Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association
Vol 10(16): 196-213
http://loading.gamestudies.ca

Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities: Normative Interfaces and Discourses in *Super Mario Maker*

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Abstract

This paper explores how the creative expression of players is framed within *Super Mario Maker* (Nintendo, 2015). Dispelling the promises of "endless possibilities" (Nintendo, 2015) with which the game is marketed, this article argues instead that a player's creativity is oriented, limited, and influenced by the interface of the game (its possibilities, and impossibilities), the paratext supplied by Nintendo (advertising, user guide, and tutorials), the reception, as well as the appraisal of levels by the community of players within the closed social platform of the game. In order to analyze this process of "normativization," the following article begins by proposing an actualization of theories of participatory culture as defined by Matt Hills (2002), Henry Jenkins (2006), Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013). From these remarks, this paper also proposes to locate some of *Super Mario Maker's* normative elements that have an influence on players' creations, using as a starting point McIntyre's work on creativity (2012), Albera's concept of "amateur-dispositive" (2011), Kline et al.'s "Three Circuits of Interactivity" (2003), and Consalvo's gaming capital (2007). Finally, this paper analyzes certain recurring motifs found in *Super Mario Maker*'s user-generated levels that serve to benefit what I call the "paradigm of difficulty," a pattern well-known within the video game medium since its infancy.

Author Keywords

User-generated content; normativization; participatory culture; *Super Mario Maker*

Super Mario Maker, User-generated Content, and Participatory Culture

Released in September 2015 by Nintendo, *Super Mario Maker* is notable for breathing new life into the veteran franchise by offering players two distinct albeit intersecting play options; these two choices are what players first see when launching the software and influence the entire game experience. The first entails the creation of original *Mario* levels using simple editing tools, the fruits of which are then meant to be uploaded and shared within the software's closed community. The second option revolves around playing levels created by Nintendo and by player-creators around the globe. This game mode also centers around a process of level appraisal and sharing. Through these two fundamental functions of *Super Mario Maker*, certain elements come to light that are endemic to the current video game production landscape, specifically within the context of the Web 2.0 where video game consoles and home computers increasingly depend on the Internet. Namely, one may notice in this title—as in a significant part of the industry—that a

particular emphasis is placed on the integration of players' creativity, thus blurring the borders between users and producers. For instance, the monumental creative involvement of players was demonstrated a mere week after the game's release in North America, when *Super Mario Maker*'s proprietary social platform had already recorded the creation and submission of more than a million levels (Moser, 2015). The authorial function of player-creators is further legitimized by the fact that their levels are built using a tool that was originally built for Nintendo developers (Lien, 2014). Finally, both levels and their authors are appraised by players and ranked according to various factors (e.g. number of "stars" as well as "walk score") that continue to put player-creators and the game's developers on even ground.

Since *Super Mario Maker* is entirely dependent on the creation and distribution of user-made content, it would be easy to say that its success in the gaming market is intrinsically linked to its skillful handling of participatory culture and spreadability, as described by Jenkins, Ford and Green in *Spreadable Media* (2013). Indeed, it would seem that in order to make use of the creative labour of players, Nintendo sought to give them free rein by offering them "a Mario game with endless possibilities" (Nintendo, 2015). Despite this grand claim, careful observation of submitted levels reveals a form of saturation resulting from normative limitations: first by the interface of the creation tool that, far from allowing for endless possibilities, actually restricts creative possibilities (imposing a preprogrammed inventory of objects, characters and actions); second, by social constraints within player communities who download and consume levels generated by their peers.

Through an analysis of certain motifs that appear on *Super Mario Maker*'s closed social platform, the following paper identifies the normative influence of the community on players and the content they submit. Integral to this project is a discussion of notions of participatory culture as addressed by Matt Hills (2002), as well as a critical reconsideration of key concepts from Henry Jenkins' work in *Spreadable Media* and *Convergence Culture* (2006). Having reframed these ideas from the contemporary example of *Super Mario Maker*, this article proposes to point out some of the normative elements that can influence players' creativity while producing new stages. To do so, an analysis model will be proposed, encompassing the possible relationships between participatory culture, McIntyre's work on creativity (2012), Albera's concept of "amateur-dispositive", Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's "Three Circuits of Interactivity" (2003), and Consalvo's gaming capital (2007). According to this proposed model, this paper will then proceed to analyze the role that a skillful handling of difficulty, or lack thereof, plays in the relative success of the user-created levels within the game's online community.

Actualizing Participatory Culture

As a game that revolves around the creative involvement of its players and the circulation of their creations within a closed social platform, *Super Mario Maker* is more than a simple platformer. When players first enter the game, two options are offered to them: they can choose to create their own level or to play a variety of levels designed by Nintendo and, more significantly, by fellow players. In fact, when a player chooses to play rather than create, the vast majority of levels available in the "course world" are those created by the wide community of player-creators, while the few levels generated by the developer appear in a dedicated section (serving as a series of tutorials hiding in plain sight). Compared to Nintendo's official playable content, the significantly higher number of courses produced by players leads one to consider the prominence of the creative

