

Olive Face, Italian Voice: Constructing Super Mario as an Italian-American (1981–1996)

Marco Benoît Carbone*

Brunel University London (United Kingdom)

Submitted: November 18, 2022 – Accepted: November 24, 2022 – Published: December 22, 2022

Abstract

This study examines the development of Super Mario's Italian-American character in the United States (1981-1996) to suggest looking at vocal typecasting and aural representation as overlooked signifiers of performed ethnicity in the arts. As a technological and cultural history of Italian face and voice, the study draws on emerging conceptualisations of aural blackface to discuss the more ambivalent place of Italianicity in the transnational space of ethnically charged signifiers. Framing Mario's characterisation through the notions of olive face and olive voice, the study addresses the ambiguous place of visual and aural Italian-ness as Otherness as an in-between of whiteness and blackness. Approaching character development through voice acting by combining screen, stardom, celebrity, franchise, and digital games studies, the paper looks at the production and cultural history of two milestone video games from the Nintendo franchise, *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) and *Super Mario 64* (1996), in relation to related artwork and character-licensed products, including the *Super Mario Bros.* film (Buena Vista Pictures 1993), and the animated/mixed live action *Super Mario Bros. Super Show* (DIC/Viacom 1989). The study thus approaches diachronically, through the lens of performance and comedy, the cross-media development of Mario's olive voice through its domestication in the United States, leading to licensing processes and the establishment of Mario's Italian-American features. Considering the ambivalent historical alignment of Italianicity with white privilege in the United States and globally, the paper frames Super Mario as an ambivalently "ethnic" construction, cautiously navigating global audiences by encapsulating commonplaces of Italian-ness, Mediterranean-ness, and Latin-ness.

Keywords: Voice Acting; Italian-Americans; Video Games; Ethnicity; Blackface.

* ✉ marcobenoitcarbone@gmail.com

In 2022 Universal Pictures released a trailer for a forthcoming *Super Mario Bros.* animated comedy film based on the iconic Italian-American games character from Japanese multinational Nintendo's media franchise (Illumination 2022). The trailer sparked discussions over Mario's Italianate accent played by US actor and celebrity Chris Pratt (Alter 2022), whose adult voice sounded like a different "Italianglish" stereotype than the child-like "Mamma mia!" intonations previously provided by actor Charles Martinet for contemporary Super Mario games. Also, neither Martinet nor Pratt are Italians, which rekindled debates on whether Mario has been misrepresenting this national and ethnic group (Quora 2019b). Recent discussions revolved around exactly which ethnic stereotypes Mario embodied, including Mexican-ness, due to the character's occasional in-game representations with a sombrero hat and mentions of a *princesa* (Quora 2019a). These cases show Super Mario's shifting positioning in relation of ethnic clichés via generic signifiers of Italian-ness, Mediterranean-ness, and even Latin-ness.

With current debates over Western media's tendency to cast white actors in non-white roles (Daniels 2016), the Mario files also showcase the Japanese multinational's management of trans-media franchises and transnational markets and their approach to navigating identity politics in a climate of heightened attention towards media representation. In this paper, I analyse the initial development of Super Mario as an Italian-American character in the United States (1981-1996) and their impact on present franchise management to suggest considering vocal typecasting and aural representation as overlooked signifiers of performed ethnicity. In framing Mario's 'Italianness', I introduce the notions of "oliveface" and "olivevoice" to refer to the impersonation or performance of Italianist and Mediterraneanist physical and aural features by non-Italian and non-Mediterranean actors. Drawing on emerging conceptualisations of aural blackface –i.e., the appropriation of black representational agency by white sonic norms of privilege (Stoeberl 2016)–, I address the more ambiguous place occupied by visual and aural ethnic commonplaces of Italianness in the system of transnational signifiers of otherness as something distinct from either whiteness, blackness, or brown-ness.

