



## **Creative Agency and Play in Design-Based Games** — Christina Fawcett

*Dreams*. Media Molecule, 2020.

*Super Mario Maker 2*. Nintendo, 2019.

As video games take up more of young people's screen time, finding games to engage them is an ever-growing concern. The fears surrounding young people and screens, and video games specifically, have been amplified through the COVID-19 pandemic. On 16 January 2021, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story on parents' anxieties about children's over-exposure to digital media. Highlighting fourteen-year-old James Reichert's reliance on technology to deal with the physical and social isolation of the pandemic the story feeds into parents' fears of digital media as addiction and mental health risk: "The cost will be borne by families, Dr. Christakis [director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children's Research Institute] said, because increased online use is associated with anxiety, depression, obesity and aggression—and addiction to the medium itself" (Richtel). The language of moral panic echoes the cultural refrain that new technology is inherently dangerous. A long-standing compromise exists: games defined as edutainment, combining math or grammar or other primary subjects into game structures, are parent-friendly nods to the importance of screens for learning. A search for "edutainment games 2020" offers a wealth of websites listing the top resources for kids learning at home. The lists further normalize the anxiety around digital gaming, as the subtitle to *CNET's* "15 Educational Video Games for Kids in Quarantine (That Are Actually Fun)" suggests: "These educational video games for kids make screen time less guilty while everyone is at home" (Brown).<sup>1</sup> The fear of screen time and focus on games labelled as educational frequently ignores the learning opportunities so-called entertainment-only games offer. The problem solving, emotional modelling, goal orientation, spatial relations, and in-world physics that games

<sup>1</sup> Notably, while speaking of educational games, Brown includes Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet* series as well as *Minecraft*, which are not marketed under the banner of educational gaming.

<sup>2</sup> Platformers, where a player jumps and moves between platforms, is a popular format that has been part of gaming culture since early video games. They are flat-plane, side-scrolling structures, made internationally popular in Mario Bros.

<sup>3</sup> All spelling and punctuation follows the subtitles or captioned and onscreen text from each game.

require encourage skills that may not align with rubrics on traditional report cards but are invaluable parts of learning.

While I could rhapsodize about the value and importance of all digital games, this review is about a category of game that began in 2008 with Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet (LBP)*: creator games. The *LittleBigPlanet* series offered both a storyline and platformer<sup>2</sup> mechanics: players collect different sound effects, background materials, props, and tools that they can then remix. The *LittleBigPlanet* platform was all about creation. The storylines of *LittleBigPlanet*, *LittleBigPlanet 2*, and *LittleBigPlanet 3* revolve around taking in ideas and creating something to share: play is fun, creation and design is important, but sharing creativity is key. *LBP* set the stage for *Super Mario Maker*, a nostalgic game-design platform. The 2015 game let players create new courses situated in the Mario intellectual property; the game engaged the creative process through an accessible set of tools and familiar set of visuals: specialized knowledge, training, and experience were not requirements. In both platforms, coding became drag and drop and digital storytelling was democratized: "All imagination is here, and what you do with it all is entirely up to you. Build new levels and expand the environment, collect the many and varied tools and objects to make your mark on this world, or just simply enjoy the people and puzzles they've set" (Media Molecule). *Dreams* and *Super Mario Maker 2* amplify the importance of the creative process in gaming: building on their predecessors' successes, these games create opportunities for not only creative but collaborative play.

### ***Dreams***

*Dreams* opens with a dark screen and a voice-over by the Dream Queen, voiced by Sophie Okenado: "In the beginning, nothing. No movement. No sound. Complete emptiness. Then, something. A spec, an idea. The idea could be anything. It could be everything"<sup>3</sup> ("Big Bang"). At the mention of an idea, a glimmering light appears, before the screen gradually fills with lights, colours, shapes, sound effects, and animation: a pair of eyes that open. The game then introduces simple mechanics, for instance, moving the controller to move the player's Imp, that is, her onscreen avatar. The Dream Queen's encouragements become more emphatic as the player learns these inputs: "You're amazing. You're wonderful. You're a dream surfer"

“Meet Your Imp”). Abruptly, a large grey wall fills the screen: “Oh no. You found the Wall of Doubt. Don’t worry, everyone doubts themselves in the beginning” (“A Wall”). The visual language shows doubt as a barrier to creativity while the voice-over encourages players to push past limitations. The tutorial shows an idea, appearing as a burst of light hiding in a jack-in-the-box and behind many sliding doors: these simple mechanics give the player a chance to learn the controls while reinforcing the message that ideas are worth pursuing.

