also maintain an underground market for emulations of games for those who still want to play them but lack the original hard- and software. Not surprisingly, successful legal action by Nintendo to shut down two major sites offering ROM-files of such old games was met with fierce criticism.²⁵

Apart from Nintendo fans and other gaming enthusiasts wanting to play old Nintendo games as part of retrogaming culture, there is also a long history of playing *with* these games as part of what we could call metagaming culture. Super Mario has been amongst the most appropriated game characters out there for mash-ups, art games, custom speedrunning games, borderline abusively difficult games, and other creative experiments.²⁶ As part of Nintendo's efforts to combine managing their own legacy while at the same time tapping into contemporary participatory gaming culture, in 2013, they released NES REMIX on the Wii U console's eShop. The game and its inevitable sequels compiled a host of games from the original NES console, offering new challenges and variations of the original gameplay. As Altice points out,

Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix, DiGRA 2019, pp. 1-15.

- 25 Cf. Onanuga, Tola: "All That's Wrong with Nintendo's Heavy-handed ROM Crackdown," in: *Wired*, August 18, 2018; <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/nintendo-roms-emulator-loveroms-loveretro-lawsuit>
- 26 Cf. Newman, James: "Kaizo Mario Maker: ROM Hacking, Abusive Game Design and Nintendo's Super Mario Maker," in: *Convergence*, Vol. 24, Issue 4 (2016), pp. 339-356; Boluk, Stephanie/Lemieux, Patrick: *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017 Boluk, Stephanie/Lemieux, Patrick: *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017, pp. 181-202.

these games were aimed at introducing a new generation to Nintendo's legacy in bite-size, whimsical chunks.²⁷ But more poignantly, he points out that "Nintendo is not simply re-presenting their own legacy, but directly competing with the emulation ecosystem that has thrived for decades, generating their own Famicom hacks and remixes," adding that "Nintendo is redefining its platform in its own emulated image."²⁸ From this perspective, the release of the first SMM game in 2015 formed the next logical step. Rather than having Nintendo's own developers play around with the company's old games, here players *themselves* would be invited to do so—only then, specifically using Mario franchise games. Rather than letting players run free with their games, player creativity can, in SMM, be contained within the limits of the game itself. For Sotamaa, who signaled similar processes at hand within the content creation-heavy game LITTLEBIGPLANET, launched in 2008, the release of such editor games shows a shift in console manufacturers' stance on player productivity to a more inclusive but nonetheless controlled one.²⁹ While certainly not ignoring the political-economic concerns one can have about these new forms of corporate control, Sotamaa is reserved about the negative implications they might have. For him, certain creative limitations are certainly in place, yielding a lot of control to the developer. The freedom to play with the creative tools within these games nonetheless leads to new ways to repurpose a console for creative production and social interaction.³⁰ For Boluk and Lemieux, the implications run deeper due to the existing participatory culture SMM taps into. For them, "Nintendo has begun to recapture and capitalize on those games occurring in, on, around, and through Super Mario," signaling that it is "the company's attempt to incorpo-

27 Altice, Nathan: *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer / Entertainment System Platform*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2015, p. 326.

28 Ibid., p. 330.

29 Sotamaa, Olli: "Play, Create, Share? Console Gaming, Player Production and Agency," in: *The Fiberculture Journal*, Issue 16: Counterplay (2010); <http://sixte.en.fiberculturejournal.org/play-create-share-console-gaming-player-production-and-agency/>; Abend, Pablo/Beil, Benjamin: "Editors of Play: The Scripts and Practices of Co-creativity in Minecraft and LittleBigPlanet," in: *Diversity of Play: Games – Cultures – Identities*, ToDiGRA 2016, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2016), pp. 5-30.

30 Ibid.

rate the metagame.”³¹ This also meant that players could and indeed did see their levels removed and their progress within the game reset if Nintendo deemed the content in violation with (often vague) terms of use.³²

The political economy behind these types of games remains a relevant topic in relation to the ever-developing notion of “playbour,” the commodification of productive forms of play as free labor.³³ This chapter, however, focuses primarily on the historical dimensions of a franchise. From this perspective, the difference between LITTLEBIGPLANET and the SMM games is the latter’s long and established franchise history. As Newman points out, SMM, on the one hand, seems to celebrate this history and the design philosophy behind it, while on the other hand foregrounds the type of extreme and even unfair level designs Mario’s metagame culture is known for.³⁴ For him, the celebratory perspective comes from “the paratextual presence of Nintendo’s designers;” they add a mythical sheen to the original design processes.³⁵ While Newman situates this presence primarily epitextually—that is outside of the game on the official website, on YouTube, or through interviews—my main interest here is how the game *itself* is paratextual and how playing, creating, and sharing content within this controlled environment can be seen as a form of paratextual play. It is Genette’s notion of paratexts as ‘threshold of interpretation’ through which the following sections will look at Nintendo’s “make it your way, play it your way” claim, to quote the tagline of the second game. The next sections will discuss three different readings of the SMM games in relation to the notion of paratext. First, I will discuss the paratexts around SMM to see if and how they present the game as a making-of of Mario. I will then continue discussing the game as paratextual itself. Finally, I will point out how design choices also shape the Nintendo fan and his/her outlook of the franchise from a paratextual play perspective.