I approach voice acting in games by looking at the production and cultural history of two milestones in the franchise's development, the video games *Super Mario Bros.* (NES 1985) and *Super Mario 64* (N64, 1996). I also discuss related artwork and character-licensed products, including the *Super Mario Bros.* film (Buena Vista Pictures 1993), and the animated/mixed live action *Super Mario Bros. Super Show* (DIC/Viacom 1989). This offers a chance to examine diachronically the cross-contexts and cross-media development of Mario's olivevoice, through its popular reception and licensing processes in the United States. As a technological and cultural history of Italian face and voice in sonic practices, the study discusses the ambivalent place of Italianness in the space of ethnically charged signifiers.

Voice-acting's characterisation of cultural types has been under-researched in relation to 'Italianness' and, more specifically here, of 'Italian-American-ness'. The focus on a fictional character, existing as an imperfect overlap of a multitude of texts, the writing and performances of different creatives and actors, and its embodying diverse functions in different media (from games to animation and live action) serves numerous aims. First, it suggests we reappraise voice acting as a central element of transnational and transmedia media production and consumption. The progressive transcultural developments of Super Mario and the aural identities introduced by voice actors suggests listening to characters as key access points to representational strategies. Second, voice offers ways to examine evolving relations between character writing, licensing, and franchise management and the dynamics and tensions emerging from characterisation across different media and target audiences. Third, a focus on voice allows to listen to Italian-American-ness and Italianness, in their relation with Mediterranean-ness and even Latin-ness, as ethnicized sonic categories.

Capturing Super Mario's typecasting as grounded in Japanese multinational Nintendo's drawing on Western sociocultural sonic norms, this analysis suggests that the benevolent Italianism of Super Mario's cartoonish and surreal worlds and characters calls for a simultaneously resistance to the idea that positive commonplaces are ideologically neutral and the temptation to address Italian-ness through a carbon-copy adaptation of critical blackface theory. Rather, one should consider how Italianness's ambivalent historical alignment with white privilege in the United States and globally characterises Mario's ethnicized markers, and how – also in the context of the franchise's non-realistic register and comedic tones – this may complicate different audiences' orientations towards its ideological coordinates resulting in family-oriented Nintendo's tactically ambivalent brand management.

The paper begins by overviewing approaches to character, star, celebrity, and franchise studies in relation to aural norms and by introducing Italian-American representations in Hollywood and global Italianicity representations. It then focuses on the two main case studies and related examples in historical context. First, *Super Mario Bros.*'s reception and domestication in the US through film, animation, and third-party licensed games from 1985 onwards, leading to experimentations with the character's voicing. Second, *Super Mario 64* (1996), as a recipient of a canonised speaking Mario, showcasing a comedic voice along the lines of a Disney-like, global Italianist cliché. The study then discusses Mario's *olivevoice* by drawing on aural blackface theorisation (Sammond 2015, Daniels 2016), before concluding that the parent company's openness to different interpretations of the character may showcase tactical ambivalence in navigating different audiences and demographics. Super Mario remains firmly imbedded in Italianist, Italian-American, and Mediterraneanist clichés, albeit through manifestations that are sufficiently ambiguous to allow Mario to traverse cognate stereotypical forms.

1 Characters, Types, and Stereotypes

A focus on characters may bridge over theoretical insights from critical theory, narratology, screen and actor studies, stardom and celebrity studies, games and character design, and franchise and transmedia studies. Super Mario's appearance in more than 300 official products, excluding amateur projects, fan games, homebrews, cross-media adaptations, and other media, make it a culturally influential character. One would thus be pressed to recognise the same Mario in texts spanning very diverse historical periods, genres, and media (not to mention this relations with the countless other characters from the Mario universe, including feminine figures constrained in damsel in distress tropes, and the issue of Mario's gender in relation to masculinist audiences – see Salter & Blodgett 2017). A way around the conundrum may be to consider different Mario instantiations as versions of a MARIO model or, as Terrone conceptualises (2017: 162, after Strawson 1959: 231), as “the same fictional character at the TYPE level but [as] distinct fictional individuals at the token level”.