implication of players within the game. This participation is also encouraged by its structure, as the very first minutes of the game shows. When a player plays *Super Mario Maker* for the first time, she starts in a level reminiscent of the first *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo 1985). The player is thus brought to navigate the space as she would do in any platformer video game, making Mario run and jump to pass through the stage. However, when she arrives to the final screen, as the visible iconic flag stands as the finishing point of the level, she encounters a bottomless pit that is too wide for Mario to traverse. In order to succeed the level, she is thus obligated to try a perilous jump that will lead Mario to fall in the void. As soon as Mario does not succeed, instead of redirecting the player at the beginning of the level as it is the tradition in 2D Mario games, the game pauses, and a screen shows a text window where it is written: "Whoa! Looks like someone left this course unfinished… It's up to you to complete it!" The game then invites the player to finish the stage by using the creation tool that is temporarily limited to 12 items (out of the 60 that can be gradually unlocked by the player afterwards). By 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. Likewise, the game insists on this aspect by integrating it in the process of unlocking the rest of the items that can be used to create levels. The game will begin by telling the player: "You've now got all the basic tools you need for course creation! Try different combinations to see what you can come up with until you queue the next delivery of course elements" and, later on, "New course elements will arrive [date of the following day]! In the meantime, try mastering the art of course creation using the tools currently available". That being said, the player need only to continue exploring the creative opportunities made available through the course editor in order for the game to reward her efforts: "Oh! A delivery truck has arrived. That's a bit sooner that we were expecting!" followed by "New course elements are now available! (Spend at least five minutes creating a course to queue the next delivery.) Or would you like to play a sample course?". The sample course in question features the newly added elements and introduces new and creative ways in which these can be used and combined. While it is not, strictly speaking, necessary to create in order to unlock new elements, Nintendo has made creating the clear, dominant strategy for gaining access to the complete variety of tools one needs to build courses.

Players can also unlock additional costumes or skins for their avatar by succeeding in some challenges in the course world (e.g. the various "100 Mario challenges"), or Nintendo's levels that appear in the "special events" section[1]. Even though these are usually unlocked by playing the game, they are only useful to a player while creating a level; she cannot choose to use her costumes while playing courses. Therefore, by offering this type of reward, it is made clear that the game attempts to solicit the participation of its players. Of course, the game's system exerts many other strategies to stimulate players' creation that will be discussed further in the next parts of this paper. Furthermore, this article also argues that the emphasis on such user-generated content within the very structure of the game contributes to its "external" commercial popularity as I will show shortly.

Within the course world of *Super Mario Maker*, the stages created by players and those produced by Nintendo appear on a nearly equal basis, but there is still a separation between the "official" content, and the amateur production. For instance, when selecting levels, players always see who created a particular course. When the creator in question is Nintendo (as represented by various figures, including Bowser, Yamamura and Mary O.), its levels may very well enjoy certain benefits

linked to its position as the original *auteur*. The same cannot be said of user-generated levels, which not only suffer from the relative anonymity of their creators, but also of a lack of quality assurance. Therefore, if the boundaries between producer and user-creators tend to get blurred within the game environment, it is also important to notice that they are not yet completely permeable, despite the core position of players and their creative labour. Nevertheless, the apparent effacement of the user/producer divide in *Super Mario Maker* recalls the theoretical considerations of Matt Hills (2002) regarding participatory culture. For one, we can regard the levels created by players in *Super Mario Maker* as a form of appropriation of the creation tool provided by the game, because they are shared and consumed by and for the players on the social platform. According to the author:

> The fan's appropriation of a text is […] an act of 'final consumption' which pulls this text away from (intersubjective and public) exchange-value and towards (private, personal) use-value, but without ever cleanly or clearly being able to separate out the two.
>
> Hills, p. 35 (2002)

By the displacement of the original text towards its cultural appropriation by the public, Hills' affirmation leads to thinking that there is a separation between the official production and fan-generated creations, functioning respectively by different logic of circulation and capital, without being completely dissociated from one another. Within *Super Mario Maker,* where the levels created by Nintendo and those generated by the players share the same space and are both almost equally accessible for the players, the porosity of borders between producer and users is more prominent than it was when Hills was writing. However, there persists a double logic of circulation regarding, on the one hand, the game itself as a marketable object with a commercial and monetary value and, on the other hand, the levels created by Nintendo or player-creators and which circulate within the closed social platform of the game.

Although these different logics lead to different types of capital (the former commercial and the latter social), the engagement of consumers remains a crucial asset both to the game's circulation and to that of content within the game itself. According to Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green in *Spreadable Media* (2013), the circulation of media contents, such as video games, "relies as much (or more) on their circulation by the audience as it does on their commercial distribution" (2006, p. 195-196). In this respect, the fact that *Super Mario Maker* builds upon such processes of user appropriation as those suggested by Hills appears to be instrumental in the "external"—that is commercial—success of the game. To contrast, other similar games that presents a level-editing tool such as *LittleBigPlanet* (Media Molecule 2008), have also tried to solicit the creative participation of players with comparatively modest success. While such games likewise present an easy to use level creation tool and the possibility to share these creations with other players on a closed social platform, their source material differs from that of *Super Mario Maker* in at least one crucial way. Contrary to Nintendo's opus, *LittleBigPlanet* presents players with a completely new fictional universe with characters and items that players cannot relate to a prior game or fictional content, while *Super Mario Maker* is part of a prominent video game legacy that has been widely circulating since 1985.

In this perspective, the game constitutes a renewal—that is a point of diversification—of the broader *Mario* franchise, evoking what Jenkins (2006) defines as transmedia storytelling, a process within which a story "unfolds [itself] across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (p. 97-98). While this definition can inform our understanding of *Super Mario Maker*, it is imperative to point out that the *Mario* franchise does not depend as much on the development of rich narratives within a complex fictional universe as it does on the diversification of cultural products and experiences for a commercial purpose. Thus, the application of Jenkins' definition can only be made partially. Nevertheless, this notion is essential to understanding the popular spreadability of its new product. From this perspective, it appears that the commercial success and the massive circulation of *Super Mario Maker* are attributable to its unique mix of well-known and new characteristics of the *Mario* franchise, in addition to the particularly effective engagement of players. From this first perspective, the utility of the concepts demonstrated in both *Spreadable Media* and *Convergence Culture* is indisputable.

However, regarding a case such as the "internal" circulation of user-generated content within *Super Mario Maker*, one can argue that the insistence on the added value of the participatory culture is not as significant to explain one's success, since the stages created by players are participatory *per se*. Instead, I would argue that the interest of *Spreadable Media* lies in the implicit normative impact of their conditions of circulation that Jenkins, Ford and Green described.