The player chooses between Dream Shaping and Dream Surfing; *Dreams*, unlike the *LittleBigPlanet* games, is a design platform first and foremost: players are encouraged to engage with others’ art and work as a collaborative and celebratory process. The Dream Shaping tutorial introduces navigation and mechanics, but aesthetics, colour, light, and other visual appeal is left unsaid. The player learns the mechanics of creating, moving, copying, and deleting objects as the Dream Queen gently explains each tool. The player is directed to the Dreams Workshop, where the Dream Crafters—the Dreams Architect and Dreams Engineer—guide the player through the next steps of creating. Dozens of tutorial videos—from reviews of basic tools of navigation, object movement, deletion, undoing, and other simple mechanics to advanced techniques of art, design, and game physics—are on offer. What is significant about these tutorials is not the content but the language; the phrasing and sentence structure is simple, concise, and clear, regardless of the tutorial level, and this simplicity enables players to build understanding incrementally. Each tutorial is an open space for the player to practise a skill and is paired with a video demonstration in the corner of the screen. This series of instructions creates an opportunity for progressive learning, making complex concepts accessible. The focus in *Dreams* remains on community: creativity is a collaborative process. While players can create on their own dream, there is also the option of remixing; players can post a creation for other dreamers to alter, adjust, or build on. Many works list multiple creators, or dreamers reference images, designs, objects, or sounds that they have received from other dreams and dreamers.

While Media Molecule provides many short games, audio-visual demonstrations, and art showcases, their feature narrative is “Art’s Dream.” The game opens with two black screens with large white text establishing that this dream is a chance to show off the platform’s tool

set: “This story was made entirely in Dreams, to give just a glimpse of what’s possible with our tools. We hope that it inspires you to use these very same tools on your own creative journey” (“Art’s Dream”). The story engages with the central character, Art, a double-bass player who has cut ties with his friends and fellow musicians in pursuit of his own fame. The game opens with Art’s voice-over reflecting on how a dream brought him back: “Sometimes, you can only see clearly in your dreams, like a light has come on in your mind” (The Open Door, “Art’s Dream”). Art’s dream moves between his disconnect from his friends and his rediscovery of imaginary friends from his childhood: little robots D-Bug, ELE-D, and ROOT-R; stuffed animals Frances and Eyepatch-Foxy; and Lancewing, an adorable dragon. These characters help him face his childhood fear, Thornbeak, a malicious crow that attacks his imaginary friends. He overcomes challenges by nurturing his imagination and sense of joy. This narrative is adult-facing, engaging the anxieties of change and the need for nostalgia and play; the story is a strong contrast to the very kid-friendly framing of Dream Shaping and Dream Surfing that the Dream Queen lays out from the outset.

“Art’s Dream” focuses on anxiety over criticism: Art responds with anger when he is told he is playing over his bandmates, storming out and leaving them without a bassist for a major performance. Thornbeak, the embodiment of Art’s doubts, keeps returning to the phrase “Tone it down,” as Art struggles with how to be an artist as part of an ensemble. The gameplay moves between Art recovering his sense of play and his struggle to admit fault and face critique. The story features an adult character and engages play as nostalgic recovery, but focuses on the need for collaboration and the acceptance of criticism in order to grow. The player is encouraged to feel Art’s growing regret and disconnection as he fights to return to the band and his friends’ lives, learning to accept critique and play together. The celebration of childhood joy and the power of imagination means the story is not solely for adults but provides an experience across age groups. Learning to collaborate, be open to suggestions, and grow as an artist is important for all dreamers to internalize.