As such, most Marios may be seen in their more or less direct or consistent relation to a codified MARIO idea, which is neither archetypal nor abstract but, rather, “construed as historical outcomes of cultural practices” (Terrone 2017: 162). This allows to see characters both in their stability and variation in a diachronic perspective. As I will discuss, Mario's development features historical beginnings (i.e., an authorial or “creationist” origin) and is bound to prescriptive representational rules, such as official company guidelines, dictating how a copyrighted intellectual property should look like and behave (Press the Button 2014). Such rules are in turn rooted in constructed social values. Characters, as “imaginary beings within real-world heterodoxies”, may be thus observed in their capacity to “populate fabricated worlds with the ideologies of their times and contexts, containing and reconciling sociocultural values, including ones about ethnicity, gender, and class” (Riis and Taylor 2019:6).

Inter-token consistency among the various Marios is challenged by the often medium-specific roles and functions they serve. Insights on such functions have come from narratology and theatre, film, and screen studies. Characters' substance, whether via representational fictiveness or live actors, points to the capacity of these entities to sometimes be recognizable “as a representation of a certain category of people” as required by creatives. The fact that Mario has been incarnated in pixels, by real actors, or as drawn by animator, thus straddling the lines between media and representational and performative forms and functions, makes it of interest to diverse areas of scholarship, including star studies' exploration of both the convergence processes and tensions between franchised intellectual properties and stardom.

As the most prominent star of a major media franchise, Mario shows relations between stardom value and character branding, with characters and actors partaking in the creation of attraction value. The actor-signifier and the character-signifier—both of which serving “to differentiate products in the marketplace” (McDonald 2012: 62)—may persist across franchises, showing the increasing intertwining of star image and intellectual property. Indeed, Mario is arguably a “star” in the complex sense explored by star studies (Qiong Yu/Austin 2018), that is, as a character that may express a specific persona and also rely on charisma of voice actors. These both draw fame from the character and contribute to its success. Actors like Charles Martinet, as I will argue, bring talent and economic value to Super Mario's performances, while also engaging in an exchange of fame and cultural capital with it.

This is of crucial importance for companies' relations with fandom and audience's reception of transmedia brand management, where opportunities and tensions arise between the presentation of actors and fictional characters (Riis and Taylor 2019: 6), often oriented by notions of cultural and psychological "reliability" (Franssen 2020: 493) that take place across transnational contexts of circulations and therefore diverse, circumstantial social realities, national histories, and the expectations of different audience segments. In my discussion of Mario, character voicing and actor's performances and identities will emerge as key framings of the character's embodiment of national or ethnic types.

Mario is primarily a game character. While I am not aligning with the medium-fetishizing trope that games hold a unique capacity for players to identify with characters (which mostly serves to demonstrate scholars' inclinations to legitimise their favoured objects and methods), I maintain that the medium's interactivity provides specific affordances through characters as game pieces with ludic and cultural properties. As Sloan notes (2015), Super Mario's appeal can be explained by its design quality, such as its leaping mechanics, which gained the character its earliest moniker as "Jumpman". Sonic qualities, which I investigate, should also be approached as cognate to functional and visual design. Overall, as I will discuss, the Mario of games is a happy-go-lucky, good-willed character, associable with playfulness, innocence, and "goodness" (Sloan 2015), while the Mario of films and animation may present different cultural types based on Brooklynese Italian clichés.

This may suggest looking at Mario's Italianate ethnicity both in relation to psychological realism or "by the standards of everyday behaviour and psychology" and through the functions of the medium. On the one hand, characters are ultimately "not people" (Thompson 1988: 40). From this perspective, it is tempting to see Mario as an inoffensive stock character, made to elicit laughter, embody silly traits, and generate situations that remind of screwball or slapstick comedy. This is relevant because an argument may be made that since Mario's ethnicity (e.g., through utterances like *Mamma mia*) is ultimately as unrealistic as the character's obviously imaginary features (which allow it, for examples, to funnily emerge as unscathed from high falls, or after being comically pressed into a flat shape by a heavy boulder), then its clichés should be considered thoroughly inoffensive.