Level's Spreadability: A Matter of Mastery

Despite the different logics of circulation that govern the "internal circulation" of levels within *Super Mario Maker* and the "external circulation" of the game itself, Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) present an interesting observation that deserves to be explored further. According to the authors, a content's spreadability "is determined by processes of social appraisal rather than technical or creative wizardry and on the active participation of engaged audiences" (p. 196). Thus, its circulation within the social circles of the participating users corresponds to a logic outside financial exchanges and values. The notion of social appraisal rises from "processes of curation, which create value […] through critiquing, organizing and display/exhibiting artifacts" (p. 85). It is also a "process by which people determine which forms of value and worth get ascribed to an object as it moves through different transactions" (p. 85). Concentrating on multiple media contents and the aspiration to explain their global phenomena of virality (or spreadability), the authors provide an all-encompassing definition that applies to a great variety of social exchanges, and the social rewards that emerge from these transactions. For instance, in *Super Mario Maker*, the star reward system reflecting a player's appreciation of a given level constitutes the form of social capital that a player-creator receives. This form of appraisal also has the power to propel the level higher in the algorithm of levels' appearance, thus increasing the chances to attract other players to try it, meaning the level could receive additional stars, etc. A player-creator who succeeds in amassing a substantial number of stars also gains certain benefits, such as a greater upload limit for her creations, otherwise initially restricted to ten levels. For instance, if a player receives fifty stars, her upload limit will rise to twenty levels, and if she attracts one hundred and fifty stars, her limit will increase to thirty levels, etc.

Therefore, regardless of what player-creators seek in their experience of creation within *Super Mario Maker*, it is obvious that the social platform's interface highlights their potential desire to attract success upon their levels (i.e. receiving more social appraisal from their peers). One cannot

deny the influence that this type of reward on players' creative expression can exert, where the popularity of player-creators (and their levels) can likewise refer to spreadable characteristics sought within the social platform's community. According to Jenkins *et al.*:

> [s]ucessful creators understand the strategic and technical aspects they need to master in order to create content more likely to spread, and they think about what motivates participants to share information and build relationships with the communities shaping its circulation.
>
> Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013 (p. 196)

In the specific context of *Super Mario Maker*, player-creators seeking success must therefore demonstrate a mastery of both the creation tool provided by the game, and a certain knowledge of the public they want to attract through their creations to stimulate their sharing and positive evaluation. Furthermore, exceeding the observations of Jenkins *et al.*, it can be argued that the creative expression of player-creators is not only limited and oriented by the restrictions of themes, items, characters, and actions contained within the creation tool's catalogue, but also by a form of social pressure based on the estimation of what the player's community wishes to encounter in a level to accumulate more social capital (like stars and a greater walk score).

Framing Players' Creativity: Agency, Structures, *Dispositive*, and Technical Apparatus

As Jenkins *et al.* suggest, the spreadability of cultural objects depends as much on the mastery of technical or material aspects than on the knowledge of what people seek during their experience. In considering this from the point of view of the creation of objects—that is, before their reception—it is possible to introduce a direct link with McIntyre's (2012) work on creativity. According to the author, creative acts are the product of interwoven relations between agency and structure. McIntyre defines the former as "an individual actor's ability to make choice", and describes the latter as "those things that are seen to determine actions and behaviours" (p. 43). These relations are dynamic, changing and mutual, so that the creative agent's actions are not only constrained by structures, but have the potential to produce an impact on them as well. However, these actions are always considered from the possibilities that are enabled initially by the structures. Thus, according to McIntyre, "creative individuals may be both circumvented in their action and, at the same time, provided with the possibilities of that action by the structural factors they encounter and use while being creative" (p. 45). This vision proves to be interesting in a case such as *Super Mario Maker*, particularly considering that the clear material boundaries of the rules and creative environment have the potential to exert concrete visible regulations on the types of player creations. For one, there are the limits of what the game allows for in the choice of items, where these can be placed, how they can be modified and combined; all of which offer creative opportunities that are nonetheless necessarily limited in scope. More interesting, however, are the prescriptive rules that Nintendo clearly state in their game and related materials. These include restrictions against writing insults or obscenities, producing vulgar content, soliciting positive appraisals, using technical bugs and glitches in one's creation or when attempting to beat a time record, etc., and players who do not follow these rules are prone to consequences such as seeing their level permanently removed from the sharing platform or having their star count reset. At the same time, creativity is made possible for anyone by the accessibility of the creation tool. Even the feedback and appraisal processes are also made through the game's structures, by the limitations and possibilities of action provided by the star raking system that is limited to the choice

of giving a star or not to a fellow player's course, and the distinctive rules that frame the options to leave a comment (no insults, vulgarity, etc.).

Following McIntyre's assertions, one can note that the structures that may influence the creativity of players exceed the context of the rules given by Nintendo and can present themselves in a multifaceted and complex relationship within the general structures of the community in which creative agents create, their own aspirations, etc. Summarizing Csikszentmihalyi and his model of creativity, McIntyre states that: "creative behaviour can be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules" (2012 p. 47). Similarly, it is my project in this article to point out the diverse structural elements that can influence the agency of players. In doing so, I do not deny that this influence can be actualized in different manners according to the dispositions and motivations of every individual. Rather, my present goal is to recognize the emergence in games such as *Super Mario Maker* of such normative structures and preferred discourses.