The community focus in *Dreams* offers players a chance to experience the creativity of others and follow a particular dreamer. It also allows creative dreamers to reach an audience. When a player completes a dream created by another player, they are invited to offer

feedback in the form of a thumbs-up; the game only offers the option of giving a positive response. Feedback is sorted by four types of tags: Comments, Feedback, Reviews, or Bugs. The text box offers a prompt: “Say something nice...” The focus on positive and constructive response creates a supportive environment for exploration and learning. Sharing the creative process further amplifies the sense of community, which has spilled out into fan communities around *Dreams*. Early-access players, who were part of *Dreams*’ public beta tests of the game before it saw commercial release, discussed the community attitude that was already forming in April of 2019: “I am pretty confident that *Dreams* is not going to devolve into a hate-filled cesspool. I mean, look at this subreddit even - have you seen any LESS toxic subs? So much consideration for other people, help from other people, and kindness, that I can’t believe I am on Reddit. There will be jerks among *Dreams* fans, sure, but I feel it’s going to be minimal” ([deleted]). While the game does not indicate if comments are vetted or culled to remove toxicity—and I was not willing to leave unkind words just to test for comment curation—scrolling through games, galleries, showcases, short movies, and musical performances did not reveal any negativity or snark; instead, comments expressed appreciation or provided constructive notes and recommendations. *Dreams* are divided into three categories: Game, Audio-Visual or Showcase; when posting a creation, dreamers can add tags to make their creation searchable. These tags include such broad terms as “Plant” or “Magenta,” game-specific terms like “First Person,” or tonal terms like “Whimsical” or “Horror.” Players who are Dream Surfing can browse through the many options, sorting by category, tag, or recommendations.

*Dreams* includes virtual reality (VR) options in both creation and play to offer immersive engagement with digital worlds. Before players can play or create in VR, they must go through the “All Aboard VR” tutorial, which introduces players to the motion controls in both comfort mode and free camera. The comfort mode uses a mobile avatar and has point-to-point jumps to limit player dizziness or discomfort. The free camera motion allows for gradual onscreen motion while the player remains physically static. Because motion without player movement can be disorienting, Media Molecule has made this optional, offering VR in cinema mode: a screen appearing within the VR helmet. The player can opt out of free camera motion at any

time, which gives a kind of freedom for a player to explore the mechanical tools and new ways of looking at games without feeling trapped in an uncomfortable format.

There is frustration among the *Dreams* community that there are fewer players than they had hoped. In December 2020, the gaming-commentary site *Kotaku* discussed how a limited number of players was resulting in a lack of exposure for beautiful creations and their creators:

In the 10 months since *Dreams*' final release in February 2020, hundreds of thousands of creations have been published on the platform. There's no shortage of incredible creators, producing mountains of excellent artwork, music videos and playable games. But when I recently spoke to members of the *Dreams* community, it was clear something was wrong. There just aren't enough *players*. For all the great work, getting exposure has been very difficult. (Yarwood)

Because the game is promoted as a creative platform, it has not had the same sweeping interest that *LittleBigPlanet* had: as a game sold on the concept of play first and creation second, many players—like myself—engaged with it purely as a fun platformer. Centring the creative process in *Dreams* has made it both a powerful space for learning game design and less appealing to the casual gamer who is not looking to develop those skills.

*Dreams*' potential as a learning space makes it accessible to a wide age range of players, but it does have inherent limitations for younger players. The mechanical inputs and the nuance of controller movement require fine motor control and make the game an effective design tool for young adult and older players. The Media Molecule team, whose *LittleBigPlanet* games were more inherently kid-friendly, have created a successor that ages up the skill and detail that their platform requires and offers. While there is opportunity for collaboration in creation, having more mature hands handle the control to harness a child's imaginative expressions, the game is more naturally suited to young adult and adult players. The potential complexity of the game limits the accessibility, while the plug-and-play design can offer a simple platform but limit the potential creations.

