

## Tools Add Agency in *Mario* 3D Platforms: How F.L.U.D.D. Engages in Activity Theory in *Super Mario Sunshine*

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Tools can do things without humans? In this *Grassroots* article, Edcel Cintron is examining the video game *Super Mario Sunshine* where he will explore how F.L.U.D.D., as a tool, adds to Mario's game mechanics. Material rhetoric and activity theory is used to explain how Mario's tools changes his gameplay in *Super Mario Sunshine* compared to other 3D *Mario* platformers.

“Dear Mario: Please come to the castle. I’ve baked a cake for you.  
Yours truly . . . Princess Toadstool” (*Super Mario 64*).

I was born in 1992, which labels me as a “’90s baby.” The ’90s represent a huge shift within American popular culture and the evolution of the videogame industry. I remember how these changes influenced my childhood. During Saturday morning cartoons I would see *Pokémon*, *Digimon*, and my favorite show of all time, *The Super Mario Brothers Super Show*. Many hours of my childhood involved watching Mario and his brother Luigi go on adventures to save Princess Peach, and help her solve problems created by the evil Bowser within the Mushroom Kingdom. The series encouraged me to start playing the *Mario* franchise games. My first *Mario* game was *Super Mario Bros.* for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES).

*Super Mario Bros.* was my first platform game, where you play as a pixelated Mario who has to jump through multiple obstacles and onto enemies, use power-ups (in-game items that temporarily add extra abilities or powers to the player), and repeatedly defeat Bowser until you find and save Princess Peach. When the *Mario* games moved towards more 3D platformer gameplay

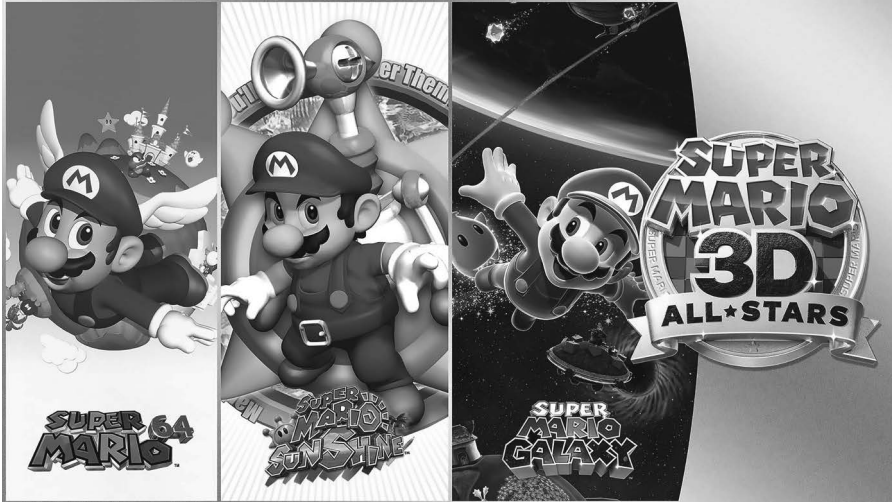


Figure 1: Cover art for *Super Mario 3D All Stars* for the Nintendo Switch

(Figure 1), the franchise evolved into games where the player is free to explore an environment without the worry of passing a stage or level within a time limit. Therefore, games such as *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 64), *Super Mario Sunshine* (GameCube), *Super Mario Galaxy* (Wii), and of course *Super Mario Odyssey* (Nintendo Switch), expanded my interest in video games.

**Agency:** using Abate's perspective on agency, this is the social action when a character uses their own voice and autonomy to call out moments of injustice oppression, and fight against pre-determined structures of power. However, **agency** looks different for tools (non-living agents) because in part, tools are co-actors with the characters and their agency is dependent, in some ways, on whether the character uses them for good or ill.

**Autonomy:** In this article, I'm using the term **personal autonomy**, which is when a character is in a state of self-directing freedom and especially moral independence.