Yet, characters may work indeed as ethnic stereotypes, originating from "typificatory schemes in terms of which others are apprehended" and in relation with other sites of expectations such as genres, auteurs, or ideological contexts (Bacon 2019: 79). Stereotypes may be seen as categorical simplifications, "proclaiming prototypicality" (Bacon 2019: 81) and limiting one's ability to understand other people. Such "ostensive signs" (Riis and Taylor 2019: 1) of reified patterns of ethnic and national belonging may be expressed via aspects including physiognomy, behaviour, gender, and social status, working through personification (Florack 2010). Such types may be perceived as expressively "economical", i.e., reminding of a certain identity "in a catchphrase-like manner", but end up creating "ascriptions of collective entities" that come to define "entire groups of people" (Florack 2010: 479).

In other words, neither media functions nor "comedy's universalizing power" may legitimise overlooking "the multitude of specific cultural, economic, and political contexts within which that power operates" (Marx and Sienkiewick 2020: 171). Consistently, the performances of actors may be instrumental to convey that power due to their central importance in the gaming experience and as primary signifiers "of personality and identity" (Southwick 2022: 33-38). As I am going to discuss in the case of Mario's ascription of an American-Italian identity, voice has been one of the primary means to its ethnicization and can be approached to interrogate its cultural value and relations with power.

Stereotypes work in different contexts and relations of power. Since debates on Mario's ethnicity have revolved around his putative non-adherence to Whiteness in the US, critical black theory can be fruitfully employed to frame the issue of Mario's alignments with "race". In the case of Black people's experience, racialisation draws on stereotypes connected to submission and exploitation, hierarchy and social inequality (Marx and Sienkiewick 2020: 38) whose effects are observable and tangible in the present, including damaging character representations. In the case of Italian-American stereotypes, which one may identify in characters like Super Mario, Italians' global positioning in race ideologies becomes far less obvious as this group transitioned in the US from being categorised as racialised migrants to partaking of acquired white privilege. Humour about and through Italian-Americans characters, as a consequence, has a different relation with relations of inequality. It has also progressively focused on positive stereotypes (warmth, family values, food lovers) and

expounded negative ones like their associations with mafia, or even appropriated the latter in self-glamourised forms (on Italian-Americans, their language and stereotypes, and their social effects see Pagliai 2005, Lotardo 2010, Sindoni 2014, Tricarico 2014).

Within this context, voice acting has been the object of important theorisation (Chion 1999) but has received fewer examinations in relation to ethnicity, particularly in games (Miletic 2020). Voice “subject to exaggeration” has worked as a key vehicle of comicity and ethnic typecasting (Florack 2010: 498). Stereotypes in comedy “help to establish instantly recognizable” types (Marx and Sienkiewick 2020: 21). These, as with Mario’s shrill Italianate interjections, may be seen as eliciting sympathy and intercultural affect. Yet, laughter may also “draw a line” between who is laughing and who is being laughed at. Laughing may serve to Other individuals and groups; conventions, registers, and genres like those of comedy have often allowed viewers to draw pleasure from stereotypes” in a way that “dispensed them from critical and interrogative engagement” (Marx and Sienkiewick 2020: 253).

Important theorisation on these issues has been developed through the critique of the racist tradition of black-face in minstrelsy and the by now frowned-upon broader tendency of White voice actors to be cast as black characters in the entertainment industries (Sammond 2015). In the field of games, aural blackface, or the “casting of black characters with white voice actors” (Shawn A. Allen, quoted in Narcisse 2015), endures today even as visual blackface has been deemed unacceptable by present standards (Miletic 2020). This may be due to the fact that racialized mis-categorizations have traditionally been seen as defined by “physical features that are by nature immutable over the course of an individual’s life”, such as “skin color, eye shape, facial features and bone structure”; contrarily, speech has been ascribed to the cultural category of ethnicity, as speech “may be trained” to reproduce language systems (Chia-yi Pao 2004: 360). While minstrelsy blackface has been ultimately categorized as racist, accents have been deemed as something that may be “learned”. This worked to legitimize claims that an actor may “become” a “real” type rather than just a stereotype. White actors could then get away with the idea that speech as an indicator of cultural identity can rightfully be acted (see Miletic 2020:38). As I will discuss, these reflections can be taken as a point of departure to understand how Mario’s olivevoice is still arguably situated within a White imaginary of ethnicity. However, this issue can only be approached after framing the character’s development within the broader construction of Italian-Americans as an ethnic group in the United States.