31 S. Boluk/P. Lemieux: *Metagaming*, pp. 197, 199.

32 See for instance the example of player GrandPOOBear in: E. Witkowski/J. Manning: “Playing With(out) Power.”

33 Kücklich, Julian: “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry,” in: *The Fibreculture Journal*, Issue 5: Precarious Labour (2005); <http://five.fi/breculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>

34 J. Newman: “Kaizo Mario Maker,” p. 339.

35 Ibid., p. 351.

THE PARATEXTS OF SUPER MARIO MAKER

While the link between the SMM games and the franchise history it plays is an obvious one, the fact that the game might also provide insight into the creative processes which made the franchise what it is remains less overt. This starts with the announcement of the first game, the primary focus of this section. Even though SMM was specifically tied to the 30th-anniversary celebration of its main hero in the 2015 video mentioned in the introduction, the game itself was, in fact, already announced a year earlier during the E3 trade event in June 2014 as part of Nintendo's digital event.³⁶ In the announcement, which features no voice-over or additional introduction, it is shown how the gameplay and the creative tools function. It ends with the title, year of release, and the tagline: "Create your own custom Mario Courses!" No references are made to the creative process which underpinned the original games these custom courses shown aim to mimic.³⁷ A year later, as part of the E3 trade event of 2015, the game was indeed pro-actively linked to the 30th-anniversary celebration. In promotional material the original game's designers Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka talk about this connection in a vivid manner. In the video presentation, both designers are seen sporting "30th Anniversary" T-shirts while sitting at a table filled with original graph paper and artwork of the first game in the series. It is here that Miyamoto and Tezuka point out that the original game and its offshoots in the franchise were first designed through a form of paper-prototyping where levels were entirely sketched out on graph paper before being translated into software. As Tezuka points out, they took the graph paper phase of design "very seriously because programmers put a lot of time inserting this data manually," which meant it actually reduced the amount of experimentation possible within level designs. He subsequently points out that the process of pre-visualization of levels through paper was still being used in contemporary (side-scrolling) Mario platformers. To improve this creative process, Nintendo's tool development team was asked to design a tool to construct sidescrolling

36 "Nintendo Digital Event—E3 2014," Nintendo, YouTube, June 10 2014; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caS_eSIKlj0

37 I should be noted here that Nintendo often uses "course" and "level" interchangeably in their communication, as do many players. They mean the same in the context of the SSM games and within this chapter.

courses, “creating the basics of what would become SUPER MARIO MAKER.”³⁸ After this moment, both designers explain how SMM offers a far more streamlined and fun experience than the original tools they used as it is more geared towards usability. It also highlights entirely new options, like the option to not just build but also share levels online as well as the addition of amiibo support to include characters from other Nintendo franchises.³⁹ As a promotional paratext, it helps to mythologize the creation process of the original game and add artistic and aesthetic value to the main text it aims to sell, in this case, SMM.⁴⁰ With a video like this being epitextual—that is ‘outside’ of the main text rather than bundled with it—and this chapter’s aim to look at instances where text and paratext overlap, a next step is looking at how such historical connections and associated values are actually made within the final product itself.

While epitextual material remains ‘outside’ of the main text, peritextual material is released alongside it. When it comes to making-of material, this is the material often bundled with games at retail, both within the physical retail package or as extra’s on the game’s carrier itself.⁴¹ We can start with the first category. As mentioned, the release of the first SMM on the Wii U platform marked the endpoint of Mario’s 30th Anniversary celebration. This connection is, however, not directly made—at least not in the regular retail version of the game. Two special edition packages were released, though, both including a “30th Anniversary Collection Classic Color” amiibo of Mario (a 3D-rendition of his original 1980s 8-bit look).⁴² Using this amiibo

38 “Super Mario Bros. 30th Anniversary—Special Interview,” 2015.

39 Amiibo’s are so-called toys-to-life figurines exclusive to Nintendo platforms. An amiibo can be wirelessly connected to every Nintendo console released since 2014, offering bonus functionalities in selected games. Using selected amiibo’s in conjunction with Super Mario Maker would unlock unique avatar costumes in the style of the original SUPER MARIO BROS. This allows players to play with characters designed to look like 8-bit versions of characters which, in some cases, were created decades after the original Mario game (like SPLATOON’s (2015) Inklings or WII FIT’s (2007) trainer character).

40 J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, pp. 81-82.

41 R. Glas: “Paratextual Play,” p. 3.

42 One special edition only featured the amiibo figure, the other was a bundle which included the Wii U console itself, a T-shirt featuring Mario and a soft toy.

in-game would increase Mario's sprite and allows him to run through obstacles due to increased strength. No links to the original game's design are made except the look and name of the amiibo. All retail versions of the game, including the less costly and more readily available regular retail version, did include a little hard-cover art book dedicated to the game. This booklet primarily presents artwork of SMM and the various games it was based upon, and mostly without any written context. There are, however, several pages that enticingly present scans of the original games' design work, including characters and their animations, levels, and game mechanics. All the way in the back of the booklet, a few pages are dedicated to a "SUPER MARIO BROS. Course Flashback." Here, we see the opening screen of the original 1985 game as well as several well-known levels presented on the graph paper planning sheets also visible in the video with Miyamoto and Tezuka mentioned earlier.⁴³ Without having seen the video where the significance of the graph paper is explained, such images provide hints about the original design process but few meaningful insights. The fact that the original graph paper planning sheet was also made available outside of the video or booklet as a free downloadable pdf document on the game's 'bonus extra's' page of the Nintendo website also remains hidden.⁴⁴

Moving to the presence of making-of material inside of the actual game, references to the creation process of the game and its franchise are also more covert than overt. For peritextual making-of material to function as a means to influence interpretation, "paratextual location and visibility [...] is key."⁴⁵ Other than the clear audiovisual references to the SUPER MARIO titles it bases its core level design on (discussed below), SMM, however, does not feature a clearly marked making-of section that is visible within its menu structure or presented as a potential unlockable reward. As such, while it is clear the game is based on older games in the franchise, it does present itself explicitly

43 *Super Mario Maker Premium Pack Artbook*, Nintendo, 2015. pp. 82-91.

