



Super Mario, the new silent clown: Video game parodies as transformative comedy tools

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Abstract

This article examines how the video game character Super Mario has become a key character in contemporary culture and an icon of user-generated comedy in hundreds of YouTube parodies, sketches and visual gags. The transformation of the original figure in user-generated makeovers highlights a vaudevillistic potential that allows Mario's image to be reinvented, enriching and questioning the limits of fan re-appropriation.

Keywords

comedy, Nintendo, Super Mario, video games, YouTube

Super Mario, the popular star of Nintendo's video games, has become a key character within contemporary visual culture, not only in the franchise's official games but also in many user-generated videos all over the internet. Academics have studied Super Mario as a historical figure (Gorges, 2008–11), a semiotic milestone (Babich, 2004) and a fertile myth of gaming culture (Garin, 2010), but his impact as a site of transformation is equally important. Three decades after his debut in *Donkey Kong*, he has become to video games what Chaplin was to silent film and Mickey Mouse to cartoon animation, a transcultural *topos*: an image that fosters intense cultural re-appropriation. Where Charlie was transformed into a Dadaist paradox (in Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* [1924]) and Mickey embodied the contradictions of pop art (in Lichtenstein's *Look Mickey* [1961]),

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Mario represents the power of transformative media. In this article I examine some of the critical and aesthetic implications of that process.

Vaudeville Marios: visual stickiness and narrative modularity

Mario's video games explore the playfulness of space through movement, like the great slapstick comedians (Kerr, 1990). His adventures rely on the interplay of forms as geometrical, mechanical and interactive devices, rather like the use of Goldberg machines – deliberately over-engineered chain reactions – as visual gags in Buster Keaton's films (Garin, 2012). This very specific kind of freedom allows fans to reinterpret the games in different ways, since strong narratives, dramatic imperatives and dialogue do not restrict Mario's possibilities as a makeover tool. The re-appropriation of media content is the process by which we 'learn by taking the culture apart and putting it back together' (Jenkins, 2009: 55), and Super Mario games are designed in a way that makes the taking apart and putting back together very easy. This is because Mario is *sticky* in terms of visual traits (iconic, physical, easy to expand) and *modular* as far as narrative is concerned (no drama restrictions nor plotted stories, only interchangeable situations): *stickiness* concerns his eye-catching power and *modularity* his ease in adapting to different frameworks. That's why fans and emergent comedians choose him as an object of transformation and parody in YouTube comedy projects, exploiting his adaptability. While other game characters have strong ties to a particular narrative context, Mario remains as an endless source of material for comic sketches and visual puns.

In his study of early sound comedy, Henry Jenkins (1992: 81) uses the term *vaudeville aesthetic* to refer to the kind of narrative fragmentation and modularity that allows comedians to alternate gags and sketches, structuring episodes without linear development or a causally integrated plot; a structure very similar to that of level-based platform video games. This is what a character like Mario fosters, the possibility to intertwine self-contained and stand-alone adventures, similar to silent comedy reels, where the gestures, looks and movements of the clown are more important than any plot. This connection between Mario and vaudeville became explicit when a group of students from Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, decided to turn Mario's image into live action in the 2005 YouTube video *Super Mario Brothers*.¹ The clip, one of YouTube's earliest hits, showcases a group of silent actors in a talent show who literally recreate *Super Mario Bros'* (1985) platform levels in a live performance: a student dressed as the Italian plumber simulates a lateral-scroll screen by running and jumping in hilarious slow motion, while the rest of the crew play the parts of evil mushrooms, Koopa turtles, coins and other Mario icons.

The laughs and cheers of the audience in that video confirm that Mario can be a type of clown that provokes laughter through jumps, stunts and movements rather than through dialogue. Like the acrobats described by Baudelaire (1956: 150) in his writings on caricature, the silhouette of a makeover Mario on stage passes from one form into another as in the pantomimes of Panurge in Rabelais novels (Bakhtin, 1984: 32), involving the audience in the physicality of popular culture. This talent-show act suggests that sketch-based live impersonations can be more effective, more coherent with the

character's nature, than other 'official' adaptations such as the 1993 Hollywood movie, because instead of squeezing Mario's modularity into a plotted script, they take advantage of his corporality.