The concept of structure developed by McIntyre manages to encompass and establish a relationship between various theories that study the regulation of creativity and agency, such as Bourdieu's field theory, or Csikszentmihalyi's notions of field and domain within his model of creativity. Similarly, I argue that there is an intrinsic relationship between McIntyre's structure and the concept of "amateur-dispositive" developed by François Albera (2011). In the particular case where this article addresses the conditions of creation and circulation of user-generated content in a very restricted environment (compared to the general production of cultural objects described by McIntyre, Bourdieu, or Csikszentmihalyi), stressing the concept of structure with Albera's amateur-dispositive brings an additional degree of precision. In order to grasp amateur cinematographic production, Albera adapts Foucault's initial concept of dispositive. According to Foucault's terminology, a dispositive can be understood as a fruitful assembling (i.e. a network) of heterogeneous elements. The author argues that:

> What I try to locate under this term is […] a set resolutely heterogeneous, including discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic positions, […] what is said as well as the unsaid.
>
> Foucault, p. 299 (1976–1988); my translation[2]

In short, the "dispositive itself is a network that one can establish between those elements" (*idem*).[3] Known as an all-encompassing concept that applies to the "liberal" socio-economy's reiteration and good functioning, Foucault's dispositive is also explained by Agamben (2007) as every element that has "in one way or another, the capacity to capture, orientate, determine, intercept, model, control, and ensure gestures, behaviours, opinions, and discourses of living beings" (p. 27; my translation)[4]. Interpreting this concept through the particular example of amateur cinema production, Albera states that even if the technical apparatus—that is the camera—appears as liberated from the constraints of the professional film production, the user is always subjugated to what he calls the amateur-dispositive. This concept, writes the author:

> […] designates the social dispositive that integrates the amateur filmmaker and the industrial material of production in a configuration that articulates the different

> definitions of the dispositive: a) the technical apparatus in the narrow sense of the layout of pieces of a device as described in the patent; b) the one that accompanies the *modus operandi* that the amateur has to enforce according to the instructions; c) the cinematographic dispositive itself, setting the relations of the filmmaker or viewer to the machine, and to the representation to which the amateur submits herself; and finally d) the social dispositive including the cinematographic dispositive, that is locatable among all prescriptive discourses, as well as the processes of subjectification of the amateur to this ensemble.
>
> Albera, pp. 383–384 (2011); my translation[5]

Thus, for Albera, the technical apparatus is always inscribed within the dispositive as one of the many regulating elements that circumscribe amateur production. Because creation is never exempt from regulatory constraints or influences, this definition seems to contradict emancipatory discourses that surround the technical apparatus, and amateur production in general. From this perspective, the material interface of *Super Mario Maker* (the creation tool or the reward system in general) recedes considerably from the "endless possibilities" prescribed by the game's marketing discourse, by orienting its players through its possibilities and limitations. As such, the game's interface inscribes itself in the broad definition of dispositive (i.e. the assemblage of every regulative element) that influences players' creations. For Albera, the creative freedom promised by the technical apparatus is distorted, since the amateur is always already inscribed in a dispositive that orientates its production. Thereby, Albera's amateur-dispositive is very close to McIntyre's structure, namely because of the constraining and enabling power it represents for the creative agent. Moreover, by trying to locate the normative elements encompassed within the amateur-dispositive, Albera also notes that "institutional discourses—the manufacturer's user manual and related literature (ads, magazine articles)—proceed to the *naturalization* of its technical procedures" (Albera, 2011, p. 384; my translation).[6]

Moving from the amateur filmmaking to the production of user generated content, it is interesting to note that both phenomena are always inscribed within a set of normative elements that exceeds the material constraints of the technical apparatus. Albera's insistence on the paratext (user manuals, ads, specialized press articles, etc.) is also of great relevance, particularly when considering Consalvo's work on gaming culture and capital (2007), or the description of video game production and interactive experience through the "three circuits of interactivity" developed by Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2003). While these authors do not deal with user-generated content specifically, a detour through their theories is useful to address "the video game dispositive" and understand how player-created stages in *Super Mario Maker* relate can to this broader perspective.

According to Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, video game production and experience exist at the intersection of three circuits, namely technology, marketing, and culture (as shown in *Figure 1*).

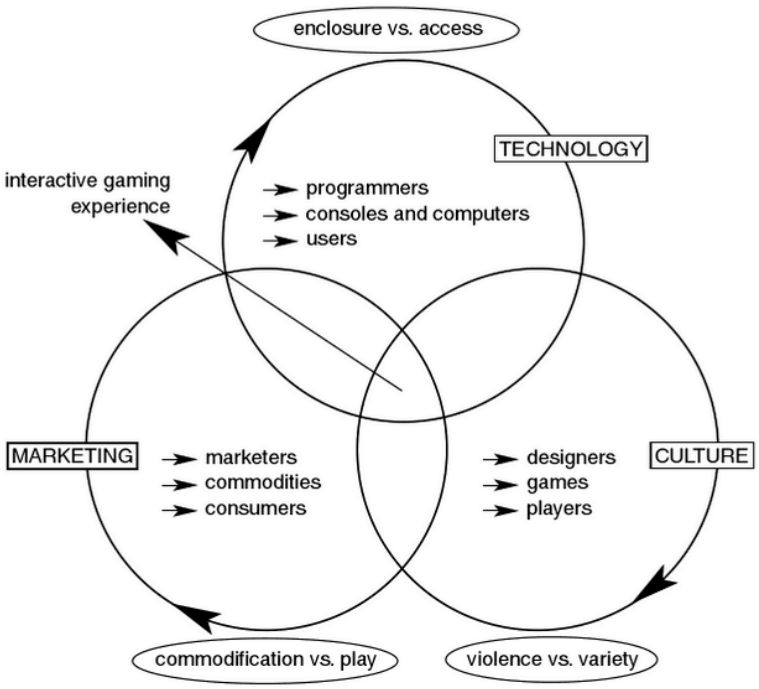

Figure 1: Contradictions in the Three Circuits of Interactivity (Kline *et al.*, 2003, p. 54).