44 The original graph paper planning sheet can be found here: http://www.nintendo.co.uk/games/oms/mario-maker-3ds/_downloads/super_mario_bros_sheets.pdf Interestingly enough, for SUPER MARIO MAKER 2, a set of themed course planning sheets can be downloaded for the price of ten "platinum points," a Nintendo-specific currency earned by using some of the company's services, see <https://my.nintendo.com/rewards/bbd412f881e529fc?lang=en-US>

45 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 6.

as a making-of. When players look for help during the creating of a level, they can go to the in-game manual. This document presents players with step-by-step guides to every part of the game supposedly presented by the “Super Mario Maker Makers;” a pigeon called Yamamura (called after Nintendo level designer Yasuhisa Yamamura) and female human hostess Mary O. Scrolling down in the various sections of the manual, at some point the player will reach a “Developer Talk.” As these sub-sections are presented in a different color and are situated underneath a green pipe, a well-known level element in the franchise signaling the player has reached a hidden location, the Developer Talk subsections feel deliberately set apart from the rest of the manual. It is here that references to the design process of both the original games as well as SMM itself are made. The very first Developer Talk starts with: “When creating courses in Super Mario Maker, we start off in exactly the same way we used to when making courses for the original SUPER MARIO BROS.: by picturing the course in our heads.” It then continues to explain this mental picture was translated onto graph paper and, finally, into its final software form. Who the “we” behind the Developer Talk is remains unclear—supposedly, it is Yamamura and Mary O. talking as they present the manual as a whole? As the two characters also present a series of tips to create levels under the header of “Mastering the Craft,” it is clear that they are supposed to be stand-ins for the game’s design team, or more broadly speaking, the designers of the franchise. For Newman, the way these two fictional characters present these core design values is significant:

“[A]lthough they appear under the auspices of providing sagely game design guidance, the paratextual presence of Nintendo’s designers serves less to shape or frame SMM making but rather has the effect of venerating and mythologizing the creation of the canonical SUPER MARIO levels and games which remain other, elsewhere and unattainable through replication or improvement.”⁴⁶

To come to these conclusions, Newman took a critical look at the type of levels the platform actually affords to create, as well as the types of levels which became popular on its sharing platform. I will do so too in the next sections, during which I will also highlight some of these affordances. Newman, however, situates “Miyamoto et al. [as] firmly located in the peripheral

46 J. Newman: “Kaizo Mario Maker,” p. 351.

media and paratextuality of the SMM release.⁴⁷ And indeed, the videos and SMM's manual discussed remain on the outside of the game, forming the Genetteian thresholds of interpretation through which the main textual experience can be interpreted. My aim is to approach the game as paratextual *itself* to see how Nintendo frames and shapes its history through play.

PLAYING WITH THE FRANCHISE

When first starting SMM, the player is put in a level feeling similar to World 1-1, the iconic first level of the original SUPER MARIO BROS. The only difference seems to be a wooden arrow pointing towards the right. This particular level being one of the most famous ones in gaming, pointing players in the right direction seems superfluous. The goal, however, is to signal that this time, the experience will be different. This is soon established as a gap appears in the floor too large for Mario to jump over. When a player attempts to do so anyway, the game is halted, and a pop-up appears saying that "someone's left this course unfinished" and that it is up to the player to finish it for them. After clicking on the "Create" button fashioned to look like a typical Hollywood clapboard, the level turns into the level creation tool. It is only after learning the basics of this tool in this tutorial level that the player gets a new opening screen to the game with the option to "Play" or "Create." And even then, both options are presented as clapper boards, indicating that whatever the choice, the player is allowed to be in the director's chair. Many of the pre-existing levels accessible through the "Play" options are, after all, created by other players. Or they are created by the design team to introduce players to the wide variety of options of SMMs design tool, showing that players could, in fact, have been the creator of the level themselves.

According to Lefebvre, "pushing the player to familiarize herself with the level editing tool before she can have the option to play or create by herself, the game insists on its particularity: the *making* of Mario levels by the player."⁴⁸ Lefebvre emphasizes "making" here as an alternative to merely "playing"—she rightly so argues that "Nintendo has made creating the clear,

47 Ibid., p. 348, emphasis in original.

48 I. Lefebvre: "Creating With (Un)Limited Possibilities," p. 198.

dominant strategy” to unlock all the game’s options.⁴⁹ For Miyamoto, SMM is “like game design training software: try it if you want to get into game design.”⁵⁰ As mentioned before, the original series’ design began with putting an idea onto graph paper. The core of the SMM games’ creation platform is a representation of this graph paper, with the interface allowing for the easy placement of objects like blocks, pipes, and goombas. Players can scroll left to right through the entire level they are creating. It provides a feel of what is involved in the planning of levels as a whole rather than the way it is presented in the final product (a side-scrolling game that always only presents the part of a level the character is currently active in). During the play-testing of a level, Mario also leaves ghost images of himself after moving, allowing players to trace movement and re-arrange objects accordingly. It is a detailed and flexible tool and helps players understand what it means—and therefore what it might have meant—to create a proper Mario level.

The SMM tool should not be confused with the strenuous process the designers had to go through with the original game, though. As the in-game manual’s Developer Talk puts it, it used to be “just a course-creation tool” in need of “element of surprise” in order to release it as a game with “weird and wonderful things that had never been seen in the Mario series before.” This included removing the original hardware restrictions the old games had to allow for experimentation, by, for instance, adding endless amounts of objects in the levels or using amiibo’s to add characters from other franchises into a Mario level. The tools available to undo, erase, save/reload are also playful; there is an “Undo Dog” and a “Reset Rocket” and so on. These tools-as-characters are references to earlier player-creativity Nintendo titles going all the way back to MARIO PAINT in 1992. All these elements make a SMM game easy to use and intuitive while adding a large number of options for experimentation. On top of this, the SMM games make sharing not simply an option but a prominent feature. Players can upload and download each other’s work and can reward stars if they like particular levels making players rise on the leaderboards. As Newman points out, SMM “gamifies game design.”⁵¹

49 Ibid.

50 “Super Mario Bros. 30th Anniversary—Special Interview,” 2015.