I was always fascinated with the types of **tools** characters would use to get through the different challenges within the video game environment. Tools themselves are made with a purpose, but this doesn't mean that the tool itself is inherently good or bad. Depending how the character uses their **agency** and **autonomy**, video game characters use tools to help them on their journey. Usually, this occurs in a positive way in regard to tool-usage. However, this can also be seen in a negative way depending on the video game mechanics and genre. With my **antecedent knowledge** (which is my prior knowledge of a topic) of the video games that I've played in my lifetime, I can see that the *Mario* franchise represents how tools are taken up differently by the agentic nature of Mario and the other characters within the franchise. Now, with the recent release of *Super Mario 3D All-Stars*

for the Nintendo Switch, I went back to play and reminisce about my favorite games. Playing these games as an adult, I wanted to explore them with a focus on how differently Mario handles the game environment, and how independent Mario is when it comes to using tools. Unlike other popular Nintendo characters, such as Link who uses his iconic sword and shield and his many in-game items, Samus with her power suit and arm cannon, or Kirby with the ability to inhale enemies and attain their powers (including their knowledge to use certain in game weapons and items), Mario stands out by not heavily relying on tools to save the day. However, this was all changed when Mario and his F.L.U.D.D. tool were introduced in *Super Mario Sunshine*.

### A Tropical Paradise: What Is *Super Mario Sunshine*?

*Super Mario Sunshine* is the second 3D platformer in the *Super Mario* series. This game was published back in 2002 for the GameCube gaming system, and most recently the game became available in 2020 with the release of *Super Mario 3D All-Stars* for the Nintendo Switch. Unlike traditional *Mario* games where the player saves Princess Peach and the Mushroom Kingdom, *Super Mario Sunshine* takes place in the beautiful tropical paradise of the Isle Delfino. Mario, Princess Peach, Toadsworth, and a few Toads travel to Isle Delfino in hopes of a relaxing vacation. Unfortunately, as soon as their plane landed they found the airport and the Isle Delfino polluted with a gunky slime-like substance (which the in-game characters also refer to as icky, paint-like goo), as well as plastered with graffiti. As Mario explores the airport, he discovers a tool called F.L.U.D.D., which stands for the Flash Liquidizer Ultra Dousing Device. F.L.U.D.D. is a water cannon that Mario wears like a backpack. With this tool, Mario is able to clean the paint-like goo that is polluting all the areas within Isle Delfino and collect Shine Sprites, which are the source of energy and sunshine on the island. Without Shine Sprites, Isle Delfino has no solar energy because a giant shadow is blanketing the island. Mario also uses F.L.U.D.D. to attack his enemies (Figure 2), move from platform to platform, slide, and perform other actions Mario would not be able to do by himself, without the use of a tool.

When Mario finds F.L.U.D.D. (Figure 3), the player has a moment to learn about the added game mechanics in *Super Mario Sunshine*. With F.L.U.D.D., Mario is able to shoot a powerful stream of water towards the enemies by pressing the R button. Then, the player can use the L button in conjunction with the R button to aim the stream of water. F.L.U.D.D. also has different parts, called nozzles. These are add-ons where Mario is able to use F.L.U.D.D. in other ways to move around the Isle Delfino. For example, by pressing the X button, F.L.U.D.D. can change from the squirt nozzle to



Figure 2: Mario using F.L.U.D.D. to attack Shadow Mario.

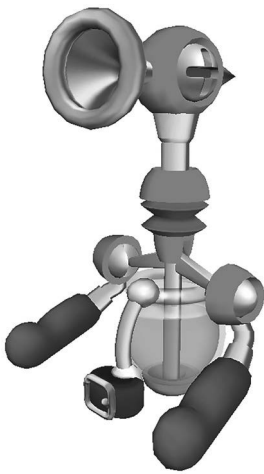


Figure 3: Full picture of F.L.U.D.D.

the hover nozzle which allows Mario to hover in the air for a short time, a rocket nozzle that is used to blast high in the air to reach difficult locations; and a turbo nozzle, which allows Mario to move quickly in the water and on land. One main setback to using F.L.U.D.D. is that it depends on a water tank to function. This means the player is always on the lookout to make sure F.L.U.D.D.'s water tank is full.