2 Italian-American Voice in the Media

Mario’s olivevoice and oliveface represent a relevant case study to approach the issue of the ventriloquising of Italianicity as a cultural and ethnic construct. Italian-Americans have traditionally been stereotyped as “non-white” in the US popular media and culture before their incorporation in the order of ‘white’ America “through social integration and intermarriage” (Marx and Sienkiewick 2020: 53). This experience of migration and integration has produced an ambiguous alignment with racial constructs, as well as various ethnic tropes. Traditionally, these framed Italians as criminals (Peticca 2019) or blue-collar workers (Chiaro 2010: 66). On the one hand, the myth of the *mafioso* had become part of the popular culture “to the chagrin of most Italians and Italian Americans” (Girardelli 2004), particularly when an “ethnic revival” of Hollywood meant even Italian-American film-makers began to glamourise mafia narratives. Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972), from Mario Puzo’s novel (1969), epitomised the wave of (often New-York based) mythologies based on violence and sex and often frowned upon by Italian Americans as damaging self-portraits (Cortés 1993).

On the other hand, Italian migrants could be portrayed as hard-working and law-abiding, sometimes playing the role of anti-heroes or working-class underdogs. Rocky Balboa – inspired by real-life boxer Rocky Marciano – epitomised a blend of vigour and pleasantness. Broadly speaking, Italians could be portrayed as exuberant, rugged and physical, whether as world boxing champions or as sadistic criminals (Cortés 1993). In yet another form, Italian characters could be funnily calamitous, inappropriately over-loquacious, or amount to helpless slobs obsessed with food (Cortés 1993). All of these representations will variously influence Super Mario’s portrayals in diverse media as an exuberant, lively plumber from Brooklyn.

Language and accents are part of the very fabric of the construction of Italian-American identities. Media orientated and perpetuated Italian-American spoken variants since the post-Unitary Italian diaspora to the

States (Haller 1987, Pagliai 2005). Drawing on Blunt (1967), and focusing on some of their clichéd and parodistic forms, Bouchl (2015) organises them in two main varieties. The first is the Wiseguy English, the voice of many Italian-American characters from films like *The Godfather* or *Once Upon a Time in America* (Warner Bros, USA, 1983), with their emblematic role in consolidating popular ideas of accented flat-capped Sicilians and mobsters on the large screen (Cortés 1993) in their genres and in others, including slapstick comedy. For Bouchl (2015), Wiseguy English is a second-generation kind of US accent, belonging to long-time dwellers belonging to Italian-American culture. Bouchl's Wiseguy English is similar to Brooklynese, spoken prevalently in Brooklyn and other areas of New York and New Jersey, all characterised by a strong Italian presence (as well as of Irish and Yiddish elements). This, as I will discuss, is where the real-world mythology of the Super Mario universe will be set; it is also Mario's accent in early experimentation in US-produced third-party games and film adaptation, including the 2022 Universal Pictures trailer.

Bouchl (2015) then discusses what they aptly define as the “Super Mario English”, “an exaggerated Italian accent” suitable to describe what “the majority of the Hollywood audience” would expect as the aural expression of an incompetent or recent speaker of English. This variety is characterised by distinct stress patterns, inflections and tone rises compared to the Wiseguy English, including a “lack of rhoticity” that is “more like Italian, as r-colouring is only used in countries where English is the native tongue” (Bouchl 2015: 21). Both variants exhibit the results of phonetic attrition between English and Italian. These include the persistence of syllable-timing and “what is, perhaps, the most important” distinguishing characteristic” of Italian theatrical speeches, i.e., the distinctive schwa-sounding syllable resulting from Italians compensating “for the lack of vowel-sound word-endings” by inserting an aspirate *uh* between words ending-and-*uh*-beginning with consonants (Bouchl 2014: 13).