Stand-up plumbers: between fandom and promotional strategies

Far from being an isolated example, the *Super Mario Bros* clip became one of many videos depicting Nintendo's star in a variety of comedy contexts. But are there substantial differences between these 'fanvids' (Jenkins, 2006)? How do they work in terms of cultural outreach? There is an interesting –blurred – frontier that separates the transformations made by amateur fans, whose only aim seems to be the pleasure of inventing a new take on the character, and another sort of video, much more professionalized, which promotes and monetizes certain comedy groups or stand-up comedians through YouTube advertising. Although both models often coalesce, regular fans generally upload one or two isolated clips, while organized groups use Mario as a promotional strategy creating crossovers, periodical updates and viral campaigns.²

The best examples of the fan model are the dozens of talent-show skits following the *Super Mario Brothers* vaudeville style: some of them recognize the influence and quote the Gordon College video (*Super Mario Skit*),³ while others don't (*Mario Brothers Live Action Skit!*),⁴ but most of them share a lack of editing, an amateur approach and the cheers of a live audience. The interesting thing, though, is how this recreational fan activity can easily evolve towards professionalized comedy contexts. *A Day in the Life* (2006), created by comedian Andrew Bush for his YouTube channel, constitutes a good example of this mixture: a brief piece where the quotidian existence of Mario is mocked in an everyday silent impersonation, including a *tête-à-tête* with his mirror reflection. It takes advantage of a concise format – half vaudeville sketch, half slapstick reel – which highlights physical humour through pratfalls, parody chases and sight gags. Makeover therefore functions as a translation of the character's most iconic moves and situations into a low-profile, nerdish context. Bush, who has since become a professional writer/director/comedian with the Canadian comedy group Picnicface, used Mario in a single video and continued pursuing other sketch projects, unrelated to the character.

But impersonating Mario in a fanvid can gradually become the foundation stone for an ongoing narrative, blurring the line between amateurism and professionalism. A number of young fans have developed online series based on the misadventures of the plumber, combining parody and fantasy, ridiculous crossovers and epic special effects. A good example is RMA Productions, creators of the series *Stupid Mario Brothers* (2007–12), with more than 70 episodes, a movie and an interactive adventure, all released through their YouTube channel Richalvarez. The group's seven-year trajectory and 100,000 subscribers exemplify the move from amateurism (fans impersonating Mario just for laughs) to monetization (hundreds of clips with commercial adds). It is difficult to predict how a group like RMA will evolve in the future, but the change of paradigm seems clear: something that started as a *cosplay* practice ended up being an organized strategy, using makeovers for cultural, professional and economic advancement.

Dr. Coolsex, a New York based comedy group, constitutes a powerful example of how the monetization of Mario's makeovers can erase almost every trace of fandom. While RMA videos still look 'amateurish', keeping the fan connection alive, Dr. Coolsex sketches seem much more 'produced', reminiscent of the TV show *The Super Mario Bros Super Show!* (CBS, 1989–91), which portrayed Lou Albano and Danny Wells playing Mario and Luigi in a sitcom *à la* Brooklyn. Their YouTube channel has had more than 50 million views through eight different Mario-parody formats: from mashups that mock Nintendo's characters in a reality show aesthetic (*Super Mario Bros: Jersey Shore*, 2011) to fake trailers bridging cinema and video games (*Kart – Official Trailer*, 2012) and elaborate interactive clips with alternate endings (*Luigi's Mansion Interactive Adventure Game!*, 2011). For Dr. Coolsex makeover seems to work as a means to an end: gaining popularity within the young stand-up comedy scene. This becomes evident at the end of some videos, when the comedians themselves ask the viewers to share and praise their clips through Facebook and other social media, increasing their visibility and making money through YouTube's advertising revenue.

These transformative practices point to the relevance of Mario as the new silent clown of contemporary culture, but more importantly they raise the question of the extent to which makeovers expand the aesthetic scope of a particular character while bridging the gap between fandom and promotional strategies. Instead of remaining within the realm of virtual images and machinima hacked from the original games (Lowood and Nitsche, 2011: 25), Super Mario continues to be explored as a comedy *topos*, in flesh and blood, jumping from interactive screens to slapstick reels and duet sketches, beyond gaming culture, thanks to the power of makeover and transformation.

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Notes

1. Uploaded by inzemiddle; see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGQ20yDDVzQ> (accessed November 2013).
2. The legal implications of these practices have not been totally delimited yet, since Nintendo has only recently started to claim ad revenue on user-created YouTube videos featuring its games (MacDonald, 2013). So the company's final stand on this matter seems far from clear (Bonds, 2013). The case of sketch comedy group *Mega 64* (www.mega64.com) remains as a good example of how a cosplay fan initiative can develop strong ties with the video game industry, with some of its most beloved gurus – Shigeru Miyamoto or Hideo Kojima – appearing as guest stars in the group's videos.
3. Uploaded by IsstDuFruhstuck, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvLOps1s3hc> (accessed November 2013).
4. Uploaded by nrt2794, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doxGb9yD78Y> (accessed November 2013).

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Manuel Garin works at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, where he teaches audiovisual aesthetics, serial narrative and film sound. In 2012 he defended his PhD dissertation, *The Visual Gag*, after visits to Tokyo University of the Arts and the University of Southern California to develop his research. He is currently expanding the online comparative media project *Gameplaygag: Between Silent Film and New Media* (gameplaygag.com), which explores the links between cinema and video game culture.