51 J. Newman: “Kaizo Mario Maker,” p. 341.

While the SMM games clearly focus on ‘making’ above all, the question is how this also ties up to the ‘making of’ Mario. The graph paper connection is an obvious one already discussed above; it is here where the design process of the original game was translated into a tool and, subsequently, a game using this tool at its core. Using this gamified design tool does provide an experience mimicking ‘how it was made’. Here too, however, affordances and limitations give shape to understanding the making of the original Mario games.

If one looks at the very first core design principles laid down in the handwritten test specifications noted down by Miyamoto for the original SUPER MARIO BROS., one can see strong resemblances with what SMM still has on offer. In these specifications, Mario’s move mechanics in relation to the game space are introduced; Mario runs from left to right, jumping over platforms and avoiding obstacles, with the background scrolling past at the same speed as Mario’s movement. Mario can only move in the left part of the screen; when reaching the middle of the screen, the background starts to scroll to the right (keeping Mario in the middle of the screen). When moving to the left, Mario can only go as far as the edge of the screen.⁵² Not being able to move back beyond the left edge of the screen was related to the limitation of the hardware (the cartridge ROM to be precise); in the many sequels, multidirectional movement did become possible.⁵³ SMM and its sequel also did remove the limitation to run backwards from the creation tool, meaning that even if one would like to recreate World 1-1 as faithful as possible, Mario would now suddenly be able to turn around and return to the start of the level. The point here is that SMM does not recreate the hard- and software preconditions of the individual Mario titles it is based on. Rather it presents one universal creation tool which uses the old games as visual reference styles. This means that it makes use of both the original pixel graphics look of 1985’s SUPER MARIO BROS. and 1988’s SUPER MARIO BROS. 3 (both released on the NES console) and the cartoony-looking style of 1990’s SUPER MARIO WORLD (for the SNES console) and 2012’s NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. U (for the Wii U console, also the host of SMM itself). As Gandolfi and

52 From a translated scan of the handwritten test specifications for SUPER MARIO BROS.; Nintendo: *Super Mario Bros. Encyclopedia*, Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books 2018, p. 3.

53 N. Altice: *I Am Error*, pp. 141-142.

Semprebene point out, these representational reference styles provide “a square based visual that appears immediate to replicate (e.g., on a blank page) following spatial and geometric coordinates.”⁵⁴ These coordinates, of course, mimic Miyazaki and Tezuka’s original graph paper planning sheets. As long as the reference style changes accordingly, this means players can use objects from the oldest game in the newest one and vice-versa. This increases the previously mentioned “element of surprise” but also smooths over the differences into what the experiences of designing the individual titles would have felt like. While the SMM games never explicitly claim to be about recreating this process, the fact that its promotional material, as well as the manual, do forefront the connection with the original design process does push this feeling.

To make this reduction of the original games into one-size-fits-all visual reference styles work, it becomes clear Nintendo has made choices which, from the perspective of paratextually playing with history, are not without their impact. The second SMM game, for instance, added a new theme based on 2013’s SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD (for the Wii U), a game which itself was never even released as a side-scrolling platformer. In fact, SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD is representative of a split between 2D and 3D games within the central Mario series. In 1996, SUPER MARIO 64 was the first title to allow the player to move Mario through all three axes in space in a far more open-world setup. Since then, these types of games have become the flagship titles for Nintendo’s new consoles as the more demanding open-world environments fit well with showing off the capabilities of new hardware. The less-demanding 2D side-scrolling games in the series have since found their primary home on Nintendo’s handheld devices. In its now flattened form, only the backgrounds of the levels using the SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD reference style remind us of its origins. In these backgrounds, we can see traces of the original 3D levels, unreachable for the player.

The re-envisioning of SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD into a side-scrolling platformer style is part of the common visuals and platforming gameplay which, according to Gandolfi and Semprebene, makes the SMM games “auto-

⁵⁴ Gandolfi, Enrico/Semprebene, Roberto: “The Imaginative Embrayage Through Gaming Deconstructions,” in: *Im@go: A Journal of the Social Imaginary*, No. 7, Year V (2016), pp. 56-71, here p. 67.

referential in its mechanics and generative outcomes.⁵⁵ The target domain of its referential system here would be the “entire brand of Super Mario and its evolution across time and platforms.”⁵⁶ They continue to argue that this makes the SMM an homage that “ask to deconstruct the target domain (the franchise) through its own rules.”⁵⁷ This, of course, depends on what one considers to be the rules here. For Gandolfi and Sempredene, the main interest is which game elements within the franchise are iconic in terms of representation and agency. They argue that SMM reproduces the original game’s patterns and aesthetics.⁵⁸ If one looks at rules more from the perspective of possible actions and limits, the rules through which SMM deconstructs the franchise are not the rules of the individual games’ but rather those of the underlying and supposedly unifying creation tool. It is an homage, then, which also slightly changes the rules of the franchise. The removal of the limitation to walk left from the original SUPER MARIO BROS. or the reduction of the free movement through all three axes to a side-scrolling environment alone in SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD are examples of this process of tinkering with franchise history. Another example is related to leaving out parts of franchise history entirely as they do not fit well within the more generic one-size-fits-all tool approach. As with the retrogaming mini consoles discussed earlier, which games are part of the SMM games and which are not is part of a politics of canonization, where inclusion and exclusion play a key role. Here, some titles are “moved to the centre of attention; others, to the margins” of a history.⁵⁹ Missing, for instance, is 1988’s SUPER MARIO BROS. 2, a game initially only released outside of Japan. The initial Japanese sequel to the first game had already been released in 1986 but was found too similar to the original and too difficult for international audiences.⁶⁰ Instead,

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Staiger, Janet: “The Politics of Film Canons,” *Cinema Journal*, 24 (3), pp. 4-23, here p. 8.; referenced in: R. Glas/J. van Vught: “The Politics of Game Canonization.”

