Super Memory Makers:
Livestreaming and/as videogame
play archives

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Using *Super Mario Maker* (Nintendo EAD 2015; SMM hereafter) as its example, this paper appraises the "incidental archives" (Manning 2017) of gameplay produced by livestreamers. Similar to other forms of "high-performance play" (Lowood 2006) such as speedrunning, many of the feats performed by the most popular SMM streamers are unparalleled in terms of their virtuosic skills and technical achievements. Here, the extent to which these performances document and reveal the inner workings of a game system, its affordances and capabilities are certainly worth noting (Newman 2011; 2012a). However, the overabundance and prevalence of such content have a hegemonic effect (Fron et al. 2007). This combined with the popularity of video-sharing platforms such as YouTube and Niconico risks eliding evidence of other play styles and especially the more autotelic forms of play that SMM engenders. The result: a distorted historical record of what actual SMM play looks like.

SMM was released on 10 September 2015 for the Nintendo Wii U console to coincide with the 30th-anniversary release of *Super Mario Bros* for the Japanese Famicom system. Widely acclaimed by critics and fans alike, SMM granted players the tools and networked features to play, create and share their own 2D Mario levels. Within the first month after release, Nintendo reported 2.2 million courses had been uploaded to their servers (Nintendo of Europe 2015) with 7.2 million courses within the first eight months (Nintendo of America 2016). Four years later on 28 June 2019, *Super Mario Maker 2* (Nintendo EAD 2019) was released for the Nintendo Switch console superseding both SMM and the Wii U console. On 31 March 2021, Nintendo discontinued SMM features which removed the ability for players to upload further courses (Nintendo Support n.d.). At this time of writing, courses are still accessible yet it is highly unlikely Nintendo will continue to keep this service running for much longer. Inevitability and at some point, both SMM and the Wii U will reach the end of their commercial hence supported lifespans. What thereafter happens to this prodigious database of player-produced content?

The contingent nature of videogames and videogame technology presents archivists with an imminent concern (Winget 2011b). Contemporary videogames exist within networked infrastructures enabling software to be consistently patched and updated with new content being generated by both players and developers alike (Newman 2012a). Despite ongoing efforts, emulation and virtualization strategies appear inadequate (cf Pinchbeck et al. 2009; Rosenthal 2015). Claims of accurate reproduction

are unfounded and often produce perceptively different results (Hedstrom et al. 2006). Accounting for such variability is one possible solution (Depocas, Ippolito, and Jones 2003; Røssaak 2010) whereas others have proposed alternative strategies better suited to capture the protean nature of videogames and the emergent gameplay practices they engender (Kraus and Donahue 2012; Lowood 2002; 2011; McDonough et al. 2010; Newman 2012a; 2012b; Stuckey et al. 2013; Winget 2011a).

Using SMM as its case study, this paper assesses the merits and shortcomings of what Lowood (2002) calls for in the creation of a "game performance archive". A strategy that elsewhere Lowood (2011) describes as a move beyond software preservation to include capturing the social and performative aspects of videogame play. For Newman, this marks a shift "from game preservation to game*play* preservation" (2012a, 38; original emphasis).

This paper is presented in three parts. First, it demonstrates how livestreaming practices preserve for future observation the everchanging assemblage of play (Giddings and Kennedy 2008; Taylor 2009) which, when viewed in combination, can be used to chronicle how videogames evolve (Manning 2017).

Second, it contends how dominant cultural values and viewer expectations influence the type of play captured and performed. As Taylor (2018, 86) acknowledges, livestreamers adopt a particular style of play called "performative play". To attract and maintain large viewing audiences, performers modulate their performances to align with social norms and expectations. As such, whilst records invariably do persist, they too are often highly curated affairs tightly edited to showcase personality and player skill not to perform as archival records.

This leads to third, how the hegemony of play (Fron et al. 2007) marginalizes certain players and omits certain play styles from historical records. Much work has already lamented how sexist (Fox and Tang 2014; 2017; Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster 2019) and racist (Gray 2012; 2017) online spaces are which directly affect who gets to play in public and participate online (Shaw 2014). The historical events which privileged agonistic over autotelic forms of play (Kirkpatrick 2017; Kocurek 2015) are examined alongside the values associated with "real" games and gamers (Consalvo and Paul 2019). This paper concludes by highlighting some of the additional struggles faced by those whose play styles and agendas do not adhere to dominant expectations.

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