Each of these circuits, explain the authors, have their own actors, commodities, addressees, and contradictions. It is thus the close dynamic relationships between these circles that are responsible for the paths the video game industry is taking in terms of technology development, selling rhetorics, and video game content. The importance of marketing and the peripheral industry of game magazines and strategy guides in the shaping of gaming culture and capital is also well studied by Consalvo (2007), who insists that "they [gaming magazines and guides] instruct the player in how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world" (p. 22). As they have a potential influence on the reception of a game and the actions a player might perform, these elements can be seen as normative aspects of the structure or the "video game dispositive".

Likewise, Consalvo's definition of gaming capital—an adaptation of Bourdieu's cultural capital—can also be useful regarding what is valorized (behaviours, types of accomplishments, etc.) within gaming culture in general, as well as within the specific example of *Super Mario Maker*. According to the author, gaming capital is "a system of preferences and dispositions" that "provides a key way to understand how individuals interact with games, information about games and the game industry, and other game players" (p. 4). It is a "currency that is by necessity dynamic—changing over time, across types of players or games" (p. 4). Adapting this concept to the case of *Super Mario Maker*, players' creative actions can be influenced by elements that largely exceed the mere context of the game or the material constraints of the creation tool: they can be influenced by all the games they have played, other players' levels in the course world, those created by Nintendo, Nintendo's tutorials and their answers on the support website, other players' comments, etc. More importantly, player-creators in *Super Mario Maker* are also driven by their own sense of gaming or cultural capital, which is in turn possibly shaped by the reward system of the game.

Taking Albera, Kline *et al.*, and Consalvo as a starting point, I propose an adaptation of the three circuits of interactivity to more adequately account for the major normative elements that shape players' creativity in *Super Mario Maker*. This revised model (as seen in *Figure 2*) presents a division between the interface, the paratext, and the cultural discourse. The interface circuit gathers: the creation tool, its material interface, how it is presented to the player-creator, its material creation possibilities, and more importantly, its limitations. The sharing platform's interface also falls within this category. I identify the paratext as: the uses described and valorized by the marketing material, user-guide, and tutorials. Finally, the cultural discourse encompasses the relations of the player to the video game dispositive, their relations to the game itself, other player-creator's levels, the cultural capital (namely the stars and top 10s and 100s of the most appreciated levels), makers, etc., as well as their previous video game experiences.

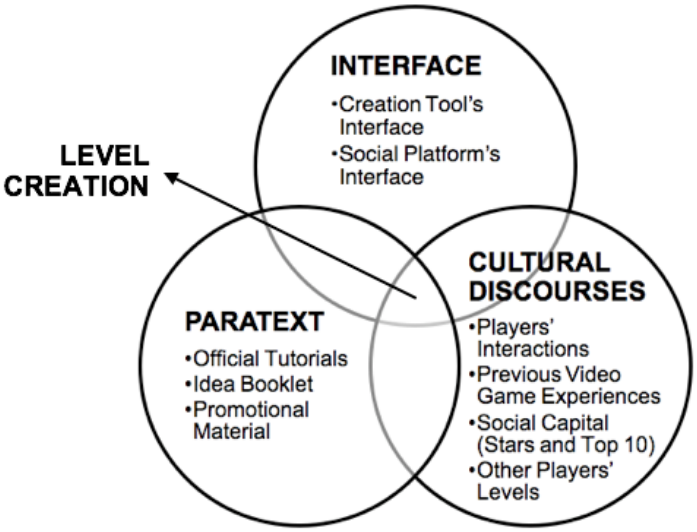

Figure 2: The Three Spheres of Influence in *Super Mario Maker*

As in Kline *et al.*'s three circuits of interactivity, the creative actions of the player-creator and the player are at the junction of several interactions between elements of the three spheres of influence I described. It is thus according to these major normative elements that I will shortly analyse one of the recurring popular discourses, namely the question of mastery regarding gameplay difficulty.

Reiterating the Paradigm of Difficulty

Although *Super Mario Maker* is specifically designed to stimulate the sharing of players' creations, significant constraints shape the type of levels that will be released online. As mentioned above, the material possibilities offered to the player are limited to the inventory provided by the game, which considerably narrows the creative expression of players to what the game allows them to do. Moreover, in order to curb the possibility of producing levels that are impossible to beat, the game asks of player-creators that they complete their own creations before uploading them to the social platform. In parallel, when a player selects a level to play, there is an indication of its completion rate onscreen (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 3: Course Choice Interface from André GX's "Super Meat Bros.", *Super Mario Maker* (Nintendo, 2015).

Through these details, one can perceive the emergence of a favored type of creation that can be assembled under the motif of mastery. In fact, it is noted that to date, the most popular levels transmitted on *Super Mario Maker*'s platform display a mastery of the creation tools, either through the production of visually captivating stages or by designing levels with exiting gameplay. Observing the top 10 most visited and "starred" levels at the time of writing, one can also note that two diametrically opposed level-design techniques are found on an almost equal footing behind this celebration of mastery: the "auto-complete" courses, and the extremely hard levels. The first focusses on the player-creator's absolute mastery of the creation tool, a quality that allows her to provide a level so well-timed and calculated that the player does not have to press any button to get Mario through the course.[7] The player simply has to watch as the level plays itself, and the most popular examples brilliantly expose a series of close calls that keep her entertained. For instance, user Gina's "[KeepRun] Ninja Mario Repost"[8], which is currently the number one course of all time according to Nintendo's interface, presents a minimal interaction with the player, where she only has to make the avatar run forward to complete the course. Throughout this level, Mario encounters an impressive number of obstacles and enemies (wheels of Boos, Koopas, saw wheels, fire lasers, and series of Chain Chomps; see *Figure 4*) whose movements are perfectly plotted and precisely timed so that he can barely pass across them without getting hurt.

Figure 4: Gina's "[KeepRun] Ninja Mario Repost", *Super Mario Maker* (Nintendo, 2015).