Such variants may be articulated to signal characters from different geographical provenances and genealogical features, based on such varieties of linguistic shifts. As Bouchl notes (2015: 39), the *Godfather* and *Donnie Brasco* include characters that may be “obviously second generation” or whose speech reveal “features from first generation Italians”. Sometimes a character may sound “fairly obvious as not Italian”, such as in Nicolas Cage's rendition in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (Studio Canal, France/UK/USA, 2001), amounting to a mock-up that is “basically English, with a few hints of” Italianisms”, like rhoticity and the enunciation of labial plosives. This is, in other words, a more stereotypical distillation of varieties originating in the social stereotyping of Italians and Mediterranean folk post-diaspora, then codified as a sub-set of Italian or Italian-American identity through the role of mass media.

All of these varieties, as I will discuss, identify different Mario tokens with shifting degrees of association with spoken ethnic commonplaces stemming from an Anglo-Saxon or globally clichéd perspective. In most of Mario's US-produced media the character sounds like a Wiseguy or a working-class stereotype of a New Yorker, while in most light-hearted gaming media mainly designed in Japan for the global market he chimes like a funnily incompetent “one-liner-flinging machine” (Grönroos 2013: 57) of some kind of “Italianglish”. This entails consequences for the character's framing within the specific functions, registers, and ideologies expressed through aural positioning in different media. In relation to these, key aspects to consider are audience projections as well as the fact that Mario mostly embodies “good” Italian stereotypes expressed in funny situations.

This comical or comedic use of ethnic stereotypes does not subtract them from criticism, as humour can indeed work by trivialising and perpetuating serious processes of stereotyping as innocuous jokes (Morreall 2009). This may, as I will finally discuss, complicate reception. As Raskins summarises (1984), one could see humour as emerging to express “superiority” (laughing at the misfortunes states of others, realising we are exempt from them), relief (through a release of nervous energy), or incongruity (laughing at the violation of our normal mental patterns and expectations). Whether by means of narrative, graphic design, or game mechanics, different Mario media, along with their different projected demographics and circumstances of reception, could mean audiences laugh *with* the mishaps of family games Mario or *at* its crass clichés in a live-action series. As I am now going to elaborate, Mario's development through comedic tones is still largely underpinned by a selectively “positive” set of Italianate clichés or a broader sense of “warm” Otherness.

3 From Kyoto to Brooklyn

In 1985, *Super Mario Bros.* hit Japanese stores. The platform game, developed by a Japanese company with an eye on the US and global video games market, had players navigate a jumping character on a side-scrolling environment on their TV home. In the game, plumber Mario set out to save Princess Peach from the clutches of evil Koopa as his minions invaded the imaginary Mushroom Kingdom. *SMB* would then be distributed in the US and globally, growing to become a multi-million copies success. As such, *SMB* provides the focal point for Mario's development as Italian, particularly through localisation in the US, where Italian-Americans represented a large part of the ethnic landscape. Here, the vague Italianate identity of Super Mario elicited an appetite for cultural domestication through localisation, licensing, and merchandising, and its official christening as a Brooklynese. The process culminated in the character's acquisition of its spoken voice in media other than games, at a time when the medium did not incorporate speech as a standard technical feature.

SMB's story begins a few years before, when Japanese designer Shigeru Miyamoto developed *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981), a platform game featuring Jumpman, a carpenter in overalls, intent on rescuing a woman taken hostage by an ape. Later, in *Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1983), Jumpman becomes a plumber and takes on the name of Mario. The character's ethnic clichés, including brown hair, a prominent nose, and a thick and dark moustache were consistent with Japanese Occidental essentialising gazes, which framed Italians as a non-antagonistic cultural force and as boorish but good-hearted and traditionalist Others in the post-war (Miyake 2010: 5-7). Apart from *Donkey Kong Jr* (Nintendo 1982), which sees Mario as a retaliating evil plumber kidnapping Donkey Kong's son as payback, the character is good-spirited, probably drawing on "comic benevolence towards Italians" due to their perceived "militaristic under-achievement" in modern times (Chiaro 2010: 67). Stylistically, influential Italianist character in Japanese media included Isaho Takahata's *Marco (3,000 Leagues in Search of Mother)*, Nippon, 1977), or the ones from *Remi* (Osamu Dezaki, TMS, 1978).