60 The Japanese SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 game was ultimately released as SUPER MARIO BROS.: THE LOST LEVELS as part of the 1993 SUPER MARIO ALL-STARS compilation on the SNES outside of Japan.

Nintendo modified an advergame they had in production for Fuji Television, titled *YUME KŌJŌ: DOKI DOKI PANIC* (1987), into a MARIO game. This new international version of SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 had a noticeably different gameplay style, with players asked to pick up items to throw at enemies rather than jumping on them. Levels could also be vertical rather than horizontal, asking players to also move up rather than only to the right. While very different from the previous—and following—Mario games, the international SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 was a big hit, selling millions of copies.⁶¹ Nintendo does not make a secret of the existence of the game at all: it has a prominent place in its officially licensed *Super Mario Bros. Encyclopedia*, for instance,⁶² and has been available as a download in Nintendo various retrogaming platforms like the Switch’s Nintendo Online service. The exclusion of SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 within the SMM games, therefore, is not necessarily related to a deliberate choice to exclude it from its franchise history but the indirect result of the affordances and limitations of SSM’s design. The game’s divergence from the core gameplay mechanics of the series (picking up items to throw, vertical levels) simply makes it an ill fit within a creation tool based on what the franchise has in common.⁶³

From the perspective of paratextual play, this means the SMM games reduce the franchise to commonalities of one particular part of the series: the side-scrolling platformer. Games that do not line up well to the core gameplay mechanics presented in the level design tool either need to be retro-fitted (as with SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD) or are simply left out (as with SUPER MARIO BROS. 2). The SMM games might celebrate the quirky diversity of the Mario franchise through the play with visual reference styles, but at the same time they offer a specific interpretation of the Mario franchise as a uniform experience. This leaves less attention to what makes the individual Mario titles it references, or the specifics of their individual creation, unique. From the perspective of seeing the SMM games as paratextual to the

61 N. Altice: *I Am Error*, pp. 111-112.

62 *Super Mario Bros. Encyclopedia*. pp. 32-39.

63 It should be noted that while writing this chapter, in April 2020, Nintendo released Patch 3.0 for SMM2. In it, they finally added an overt reference to SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 in the form of the “SMB2 Mushroom” object. This power-up item lets players change into a Mario which now can pick-up and throw items, just like in the original game it references.

franchise, we can see Nintendo using its history to suggest the franchise's development was a smooth and coherent one, with only the visual style becoming increasingly more detailed over time. A next step is to see how the player is positioned to be part of this particular history in the SMM games.

BEING A MARIO MAKER/PLAYER

It was mentioned above that the SMM games are only based on four and, eventually, five reference style games. As the MARIO PAINT connection, as well as the inclusion of amiibo's from other games, already indicated, though, is that the SMM do not shy away from referencing many more games. Many of the more than 200 games which exist within the larger Mario franchise are, for instance referenced but not implemented as part of the core gameplay. They might, for instance, belong to entirely different game genres, like 1990's DR. MARIO (a puzzle game) or 2000's PAPER MARIO (a role-playing game).⁶⁴ In many cases, these references appear in the form of easter eggs, reachable through experimentation with the creation tools or unlockable through reaching certain pre-set in-game achievements. Some of these references are subtle, like the re-use of a particular level theme from SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE (2002) as a sound effect that players can add to their level creation. Others are more obvious, like costumes players can have their avatar wear, including ones from the aforementioned DR. MARIO and PAPER MARIO. In the first SMM, such costumes can be used in levels specifically created with the SUPER MARIO BROS. reference style. In SMM2, costumes no longer exist, but players can unlock outfits for their Mii digital avatar. Ever since the release of the Wii console in 2006, players have been able to create customizable avatars to represent them on the system and within certain games. In SMM2, the Mii's function as the player's representation in the Course World sharing platform. Here, players can dress up their Mii's with unlocked outfit items such as Dr. Mario's headgear or a Superball Mario suit, a reference to the 1989 Game Boy title SUPER MARIO LAND. As these outfits can be seen by other players, they, even more so than the costumes, form franchise references linked to the skill necessary to attain them. The Dr.

64 For a full overview of all games within the larger Mario franchise, cf. the fan-created *Super Mario Wiki*, [<https://doi.org/10.14391/9783639454219-008> - am 18.02.2025, 21:32:15. <https://www.unibra.com/de/ugb> - Open Access - !\[\]\(0979bc5381a9fbdeb426afdb5cbf3e6f_img.jpg\)](https://www.mariowiki.com>List_of_games</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Mario headgear item, for instance, is only unlocked when reaching a certain rank in multiplayer games. Another hat, shaped like a Cheep Cheep fish, is unlocked when more than 500 players play a course you've created. Such outfits signal prowess in playing and making SMM levels. Paratextual play here, therefore, leads to being "both a knowledgeable 'insider' (in the creative process) but also acknowledged 'expert' (in terms of gaming capital) in a measurable and communicable form."⁶⁵ Knowing all the references, collecting them, and showing them off to other players within level designs or through their avatar's outfits help shape a player into a franchise fan.