Because it is imperative that the player only interact minimally with the game in order to successfully complete this level, she is forced to adopt a spectatorial posture and to admire the spectacle of abounding enemies, Mario's speed, and the virtuoso precision with which the player-creator has orchestrated it all. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the spectacle of overwhelming abundance of objects, obstacles, and opponents that these "automatic" or "roller coaster"[9] levels display is entirely opposed to the ideals of level-design, characterized by a gameplay that is evenly challenging, pleasurable, and fluid.

In the same use of unusual game design that goes against Nintendo's best practices, James Newman (2016) identified a publishing trend, where the mastery of *Super Mario Maker*'s creation tool and gameplay is voluntarily used to counteract a player's usual trajectories: blocking their jump with invisible blocks, placing enemies in unfair places, etc. According to Newman, this type of design echoes with the ROM hacking community, in which Mario's code is modified and emulated to provide new experiences of play. These new experiences are often translated in what he calls abusive game design (following Wilson and Sicart's theories [2010]), a motif that can be found in the infamous *Kaizo Mario World 1* from Takemoto. Since this type of design is allowed by the system—although it seems like a paradox considering Nintendo's marketing campaign phrase: "Anyone can make it. Everyone can play it"—Newman asserts that *Super Mario Maker* was an attempt from Nintendo "to connect […] to player cultures, and particularly the 'hardcore' players that it is often seen to have disconnected from since the launch of the Wii and its focus on 'casual' games and gamers" (2016, p. 8). *Super Mario Maker* user-generated levels such as Panga's "P-Break"[10], that "take much of their inspiration from the amateur practice of 'ROM hacking'" by presenting abusive and unfair game design, show another end of the spectrum regarding the gameplay mastery demanded from its players. Panga's recorded performance to succeed his own level on Twitch took over 9 hours. According to Newman, the creator's project was to "explore SMM [*Super Mario Maker*] in order to find the tipping point between genuinely impossible and uploadably hard" (2016, p. 11), a remark the creator also confirmed: "I want to get rid of that partial viewpoint and actually make it as close to 'impossible' as I can" (Panga in Hernandez, 2015).

Considering that *Super Mario Maker* offers the possibility to upload extremely hard levels on its sharing platform, it is not surprising to notice that the second trope of level-design techniques found within the most popular levels is characterised by courses whose mastery of the creation tools lies in their challenging yet flowing gameplay (e.g. by offering a great balance of obstacles and enemies that does not hamper the levels' fluidity). Moreover, the celebration of these levels by the community also demonstrates the importance of being a skillful player. Since every level has to be beaten by its creator before its release on the social platform, being a competent Mario player is an essential part of creating adequately challenging gameplay. Therefore, popular courses that display a low completion rate within the community are consecrating a certain global mastery of the game by their successful player-creators: the harder the better. Even though they are massively failed by the majority of players, levels that present a fluid but difficult gameplay often gather a considerable number of entries and stars. For instance, André GX's "Super Meat Bros."[11], one of the most popular user-generated levels to date, has only a completion rate of 0.53%, but has collected more than 57136 stars,[12] and displays a countless number of entries. In fact, the level is so popular that the walk score registering system has attained its calculating limit, as well as having

reached its limit regarding the space available for other players to comment. Aesthetically, André GX's level is relatively simple: set in a castle themed dungeon from *Super Mario Bros. U*, it features several series of saw wheels through which players must zigzag and a set of lava holes just waiting to trap the player. In most cases, the space between each saw wheel is just large enough so that the player needs to execute a very precise and well-timed jump between each obstacle. The course's arduous route is also punctuated by the appearance of Chain Chomps and one particularly well-positioned Thwomp that constitutes a cognitive and coordination challenge within this environmental puzzle (as seen in *Figure 5*).

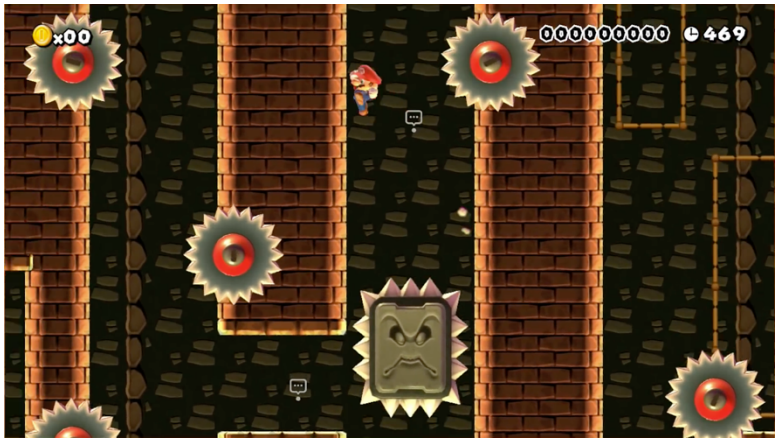

Figure 5: André GX's "Super Meat Bros." Level, *Super Mario Maker* (Nintendo, 2015).

Although the level is considerably difficult to complete, its flow is punctuated by safe spaces where the player can evaluate the next obstacles she will encounter, thus applying one of the suggestions made by Nintendo in its tutorial section on *Super Mario Maker*'s website. According to this tutorial, "[c]ourses are more enjoyable when there's a balance of calm and chaos" (Nintendo, 2015), which implies that it is better for a level to display both a balanced number of enemies, and expose every obstacle to the immediate sight of the player so she can evaluate the best way to evade it. This latter idea indubitably echoes Jesper Juul's study (2009) regarding players' attitudes towards failing. Following his observations, "[p]layers clearly prefer feeling responsible for failing in a game; not feeling responsible is tied to a negative perception of a game" (p. 237). Thus, if a level is perceived by a player as unfair, namely if she does not feel responsible for her failure, she will accuse the poor creation skills of the given course's creator, and the latter will likely fail to attract social capital. Therefore, player-creators have to master a certain discursive knowledge about what players wish to encounter in terms of challenges, obstacles, and difficulty in order to have their level spread within the social platform of the game. In order to succeed, player-creators have to consider what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls the "flow channel", a notion that can be defined as the balance between the game's challenges and the concrete capacities of the players. According to the author, because gameplay is characterized by a player's skill acquisition, the address of a game will be programmed to become progressively more challenging to counteract the player's constantly increasing mastery of the game's mechanics. If, however, a game does not succeed in compensating for the skills of a player, the affective experience of the latter will resolve in one of two ways: anxiety if the game is too hard for her capacities, or boredom if the game is too easy (see *Figure 6*).