## ***Super Mario Maker 2***

*Super Mario Maker 2* was released for the Nintendo Switch in 2019 and continues the series' notoriety for players creating impossible and unplayable levels; the game itself is an open and accessible format that encourages a strong sense of play. Mario is an interesting franchise from the perspective of young people's texts, as the character has featured in games and media through many, many childhoods: I myself visited friends to play Nintendo before being lucky enough to get a Super Nintendo in my own home. Mario, as a result, evokes childhood play for many players, regardless of their age. *Super Mario Maker 2* incorporates game-design maps from earlier games: *Super Mario Bros.*, *Super Mario Bros. 3*, *Super Mario World*, *Super Mario U*, and the upcoming *Super Mario 3D Worlds*.

The first tutorial, called *Maker Basics*, immediately establishes a silliness through the two trainers: Nina, a young woman, and Yamamura, a pigeon. Yamamura is a *Mario Maker* expert and he communicates with coos, which are immediately translated into text in English. The absurdity of having coding instructions provided by a pigeon brings the player into a sense of levity: the process of designing a game is made fun and playful rather than complex. After all, even a pigeon can do it.

The buttons used to manipulate the world further the playful engagement, as Nina and Yamamura walk the player through the different tools. Using click and drop, the player puts things into the frame from the menu across the top of the screen, while buttons to erase, undo last action, and clear screen run along the side. The eraser, aptly called Mr. Eraser, is a cartoon eraser that grows stick-figure legs and makes a sproinging rubber-band sound when selected. To amplify the humour, when the player removes the block, as instructed by Nina and Yamamura, they respond with horror: "YOU MONSTER! That Block had a family!" They immediately offer solace: "But don't worry—their pain is only temporary. Because we have Undodog on our side!" Undodog is the undo button, and the icon is a dog's face. When the player selects it, the last item removed returns with the sound effect of a cheerful bark. The reset button is the reset rocket, which has a launch countdown when holding the button; it then launches from the bottom of the screen and removes all the creator-added content in the process. The save icon, rather than the disk logo common in word processing and file

management systems, is a robot face: technology will protect the player's designs. These tool icons reinforce the playful accessibility of the space and the child-centric framing. The robot, the dog, and the rocket portray common editing tools through a playful lens.

The game offers the option of further training in Yamamura's Dojo, creating levels, or playing either other player's creations, which one can access with an online Nintendo account, or in Story Mode. Training, aimed at different levels, includes Maker Lessons like "Fixing Mistakes" for beginners, "Treating the Player Fairly" for intermediate players, and "Creating Satisfying Experiences" for advanced makers. The focus on creating courses that are fun, fair, and creative encourages makers to think of the balance of experience. The training, while optional, points to the importance of creating games that are player-focused.

In Story Mode, Mario and the Toads finish building Princess Peach's castle before realizing a Reset Rocket button is on the ground. There is momentary panic before the Undodog romps into the scene, plays with the Toads and Mario, and then firmly stands on the button and resets the castle. This sequence—including the next scene showing the empty castle site and one Toad saying "This is why I'm a cat person"—embraces the goofy humour. The Story Mode has Mario complete courses, called Jobs, to collect coins to pay for the reconstruction of the castle. These courses demonstrate the breadth the game's design component offers. Different levels challenge the player through time, mechanics, or goals; very short levels, levels that invert Mario's gravity, or levels where Mario must complete a task like carrying an object or collecting a number of coins push beyond the traditional platformer point-A-to-point-B journey. The Story Mode also provides courses in all five game styles available in the design platform. This variety introduces different visual forms, mechanical options, and enemies appropriate to each game world. The array of the games can serve a double function: nostalgia for adult players who may have enjoyed these games upon their initial release and exposure to "retro" gaming for younger players.

In addition to pursuing coins, Mario can assist the rest of the team—the Toads, the Undodog and Mr. Eraser, and a sentient block called Partrick—working on the castle. These characters send Mario on tasks that are less about coins than resources or rescues, gaining Mario other rewards at the build site. Signalling that courses are prosocial engagement



maintains the heroic spirit of the earlier Mario games, in which he sought to save Peach and defeat Bowser. While the tasks are more mechanical, collecting funds to build a castle and assisting the workers, the story articulates Mario's capacity to help those around him. He rescues the Toads when they are lost or kidnapped and collects useful tools to clear blocks and barriers around the site. The rescue of the builders is non-optional; saving the crew and crew chief is a necessary step to completing the build. When you complete the rebuild, a pop-up message appears:

Congratulations on completing Peach's Castle!