The SMM games' designs also shape players in different ways, which, ultimately, reflect back on the way the franchise, and the games within them, are perceived but also the way they are supposed to be played. Both Lefebvre and Newman point to the way the level creation tool is structured to push certain types of design over others, not just discursively but also in terms of actual options. As Lefebvre argues, SMM "acts as a frame for creative possibilities: constraining and enabling players' agency,"⁶⁶ with Newman going as far as to say that this makes "designing the kinds of levels that would sit within the Mario canon not just difficult, but positively unlikely."⁶⁷ The reason for this is that while the manual might provide sagely advice on Nintendo's core design values, the sample levels players are presented within promotional videos and within the game itself present far more excessive level design, often focusing on chaotic and borderline abusive level design in terms of difficulty. It is here where the SMM games tie into the Mario franchise's metagame. It affords and actively encourages players to use the level design tool to create the type of almost impossible level designs which for a long time we only saw in the franchise's subcultural fringes. It is here that we see the aforementioned attempts to incorporate the metagame.⁶⁸ For Newman, this process leads to a paradox where SMM, on the one hand, seems to celebrate its own design history and philosophy behind it, while on the other hand foregrounding the type of extreme and even unfair level designs Mario's metagame culture is known for.⁶⁹ More so, as being able to

65 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

66 I. Lefebvre: "Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities," p. 210.

67 J. Newman: "Kaizo Mario Maker," p. 348.

68 S. Boluk/P. Lemieux: *Metagaming*, pp. 197, 199.

69 J. Newman: "Kaizo Mario Maker," p. 339.

create such levels also means having the skill to beat them, players being able to do both have, as Lefebvre points out, become stars within the SMM social platform.⁷⁰

I wanted to direct attention, however, to another popular part of SMM's subculture which is speedrunning. I do not aim to discuss the subculture of speedrunning itself, nor the way Nintendo positions itself vis-à-vis this subculture. Rather, I want to look at the SMM designs afford and actually encourage such forms of play to its player and how this, subsequently, can be read from a paratextual perspective.

Speedrunning as a practice means trying to advance through a level or entire game as fast as possible while recording the proof. As a form of high-performance play, it has been around since the 1990s.⁷¹ It found a much larger audience with the rise of video and especially livestreaming platforms in the past decade. Here, it has also become much more performative and competitive.⁷² With speedruns of classic SUPER MARIO BROS. games having always been part of the subculture and Nintendo being eager to tap into the franchise's metagame, the SMM games have built the practice of speedrunning into their system as a core feature. We can see this through their focus on records, their reward structure, and, in SMM2, the inclusion of a dedicated play mode called "Ninji Speedruns." I'll discuss all three below and how these subsequently can be read from a paratextual play perspective.

When players upload a new level, they have created to the Course World sharing platform, and other players start to play them, several types of metadata are automatically provided. These include the number of people who played the course; the number of people having been able to clear the course; the subsequent clear rate (where lower usually means a course is more difficult); which player first cleared the course; and which player holds the "World Record" for that particular course in terms of the time it took them to clear it.⁷³ The world record holder and their time score are featured

70 I, Lefebvre: "Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities," p. 207.

71 Lowood, Henry. "High-performance Play: The Making of Machinima," in: Andy Clarke, Mitchell Grethe (eds.), *Videogames and Art*, Chicago: Intellect Books/The University of Chicago Press 2007, pp. 59-79.

72 E. Witkowski/J. Manning: "Playing With(out) Power," p. 4.

73 The "First Clear" and "World Record" titles were added for each course in patch 1.30 of SMM in December 2015, a few months after release.

prominently next to the course information when browsing through the Course World database. It does not matter what type of level it actually is. Here we find the more forgiving, explorative ones, the almost impossibly difficult ones, but also levels trying to deviate as much as possible from the traditional Mario experience through clever use of game objects. There are, for instance, music levels (using objects as instruments) and automatic levels which require hardly any input from the player (the player's avatar is bounced around by various objects). Independent of course type, the time to clear it is measured and communicated to players, and a world record is assigned to the fastest of them all. The way the record and its current holder is subsequently positioned within the user interface of the Course World emphasizes that speedrunning as a type of play as not just optional but as a key element of the Mario experience. Top speedrunners are also celebrated within the system. The "Super Mario Maker Bookmark" page, which Nintendo launched as a portal to look at all course information, has, for example, a specific tab called "Maker Rankings" where one can look up players with the most world records (which at the time of writing is an SMM player called "Tyrex," with close to 34,000 records to their name).⁷⁴ In SMM2, several in-game rewards are directly tied to world records. Players can, for instance, receive a "Super Star Barrette" outfit for their Mii avatar when holding the world time record in more than 500 courses. Patch 2.0 for SMM2, which came out just a few months after the initial release, further cemented speedrunning into the core experience through the Ninji Speedruns mode, which features a course created by Nintendo's design team specifically for speedrunning.⁷⁵ While playing a course in this mode for the first time, the game indicates it is "recon time!" After a first clear, players can then race the ghosts of other players attempting the same level, either a random sample or the fastest ones. The game, here, indicates that courses are meant to be replayed in ever-faster times and does so by also emphasizing the competitive and performative nature of the contemporary speedrunning subculture. Additionally, speedrunning challenges change periodically, and top players can

74 For the "Super Mario Maker Bookmark" portal, see: <https://supermariomakerbookmark.nintendo.net/>

75 Incidentally, the Ninji character after which this mode is named is a reference to a character originating from SUPER MARIO BROS. 2's original design source YUME KŌJŌ: DOKI DOKI PANIC.

earn outfit rewards that stick with them till the end of such period. These outfits can be used to display speedrunning prowess on the SMM2 Course World platform, but players also need to stay on top if they want to continue showing off.

If we relate this emphasis on speedrunning to the paratextual play angle, where we consider the SMM games a making-of material for the franchise, we can consider the role and function of time for the Mario experience. One can, for instance, argue that time has always been a core part of the SUPER MARIO BROS. franchise experience. Even the first SUPER MARIO BROS. featured a timer with each level. The famous World 1-1 level had a 400 seconds time limit, for instance. Not meeting the time limit would mean failure and a restart. The time limit in most cases was a generous one, though, leaving time for a more explorative approach. The core experience, then, was a different one than games featuring time limitations as a primary way to test player skill.