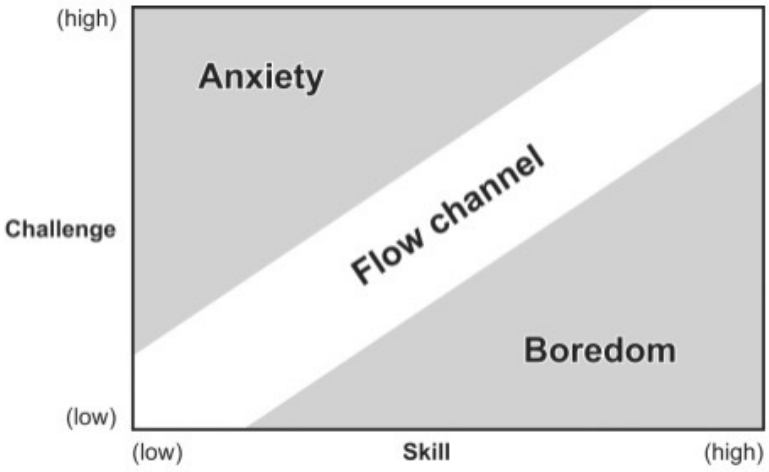

Figure 6: "The Flow Channel" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 74).

Applied to level design within *Super Mario Maker*, Csikszentmihalyi's "flow channel" can no longer relate to the idea of a progression of difficulty throughout a single game. Rather, the concept of flow has to be refocused around unique levels, wherein it now refers to the idea of levels that consider the capacities of players through their intuitive design (i.e. not too many enemies or surprise obstacles as seen in Nintendo's "Crash Course" tutorial). In this context, the creation of flow relates to the mastery of the creation tool to produce an enjoyable level that considers players' capacities and that provides a considerable challenge so that the succeeding player feels deeply rewarded after having beaten the given level. Without being able to confirm or deny that "Super Meat Bros." was directly influenced by Nintendo's tutorial in order to produce a challenge that is both difficult and pleasurable, one can still argue that its player-creator certainly demonstrated a proficient knowledge of what the community expects in a *Super Mario Maker* level, especially if one refers to its number of entries and star accumulation. Hence, by rewarding the effective use of challenging enemies, obstacles, and a certain sense of timing as well as the prior completion by the creator, *Super Mario Maker*'s community exerts some form of influence that has the power to direct subsequent players' creations. Whenever a recurring motif is celebrated by the accumulation of stars in the game, it opens to the possibility to be repeated by other player-creators who are also seeking the same success, especially considering the fact that Nintendo encourages players to "edit courses created by other players" in their marketing material (Nintendo Wii U UK, 2015). This promoted practice allows player-creators, among other things, to download the given level and open it within the creation tool to look at how it functions, get inspired by it, or appropriate it by modifying certain components. Consequently, the influential power that a successful level can have on other player-creators is certainly concrete and tangible.

On the other hand, an example such as "Super Meat Bros." highlights another dimension of the paradigm of the mastery, namely the demonstration of gameplay proficiency, a motif that is underlined by the game mechanics of both the course uploading rules, and the social reward system displayed in the interface of the course choice. For instance, as I have already noted above, player-creators must take on the role of the player and beat their own level before they are allowed to upload it upon the social platform of the game. Nintendo's attempt at preventing users from uploading impossible to beat levels thus effectively forces the player-creator to master the game's

mechanics to demonstrate the completability of the product. Then, if the given level is considered difficult (but well designed) by the community (by accumulating a great number of stars and a low completion rate), it will highlight the mastery of the game by the creator. In addition to the low completion rate of the course, the interface of the game also shows the name of the player that reaches the world record (i.e. the best time to achieve a given level). Having one's Mii represented on the course choice and finish interface figures as a social capital for the best player, a reward that is also accentuated by the fact that the game is now integrating (since the March 9, 2016, update) a global high-score table showing the names of the best world-record breakers in the bookmarks section of the game. These last three characteristics are thus establishing what Nintendo and the community consider as the most proficient players, as well as reiterating a competitive atmosphere that is well known within the video game medium landscape since its beginning. Therefore, much like the era of arcades and the early domestic game consoles that displayed the name of the players that achieved the best scores, *Super Mario Maker* persists in this long-lasting competitive attitude by rewarding the best-timed gameplay performances, thus encouraging other players to constantly beat the prior world record. Notably, since the update to version 1.40 of the game (March 9, 2016), Nintendo's *Super Mario Maker Bookmark* website also features leaderboards for top-ranking players in various categories.[13]