Using F.L.U.D.D., Mario is able to defeat an array of enemies composed of the same paint-like pollution that is damaging the weather and environment of Isle Delfino. Figure 4 shows how Mario and F.L.U.D.D. are battling against Phantamanta. Phantamanta is one of few unique bosses in *Super Mario Sunshine* since it only appears in the first episode of "Sirena Beach," one of many levels in the game. Similarly, to most slime and goo creatures in the game, Phantamanta produces electric slime that shocks you when you touch it, and makes the environment and landscape disappear by drowning it in goo. This is the reason why Hotel Delfino disappeared and why Mario needs to clean the environment using F.L.U.D.D. The enemies and the paint-like goo cause environmental damage to the different sections of the island. This pollution can eliminate trees and wildlife, and absorbs people inside it as if it were quicksand. The main antagonist causing this pollution is a shadow figure that looks an awful lot like Mario! He possesses a large paintbrush that is being used to damage the island and its inhabitants. With the combined efforts of F.L.U.D.D. and Mario, this duo works together to restore the environment and solar energy to Isle Delfino.

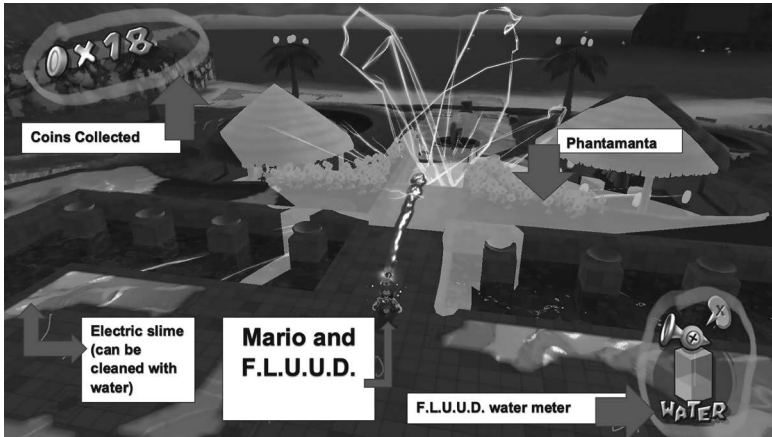


Figure 4: A modified screenshot of *Super Mario Sunshine* gameplay. Arrows and text added.

## Tools Have Their Own Agency? A Brief Discussion on Material Rhetoric

In the introduction of *Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things*, Barnett and Boyle explain how in current rhetoric research, scholars from different disciplines across the humanities and social sciences are drawn to the idea of how nonhuman objects have the ability to create their own action in the world. I know, right? When I first asked myself the question of whether objects can have their own agency, I pondered how an object could create its own action with or without human interaction. Let me explain this further by sharing my frustrations with my Mom’s Roomba, which she named “Robotina” (Figure 5) which is “Rosey” in the Spanish version of *The Jetsons*. Roombas are built to vacuum your home, so us humans don’t have to invest time using a vacuum cleaner. The neat feature of a Roomba is that with a press of a button, you activate the tool and it goes in search of dust and dirt around your house. However, the Roomba itself decides its cleaning trajectory. This means that the Roomba, or in this case “Robotina,” chooses which areas to clean first and then where to go next.

**Material Rhetoric** is when a physical object in the world (perhaps a memorial site, a speech, signs, or even words on paper) has both a physical presence and a rhetorical meaning in the world is released to the public and is no longer in the rhetor’s control.



Figure 5: Robotina sleeping on her charging dock.

However, when I start thinking about objects as **tools** that are created for a specific purpose, and how different people find a new use for the same tools, then here is where “[tools] provoke thought, incite feeling, circulate affects, and arouse in us a sense of wonder” (Barnett & Boyle 1). The fascinating thing about material rhetoric is that scholars acknowledge that tools do things by themselves, and discuss how tools can take up a new meaning and use by how other people engage with them. Therefore, when thinking about tools in a material rhetoric perspective, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Can a person define a tool and therefore give the tool agency?
2. Can the tool have its own agency?
3. Can other people give a new type of agency and use to the tool in a different way once it is accessible to the public?

These are the types of questions that we engage with when we are thinking about both tools and agency. These questions can also be adapted and modified depending on the environment the tool is interacting with and how the tool is being used by the person. Therefore, the tool can both have a level of agency, while also add or take away agency from a person depending how the person interacts with and uses the tool.