In the mid-1990s, Fuller and Jenkins discussed the central feature of Nintendo's franchises as the "constant presentation of spectacular spaces."⁷⁶ They argued that:

"Once immersed in playing, we don't really care whether we rescue Princess Toadstool or not; all that matters is staying alive long enough to move between levels, to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen."⁷⁷

When Fuller and Jenkins wrote this in the mid-90s, these levels were still designed by Nintendo's design team. The Mario metagame was present but still relatively small and not very widespread, while speedrunning has now become core rather than fringe through social media and livestreaming platforms. The "pleasure of spatial spectacle," as Fuller and Jenkins call it, remains in the SMM games.⁷⁸ In his work on speedrunning, Scully-Blaker argues that a successful speedrun does not just involve many hours of training,

76 Jenkins makes these remarks in a dialogue with Mary Fuller; Fuller, Mary/Jenkins, Henry: "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue," in: Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated Communication and Community*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE 1995, pp. 57-92, here p. 61.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

but also that the “approach to the spatial practice of playing through the game is so efficiently streamlined that it becomes a new practice unto itself.”⁷⁹ This practice adds far more emphasis on temporal spectacle. With speedrunning, time is not the limit to experience spatial pleasure but the starting point.

With the speedrunning play-style offering a new practice of play based on the temporal as much as spatial spectacle, and with speedrunning being a fully integrated and prominent feature of the SMM games, we can say that Nintendo presents a take on its game which until recently belonged to the franchise metagame. From a paratextual play perspective, however, such a perspective on playing Mario in a game that is set up and feels like a making-of of the original games means a potentially different outlook on these original texts—the classic games in the franchise. For younger players for whom the SMM games are part of their core experience of the Mario franchise, for whom the metagame, therefore, is the game, speedrunning might just be the way to approach the old games as well. Playing the original SUPER MARIO BROS. then becomes not a matter of moving between levels “to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen” as Fuller and Jenkins put, or to save the princess in another castle, but a retrogaming experience made for speedrunning opportunities even if that means sticking to just a few levels and playing them again and again to improve the time to beat them.

CONCLUSION

The video, which features Miyamoto and Tezuka discussing the origin of SMM, starting with graph paper, begins with vintage footage from the early 1980s. Here, we see a young Miyamoto introducing the very first SUPER MARIO BROS. while it was in production behind him. He explains that “for the earliest video games, one programmer could develop an entire game by themselves,” but “as technology advanced, sound and music specialists and graphic designers have also played a part in development.” In stark contrast with SMM the now older Miyamoto will introduce only a minute later in the same video, a game where individual players can make their own Mario

79 Scully-Blaker, Rainforest: “A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space with de Certeau and Virilio,” in: *Game Studies*, Vol.14 (2014), Issue 1; <http://gamedstudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker>

experience, it becomes clear that the original game was not the product of one lone but brilliant developer but the result of a group endeavor. The video shows some of this group at work on the game in their offices while Miyamoto in voice-over explains the game was furthermore “born in a meeting” where it was discussed whether the at that time innovative design of the relatively large character of Mario and scrolling world would “appeal to the current market.”⁸⁰

This video material, part of SMM’s paratextual shell, shows that early on, Nintendo did not leave the release of a new product to chance. The SMM games, too, are the result of careful planning and close attention to market concerns and possibilities, from understanding the potential of new hardware to tapping into the burgeoning participatory culture already ‘at play’ with experimental Mario level designs and playing practices. Before the first SMM were announced, Suominen wondered if Nintendo could keep up fortifying an iconic franchise like Mario by “raising new Nintendo and Mario player generations by combining old game characters with new innovations and playabilities” or whether the “legacy of Mario” could be a burden for the company to branch out to new applications like online gaming.⁸¹ With the SMM games, they have managed both: it’s a retrogaming experience of the old, with appeal to a new generation of players.

As I have shown in this chapter, by tying the first SMM games directly to the 30th anniversary of Mario and by designing the game around the notion that this tool not just mimics but actually originates from the original design approach of some of the biggest games in the franchise’s history, the SMM games have a dual function of being making-ofs of the old, and a way to present a new direction for the franchise as more user-creation driven. The design choices made, however, do impact the way the original franchise can be perceived—and played. By designing the level creator tool around what the original games have in common, attention to what makes them unique takes a step back. Games within the franchise deviating from this mold are in many cases relegated to referential easter-eggs to recognize and, in some cases, to collect as unlockables. They help shape the Nintendo fan, which can express and share their franchise knowledge in-game. The SMM games’

80 “Super Mario Bros. 30th Anniversary—Special Interview,” Nintendo, YouTube, Nov. 18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKhAOe96T8c>

81 J. Suominen: “Mario’s Legacy,” p. 13.

active engagement with metagaming play-practices also shapes the Nintendo player in different ways. Through the speedrunning example, I have shown how a contemporary playstyle is introduced as a new norm which, the SMM's being essentially retrogames, potentially also reflects on one's reading and playing of the original games.

From a paratextual play perspective, this chapter's aim was to show how Nintendo frames its own history through the SMM games. These titles present the closest we have of a playable making-of of games, even though the games offer a very specific reading of what making-of means here. They look back—through a recreation of the graph paper design process and iconic reference styles—while at the same time looking forward—blending with Nintendo's metagame and channeling the games and their players in new directions. In doing so, they make Mario—even the now more than 30-year-old one—anew.

LITERATURE

Abend, Pablo/Beil, Benjamin: "Editors of Play: The Scripts and Practices of Co-creativity in Minecraft and LittleBigPlanet," in: *Diversity of Play: Games – Cultures – Identities*, ToDiGRA 2016, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2016), pp. 5-30.

Altice, Nathan: *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer/Entertainment System Platform*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2015.

Boluk, Stephanie/Lemieux, Patrick: *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017.

Fuller, Mary/Jenkins, Henry: "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue," in: Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated Communication and Community*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE 1995, pp. 57-92.

Gandolfi, Enrico/Semprebenre, Roberto: "The Imaginative Embrayage Through Gaming Deconstructions," in: *Im@go: A Journal of the Social Imaginary*, No. 7, Year V (2016), pp. 56-71.

Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, London: Cambridge University Press 1997.

Glas, René: "Paratextual Play: Unlocking the Nature of Making-of Material of Games," in: *DiGRA/FDG '16—Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, Dundee, DiGRA 2016, pp. 1-13.

Glas, René/van Vught, Jasper: "The Politics of Game Canonization: Tales from the Frontlines of Creating a National History of Games," in *DiGRA '19—Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*, DiGRA 2019, pp. 1-15.

Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Practices*, New York: New York University Press 2010.

Hight, Craig. "Making-Of Documentaries on DVD: The Lord of The Rings Trilogy and Special Editions," in: *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 56 (2005), pp. 4-17.

Kline, Steven/Dyer-Whiteford, Nick/de Peuter, Greg: *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2013.

Klinger, Barbara. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2006.

Kücklich, Julian: "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry," in: *The Fibreculture Journal*, Issue 5: Precarious Labour (2005); <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>

Lefebvre, Isabelle. "Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities: Normative Interfaces and Discourses in Super Mario Maker," in: *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, Vol. 10, No. 16 (2017), pp. 196-213.

Lowood, Henry. "High-performance Play: The Making of Machinima," in: Andy Clarke, Mitchell Grethe (eds.), *Videogames and Art*, Chicago: Intellect Books/The University of Chicago Press 2007, pp. 59-79.

Newman, James A.: *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*, London: Routledge 2012.

Newman, James: "Kaizo Mario Maker: ROM Hacking, Abusive Game Design and Nintendo's Super Mario Maker," in: *Convergence*, Vol. 24, Issue 4 (2016), pp. 339-356.

Nintendo: *Super Mario Maker Premium Pack Artbook*, Kyoto: Nintendo 2015.

Nintendo: *Super Mario Bros. Encyclopedia*, Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books 2018.

Onanuga, Tola: "All That's Wrong with Nintendo's Heavy-handed ROM Crackdown," in: *Wired*, August 18, 2018; <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/nintendo-roms-emulator-loveroms-loveretro-lawsuit>

Scully-Blaker, Rainforest: "A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space with de Certeau and Virilio," in: *Game Studies*, Vol.14, Issue 1 (2014); <http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker>

Sotamaa, Olli: "Play, Create, Share? Console Gaming, Player Production and Agency," in: *The Fiberculture Journal*, Issue 16: Counterplay (2010); <http://sixteen.fibreculturejournal.org/play-create-share-console-gaming-player-production-and-agency/>

Staiger, Janet: "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal*, 24 (3), pp. 4-23.

Suominen, Jaakko: "The Past as the Future? Nostalgia and Retrogaming in Digital Culture," in: *The Fiberculture Journal*, Issue 11 (2008); <http://eleven.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-075-the-past-as-the-future-nostalgia-and-retrogaming-in-digital-culture/>

Suominen, Jaakko: "Mario's Legacy and Sonic's Heritage: Replays and Re-funds of Console Gaming History," in: *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global—Games in Culture and Society*, DiGRA 2012, pp. 1-18.

Voskuil, Erik: *Before Mario: The Fantastic Toys from The Video Game Giant's Early Days*, Châtillon: Omaké Books 2014.

Walsh, Christopher/Apperley, Thomas: "Gaming Capital: Rethinking Literacy," in: *Changing Climates: Education for Sustainable Futures, Proceedings of the AARE 2008 International Education Research Conference*, Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology 2009, pp. 1-12.

Witkowski, Emma/Manning, James: "Playing With(out) Power: Negotiated Conventions of High Performance Networked Play Practices," in: *DiGRA '17—Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference*, DiGRA 2017, pp. 1-18.

GAMOGRAPHY

DONKEY KONG (Nintendo 1981, O: Nintendo R&D1)
DOOM (GT Interactive Software 1993, O: id Software)
DR. MARIO (Nintendo 1990, O: Nintendo R&D 1)
LITTLEBIGPLANET (Sony Computer Entertainment 2008, O: Media Molecule)
MARIO BROS. (Nintendo 1983, O: Nintendo R&D1)
MARIO KART 8 (Nintendo 2014, O: Nintendo EAD)
MARIO PAINT (Nintendo 1992, O: Nintendo R&D1/Intelligent Systems)
NES REMIX (Nintendo 2013, O: Nintendo EAD Tokyo)
PAPER MARIO (Nintendo 2000, O: Intelligent Systems)
POKÉMON (Nintendo 1996, O: Game Freak)
SPACEWAR! (Steve Russel 1962, O: Steve Russel)
SPLATOON (Nintendo 2015, O: Nintendo EAD)
SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD (Nintendo 2013, O: Nintendo EAD Tokyo)
SUPER MARIO 64 (Nintendo 1996, O: Nintendo EAD)
SUPER MARIO ALL-STARS (Nintendo 1993, O: Nintendo EAD)
SUPER MARIO BROS. (Nintendo 1985, O: Nintendo Creative Department)
SUPER MARIO BROS. 2/SUPER MARIO BROS.: THE LOST LEVELS (Nintendo 1986, O: Nintendo R&D4)
SUPER MARIO BROS. 3 (Nintendo 1988, O: Nintendo EAD)
SUPER MARIO LAND (Nintendo 1989, O: Nintendo R&D1)
SUPER MARIO MAKER (Nintendo 2015, O: Nintendo EAD)
SUPER MARIO MAKER 2 (Nintendo 2019, O: Nintendo EPD)
SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY (Nintendo 2017, O: Nintendo EPD)
SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE (Nintendo 2002, O: Nintendo EAD)
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (Nintendo 1989, O: Nintendo R&D4)
WII FIT (Nintendo 2007, O: Nintendo EAD Group nr. 5)
YUME KŌJŌ: DOKI DOKI PANIC (Fuji Television 1987, O: Nintendo)