According to Carl Therrien (2014), early arcade and video game consoles had integrated high-score tables to encourage competitive practice: "[t]he score […] acted as an extrinsic motivator, as opposed to the intrinsic pleasures associated with playing a game" (p. 155). This attitude, Therrien writes, persists within the current video game production, although the author also perceives a shift from the antagonizing address of earlier games towards the rise of a cooperative address between games and their players (p. 549). It is thus interesting to notice that within a contemporary game such as *Super Mario Maker*, these two types of addresses cohabit, where the game leads players through various tutorials and official guides on their website about the usage of their creation tool, while the interface also reinforces the staging of difficult challenges, recalling the early history of the medium regarding some levels' gameplay. Through this later encouragement, one can thus argue that *Super Mario Maker*'s interface, as well as the community of players, are participating in asserting and celebrating what I call the paradigm of difficulty. This notion ensues from the mastery of the creation tool—namely that of creating balanced challenges in order to reach the expectations of the most skilled players in the community—and the mastery of gameplay, both on the part of player-creators who initially beat their courses and of the players who succeeded in performing the fastest completion times. Knowing that they are part of the 0.53% (in the case of "Super Meat Bros.") or having their Mii and their name proudly displayed in the interface acts as the social capital to which those players aspire.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I feel it is important to recall that all actions (creative, appraisal, play, etc.) are always inscribed within the prism of the material structures and imperative rules of *Super Mario Maker*. In exerting this type of limitation, as well as providing an easy to use creation tool, the game already acts as a frame for creative possibilities: constraining and enabling players' agency. Other than these limitations, this article tried to locate other possible elements of influence on players' creativity, namely between the paratext (that is Nintendo's marketing discourse, idea booklet, and tutorials) and the cultural discourse (a category that gathers the interactions between players in the community, prior video game experience, as well as other players' levels). My

interest in analyzing popular game designs and themes lies exactly on the latter, that is in the potential influence they can exert on other players that are seeking the same success. By reiterating well-known design patterns such as the long-lasting paradigm of difficulty, popular courses highlight very well that any creative action, or its reception, is not to be taken apart from the "structure" (McIntyre, 2012). Hence, creativity is always determined by the interplay between players' free will and normative influences and constraints. As my use of the concept of dispositive has shown, the regulatory structures of players' creativity far exceed the game's system and players' interactions within it. Players' creative actions can be also directed by the structures of the video game community (or communities) of which they are part. Besides, I would argue that the circulation of user-generated levels also exceeds the perimeter of the game. As Newman's (2016) case of Panga's "P-Break" underlines, the large spreadability of this particular level is not only attributable of its use of a nearly impossible to beat design. Its diffusion on Twitch by the player-creator himself, and the several *Let's plays* on YouTube from other users, have certainly helped the visibility and the popularity of the level in *Super Mario Maker*'s ranking system. Players that saw the performance on Twitch or YouTube could be curious to try it, positively appraise it to encourage their fellow Twitcher, etc. From that perspective, it is almost impossible to know to what extent these elements really influence any given player's creation. As this article has shown, there are always limitations in any act of creation despite the emancipatory rhetoric of the marketing of the game.

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[1]. Most costumes can also be unlocked by purchasing the corresponding Amiibo. However, there are many costumes that are only unlockable by playing the "100 Mario Challenges" or Nintendo's special event courses, such as: GLA (Mario in a Mercedes Benz SUV, which was also featured as DLC in *MarioKart 8* [Nintendo, 2014]), the Wii Fit Balance Board, Shy Guy, etc.

[2]. « Ce que j'essaie de repérer sous ce nom, c'est […] un ensemble résolument hétérogène, comportant des discours, des institutions, des aménagements architecturaux, des décisions règlementaires, des lois, des mesures administratives, des énoncés scientifiques, des propositions philosophiques, morales, philanthropiques, […] du dit, aussi bien que du non-dit […] » (Foucault 1976-1988, p. 299).

[3]. « Le dispositif lui-même, c'est le réseau qu'on peut établir entre ces éléments » (*Idem*).

[4]. « […] tout ce qui a, d'une manière ou d'une autre, la capacité de capturer, d'orienter, de déterminer, d'intercepter, de modeler, de contrôler et d'assurer les gestes, les conduites, les opinions et les discours des êtres vivants » (Agamben 2007, p. 27).

[5]. « […] désign[e] ici le dispositif social qui intègre cinéaste amateur et matériel de production industriel dans une configuration qui permet d'articuler les différentes définitions du dispositif : a) le dispositif technique au sens restreint d'agencement des pièces d'un appareil tel que le décrit le brevet; b) celui qu'accompagne un *modus operandi* que l'amateur doit mettre en œuvre selon la notice d'utilisation; c) le dispositif cinématographique proprement dit réglant les rapports du réalisateur ou du spectateur à la machine et à la représentation auquel se soumet l'amateur; et enfin d) le dispositif social dont le dispositif cinématographique fait partie et dont il relève, ici particulièrement repérable dans

l'ensemble des discours prescriptifs et dans les procédures d'assujettissement de l'amateur à cet ensemble » (Albera, 2011, p. 383-384).

[6]. « […] les discours institutionnels - le mode d'emploi du fabriquant et la littérature afférente (publicité, articles de magazines) - procèdent à une *naturalisation* des procédures techniques » (*Idem*, p. 384).

[7]. Sometimes, there are also "roller coaster" levels that only requires to make the avatar run towards the right without stopping to succeed.

[8]. ジーナ's "[KeepRun] 忍者マリオ 再投稿" (Course ID within *Super Mario Maker*: 1643-0000-01AB-A0C2).

[9]. An "automatic level" refers to a course where the player only has to watch, without pressing any button, to get Mario through the course. Generally, this type of level is identified in its title as "auto", "don't move", etc., so the player knows what game design to expect. Similarly, "roller coaster levels" demand the player to make Mario run forward without stopping. These are also generally identified in their titles, with "roller coaster", "Keep run", "Run!", etc.

[10]. Course ID within *Super Mario Maker*: 6059-0000-005E-4FB5.

[11]. Course ID within *Super Mario Maker*: BA34-0000-0015-F84C.

[12] . This information was recorded on March 1, 2016 and may have changed since.

[13] . These include: total stars (all-time), total stars (weekly), world records (all-time), first clears (all-time), first clears (weekly), 100 Mario challenge (expert), and 100 Mario challenge (super-expert).