To take a step back, let me first talk about agency. **Agency**, as used in children’s and young adult’s literature, is how a fictional character goes through life changing experiences when the story provides a call to action, and they find their own voice and autonomy. Usually, you will find characters who participate in different acts of agency depending on the situation they are facing and their social-cultural environment. For example, Howard and Ryan’s article titled “Black Tween Girls with Black Girl Power: Reading Models of Agency in Rita Williams-Garcia’s *One Crazy Summer*” explains how young children can be trapped in space where even though they are still children, they have no choice but to become agentic characters and take action to challenge oppressive circumstances. In *One Crazy Summer*, Delphine has to negotiate different types of identity and agency as a way to take care of her younger sisters by cleaning, cooking, and even going without an adult to the supermarket to buy healthier foods for herself and her sisters.

With *Super Mario Sunshine*, players experience two types of agency. We see an example of **character agency** when Mario acts as the agent who ventures through the various levels in the game, and **tool agency** where F.L.U.D.D. aids Mario on his adventures and speaks to Mario when they have conversations on how they will save Isle Delphino.



## Mario 3D Platforms Is Where It's A.T.: How *Mario* 3D Platformer Games Work from an Activity System Perspective

**Activity theory** is a framework of concepts that explain what human interaction and activity does within a system. This theory focuses on the idea that humans are “socio-culturally embedded actors” (learningtheories.com) who form part of a process to explain how certain actions are connected. The Writing Program at Illinois State University further describes this concept by talking about **activity systems**. This helps us understand how these different systems can change and develop over time. This change depends on how we socialize and interact with people, and how activity systems require participation from tools and humans in order to work. In other words, you can say that activity systems involve “all the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together to achieve a particular objective” (Sheets 134). So far, all of this theory makes sense when applied to creating a genre, such as working to make a music video on YouTube. One would need to find out how to make a music video by exploring the **genre** and its conventions, find out the rules and restrictions of YouTube as an online video platform, write lyrics, select music, and have people help with the recording and editing process. In my own research, I’m not interested in using activity theory to talk about producing a game. Instead, I’m interested in both thinking about the game *as a player* and thinking as a writing researcher about how the characters act within the game. From the viewpoint of a player, the activity system includes the player’s goals, but it also involves the discourse communities and social interactions involved in play. Basically, in my research I am thinking about the activity involved in playing the game. The player, as our subject within the activity system, is highly involved with the **discourse community** and social interaction involving a video game. The Writing Program at Illinois State explain discourse communities as groups of people who share certain language-using norms and practices.” This is true for online video games where the player is involved with, “the network of the game’s people, texts, tools, and rules” (Hancock 20). The player has to talk to other players, read and understand the game mechanics, and become part of the larger activity system surrounding a video game.

For the purpose of this article, I want to focus more on how activity systems can connect by focusing on the in-game characters and the different actions they take. In the case of other 3D *Mario* platformers, such as *Super Mario 64* and *Super Mario Galaxy*, Mario is the main subject/character the player uses in the game. Mario has different jumping abilities that help him get through the many obstacles he faces in different stages of the game. He also relies on different power-ups to help him progress past certain situations

in the game, such how the fire flower helps Mario blast enemies, and how the metal box transforms Mario into Metal Mario, which makes him heavy enough to walk on the bottom of the ocean and become briefly invincible. In other *Mario* games, the player will recognize how Mario is able to master superhuman stunts with his different abilities. In the next section, we are going to take a look at how a tool adds to Mario's abilities and changes the dynamic of a traditional 3D *Mario* game.

### **Why *Super Mario Sunshine* Again? F.L.U.D.D. and Mario's Activity System**

Now that we talked about agency, material rhetoric, tools, and the in-game mechanics of F.L.U.D.D. and Mario, let's discuss how tools do many things in the world. In this case, we are looking at how F.L.U.D.D. helps Mario in *Super Mario Sunshine*. As I explained above, my interest is in using activity theory to look at how an in-game tool can alter the gameplay. For a better understanding on how I am applying activity systems in *Super Mario Sunshine*, here is a breakdown of how F.L.U.D.D. modifies Mario's movement and mechanics in this game:

#### **Subject**

Mario is the main character of *Super Mario Sunshine*, and the only playable character the player uses through the game. However, F.L.U.D.D. is introduced specifically for the environment and mechanics of this game. This means that Mario cannot complete most, if not all the stages in *Super Mario Sunshine* without using F.L.U.D.D. as his main tool.



Figure 6: A stage where Mario has to complete an obstacle course without F.L.U.D.D.



