

# Playfully Conservative: Reinventing Nintendo's Platform Games through Materiality in *Yoshi's Crafted World*

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## (EXTENDED ABSTRACT)

Nintendo's creative output remains largely influenced even to this day by Shigeru Miyamoto's approach, stressing his strong connection to childhood and joyful aspects of its games (deWinter, 2015). The company's conservative approach also testifies to Nintendo's general tendency toward prioritizing and strictly securing its financial interests, even at the cost of silencing some urgent socio-political issues by means of urging its customers to refrain from bringing any political (Chau, 2020) and formerly even socially "sensitive" content such as homosexual relationships into its game spaces (LeJacq, 2014). When needed, these creations tend to get appropriated even by the Japanese political elites (Rich, 2016) as useful tools that "codify the logic of a political system through procedural representation" (Bogost, 2007). In this contribution, I focus on one of Nintendo's recent development and publishing strategies, particularly the pattern of reinventing the old platform genre aesthetic by applying physical material-based textures with "tactile" qualities such as wool (*Yoshi's Woolly World*, 2015), yarn (*Kirby's Epic Yarn*, 2010), *origami*-paper (as in *Paper Mario* series, 2000-) or cardboard as was the case in *Yoshi's Crafted World* (2019; henceforth YCW). The paper-based materials are to be seen in practically all of its forms in YCW – wrinkled, folded, aluminum-covered etc., as its entire game space literally consists of mainly packaging materials, simultaneously revealing its artificiality.

In this text, I employ the *close-reading* method and focus on how YCW features these physical material-based "graphical elements" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca, 2016). I have selected the maritime-themed zone entitled "Many Fish in the Sea" as well as "Origami Gardens" area for the purpose of focused analysis. Thus, I intend to demonstrate how a number of elements, borrowed from the ancient Japanese high culture and folk crafts alike (as defined by Yanagi Sōetsu in 1926 under the term of *mingei*, an abbreviation of "*minshūteki kōgei*", or "popular arts and crafts of the masses"; see Winkelhöferová, 2022) effectively blend with modern props, namely the pavilions in *shinden-zukuri* architectural style, Heian-period court ladies' figures (reminiscent of the originally straw-made *hina* dolls; Araki, 2010), or the *origami*

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creations. This blending and “selective inclusion of some traditional items and not others (...) shapes our perceptions of Japanese culture” (Hutchinson, 2019) and, as I argue, presents an attempt to update the already long-overdue platform genre gameplay.

By further paying attention to the Japanese phenomena, I discuss these creative choices as largely conservative efforts, reflecting on both the contemporary consumption-oriented mass culture as well as some ancient aspects of the archipelago’s culture. Here, materials and stationery objects such as cardboard, skewers, empty plastic bottles, coffee-cream containers, or paper clips, co-exist with ancient cultural codes and representations of maritime fauna or a garden, respectively, creating an illusory landscape, which might be read either as a dream, or a sort of modern-day wasteland. After all, as of 2015, Japan was the world’s second-largest producer of plastic waste per capita (only behind the US), and remains infamous particularly for its excessive use of “elaborate but often unnecessary food packaging”, e.g. the disposable plastic bags and food containers (McKirdy, 2020).

Over the past few decades, Nintendo’s games have also been subjected to a regular criticism over the lack of innovation, relying on the same, nostalgia-driven patterns (Hardy, 2016) and recycling its previous franchises (Victor, 2016), arguably as a result of its executives’ cautious decision-making process (Consalvo, 2016). This tendency can be traced back to the US video game crash of 1983 – 1984 and the story of the Nintendo Entertainment System console. In the aftermath of the above-mentioned market events, the company introduced a relatively strict control over the software available for its consoles, including the third-party productions (Juul, 2019). Conceptually, Nintendo’s dominant line of production still reflects the rarely contested paradigm in game design prevailing ever since the late 1970s, specifically killing monsters in order to progress (Švelch, 2023), complete with – sometimes almost obsessive – collecting quests.

And yet, even though *YCW* draws heavily upon consumer culture, it refrains from critically depicting its negative side-effects. Global society’s destructive impact on its environment only becomes more visible in a later Nintendo’s title, namely the 2022 *Kirby and the Forgotten Land*, which addresses the dichotomy (Regan, 2022) between mankind and the natural environment somewhat more explicitly.

In conclusion, regardless of the game’s playful tone, Nintendo’s approach to *YCW* resembles a stealthy, conservative production strategy, which contextualizes our understanding of the publisher’s cautious decision-making process. Not only does it confirm the publisher’s pattern of prioritizing its financial interests, but also illuminates how Nintendo plays into consumer culture and contributes to the destruction of our planet by normalizing trash and mass consumption. Time and again even at the cost of silencing some urgent socio-political issues by means of supporting the political *status quo*, while almost simultaneously urging its customers to refrain from bringing any political (Chau, 2020) and formerly even socially “sensitive” content into its games.

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