In *Super Mario Maker 2*, you can make all kinds of courses like the ones you've played in Story Mode.

Head over to the Course Maker and bring your ideas to life.

*(Super Mario Maker 2)*

The immediate pivot from play to creation highlights the centrality of design to the game's experience. The opportunity to develop one's own ideas is featured, even in the narrative space, to encourage that focus on making.

The design process is click and drop: you select an element, such as ground or blocks, or mechanical tools, such as moving platforms, see-saws, or block-snakes, to generate a linear path for Mario to follow. To ensure gaps are jumpable or blocks are low enough to hit, players can test drive the course mid-build. The course builder has numerous options and expansionary menus of different elements, objects, tools, and enemies to populate each course. Designing is simple and clear, as there are only so many elements to remix; the adjustable course length and the layering of warp pipes or cloud levels enables the maker to create more complexity. Beyond course building is World building: players can create an interrelated series of levels, just like in any Mario game. Each World must end with a Castle course, but the game offers flexibility and creativity for building the interaction between levels leading up to that point.

The online collaboration in *Super Mario Maker 2* is an active fan community; makers and players are all Mario fans, and norms have developed in both course design and feedback.

Many levels end with a block structure spelling out THX, highlighting the relationship between designer and player: a maker whose levels are never played never gets affirmation or feedback. When completing a course, the player has the option to leave a response or not: selecting either the icon of a heart captioned “I like it” or a broken heart icon captioned “Boo!” Comments can be provided by typing feedback, drawing a picture, or using a stamp; the stamps are Mario cartoons with captions like “Easy!” and “Seriously?!” accompanying pictures of Yoshi lying down or Mario getting poked by a spiny. Players can also leave tags throughout the course, so commentators can flag where they have found high-value items: for example, tags of “30 Coin Club” appear where the 30-Coin item is. The tags, which appear like *danmu*, shape the next player’s experience, and every player after. The game has the opportunity for balanced feedback, but only the hearts metric appears on the level information; boos are not provided. The game offers space for critique along with positive feedback, but there are also mechanisms of control: after each comment, players can tag to report it if it contains something against community guidelines. Makers can also lock their levels for comments, closing off the avenue for feedback but preventing negative reviews.

### Creation as Play

In both games, the sense of play and joy may initially appear targeted at younger players, but the complexity and strategy of the process requires critical thinking appropriate for older players. While both games tap into the aesthetics and concepts of childhood and play, the complexity of the design process requires the player to have a mechanical aptitude and sense of linear progression. Both *Super Mario Maker 2* and *Dreams* engage with the curiosity and play that make the collaboration between young creative players and parents, older siblings, or friends an appealing avenue. *Super Mario Maker 2* offers a more simplistic and thus more universal game-design process, while *Dreams* offers greater breadth and depth of design tools, thus limiting the age of the potential dreamer. The games, both rated E for Everyone, are free from real violence<sup>4</sup> or mature subjects, offering platforms for all-ages play. These spaces engage the player in the agentive experience of

<sup>4</sup> I am categorizing this as separate from cartoon violence: Mario leaping up and dropping off the screen after landing on a spiny or getting hit by a goomba is not realistic or evocative of real-world traumas.

generating the world they want to see: there is a real sense of satisfaction that comes from playing around with varying elements and making a complete picture or course.

Staying within the single-player experience, players can both enjoy the levels created by the designers at Media Molecule and Nintendo, and create their own spaces to play in. Using the platforms to learn the logic of design in *Super Mario Maker 2*, or digital drawing, mapping, and encoding in *Dreams* is a complete experience. Yet both games promote the power of sharing and showing one's creation, which fits well with contemporary youth cultures of TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and other platforms: creating work to share and show is a part of selfie culture and the inherent celebration of remixing and creating media that we see in our modern digital culture. These two games, while establishing frameworks for design and creation, also offer spaces for creative agency and platforms for sharing the resulting art.

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