**Objective**

Mario and F.L.U.D.D. have many objectives to complete in *Super Mario Sunshine*. They have to discover the true identity of shadow Mario and the reason why he is polluting Isle Delfino. They also have to collect Shine Sprites to restore the island’s source of solar energy. Without the sun, Isle Delfino’s natural resources, lifestyle, and economy will be highly affected by this phenomenon. Lastly, we can’t have a Mario game without Mario having a battle with Bowser at the end. What is interesting is that F.L.U.D.D. is required for Mario to be able to complete all these objectives.



Figure 7: Noki Bay’s polluted waters.

**Tools**

F.L.U.D.D. is the main tool Mario requires to be able to complete each stage in *Super Mario Sunshine*. Furthermore, some stages require Mario to change F.L.U.D.D.’s nozzles in order to perform different tasks, such as using the rocket nozzle to climb higher buildings, or the turbo nozzle to complete time-limit missions. Although there are no traditional power-ups in this game, such as the fire flower or the metal box, Mario is able to complete incredible feats using his main tool, F.L.U.D.D.



Figure 8: From left to right, the squirt, hover, rocket, and turbo nozzles.

**Rules**

For the player (real person playing the game), the rules would be to learn the new in-game mechanics of using Mario with F.L.U.D.D. In turn, the player will have to adapt to not having power-ups, and to keep an eye out for the water supply that F.L.U.D.D. needs in order to work.



Figure 9: Mario using the hover nozzle and water supply to clean the area from the electric slime/goop.

**Community**

Since this is a single player game, there is not a “community” to actively participate in gameplay with. There are fandom and online forums where players can have conversations about *Super Mario Sunshine*. In the case of Mario and F.L.U.D.D., there are certain missions where Mario needs to talk to the other characters in the game. This would be an example of how the community is involved with Mario’s success, even if that community is within the game itself!



Figure 10: An Isle Delfino resident helping Mario by throwing him up in the hill.

### Division of Labor

Other characters in the game help Mario solve particular in-game objectives. Another aspect is that in order for Mario to change F.L.U.D.D.'s nozzles, he has to jump on a nozzle box and obtain the tool. Someone had to place these nozzle boxes in the different locations for Mario to be able to access them. In addition, the fruit merchants in the game provide fruit for Mario to pick up and wake up Yoshi. Yoshi is needed to complete specific missions within the game, so in a way, other characters in *Super Mario Sunshine* do help Mario.



Figure 11: Mario and Yoshi obtaining a Shine Sprite at Sirena Beach.

Activity systems work differently in *Super Mario Sunshine*, and the in-game mechanics and interaction with other characters allow this type of activity system to function in the unique environment Mario is placed.

### Cappy Is Not a Tool, But F.L.U.D.D. Is: Final Thoughts on *Super Mario Sunshine*

Many Mario fans are probably wondering why I didn't talk about Cappy in *Super Mario Odyssey*. Unlike F.L.U.D.D., Cappy is presented as a living character with the ability to transform into Mario's iconic hat, and helps Mario take over different enemies in the game. Therefore, Cappy is seen as more of an ally towards Mario, and not a tool Mario can manipulate and use in-game. Despite this, F.L.U.D.D. proves that tools can have the ability to make a change in the world. Therefore, "[tools] are more than what they mean or do for us. They are also vibrant actors, enacting effects that exceed (and sometimes are in direct conflict with) human agency and intentionality" (Barnett & Boyle 1). Thanks to F.L.U.D.D.'s functionalities as an in-game tool, Mario is able to perform different abilities that ultimately save Isle Delfino's lifestyle and source of sun energy. As I leave you with this, it is important to keep in mind how tools can have different effects in the world depending on how humans interact with them.

## Image Sources

Figure 1: Retrieved from Nintendo's website. 18 Jan. 2021, <https://www.nintendo.com/games/detail/super-mario-3d-all-stars-switch/>.

Figure 2: Screenshot taken by Edcel Cintron during *Super Mario Sunshine* gameplay. 15 Jan. 2021. Copyrights reserved by Nintendo.

Figure 3: Retrieved from Mario Wiki. 18 Jan. 2021, <https://www.mariowiki.com/FL.U.D.D.>

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Figure 8: Retrieved from Mario Wiki. 18 Jan. 2021, <https://www.mariowiki.com/FL.U.D.D.>

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