Yet, as Mario draws equally from *Popeye* the comic and the *King Kong* film, one could argue such Italianisms might have come from Italian or US media like *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (Lux Film, Italy, 1957) and the *Godfather* (Paramount Pictures, USA, 1972). In a later *Mario Bros. "Game-and-Watch"* LCD game (Nintendo 1982), Mario and Luigi were characterised as bottling plant workers, catering to an imaginary of working-class underdogs that aligned them with the clichés of most "good" Italian-Americans in the media as weirdly funny and picturesque (Miyake 2013). In Miyamoto's account, the limited graphical resolution (16x12 pixel for a character) inspired the use of overalls, a hat, a big nose, and a moustache as expedients for the silhouette to stand out expressively (Nintendo 2017). Miyamoto also claims inspiration by his meeting with Mario Segale (1934-2018), an Italian-American entrepreneur who had leased a warehouse to Nintendo (D'Anastasio 2019). According to the story, the designer was in a storehouse of coin-operated machines in the US for a company meeting when Segale burst in and, in his thick Italian-American accent, berated company representatives for outstanding rent payments.

Italian accents therefore partake of the mythology of Miyamoto's serendipitous inspiration as much as elements such as pipes and sewers set in the subterranean, labyrinthine networks of New York; Miyamoto's choices were arguably influenced not just by this encounter, but also by the fact that Nintendo of America's operations began in an office in Manhattan, New York, where the company was said to hire gamer youths to receive and service their Japanese hardware for the public in filthy warehouses in New Jersey (Sheff 1999). Miyamoto's explanation about restraints turned into creative opportunities shows therefore how technology represented "a chance for the technical construction of exoticism". Mario's exotic Otherness might have responded to the need for characters to "draw the eye and prompt our imagination" (Riis and Taylor 2019: 1) — as much as entice our ears, as the Segale anecdote seems to demonstrate. Spoken Italian-ness as experienced in New York may have well played a part in inspiring Miyamoto's vision of a feisty, energetic Italian character.

Super Mario Bros (1985), as Miyamoto's next game, would mark an even more ambitious attempt by Nintendo to move into the profitable consumer base of the US, which would play an important role in the making of the company's fortunes and ensuing global market expansion. *SMB* was innovative and technically pioneering and reinjected the US home market with vitality in the wake of its recent "crash" (Donovan, 2010). The US also represented a context where Super Mario's Italian-ness would be domesticated and amplified. Mario's deflagrating popularity in American culture transcended the success of the games, as the character became a

merchandising and licencing money-maker. Super Mario would go on to be featured in animated series and a live action film, as well as in countless pieces of merchandise items, from apparel, plush, stickers, and toys to pasta and other food items.

These operations were accompanied by a further amplification of its Italianate features as American localisation teams, third parties, and marketers framed the character within the well-established tropes of US Italianity. This process began with the localisation of the *Super Mario Bros* game for the US market, which set the game box and artwork apart from the original Japanese counterparts. Nintendo removed the manga-looking artwork from the booklet in the US version of the game, emphasising the stylish sleekness of in-game sprites, and framing the branding along the lines of the pixel aesthetics of former US games giant Atari. Mario's antagonistic mushrooms, called *kabuki* in the Japanese game, became *goombas* in the American manual. A moniker derived from *gumbà* or *cumpà*, a corruption of Italian regional forms *compari* or *cumpari*, this Italian-American slang word related to Italian-American family culture and, by extension and ironically, to mobster jargon in media cultures.

At this time, Mario was still a voiceless character. The initial breakthrough in his aural make-up came via the *Super Mario Bros. Super Show* (DIC/Viacom 1989), a comedic animation-meets-live action series loosely inspired by the Mario games. Here, spectators are introduced to the idea that Mario and Luigi ended up in their flat's bath tub in Brooklyn, New York. In the live scenes, Mario was played by Italian-American wrestler Lou Albano and characterised as proud and bustling Italian-American with a prominent accent, bombastic expressions, and an obsession with Italian food. The show's "hey, Paisanos" line, proclaimed by the animated Mario face that opened this licensed cash-in, may be regarded as Super Mario's earliest spoken utterance.

In the show, funny and good-spirited Mario and Luigi look and sound like a tongue-in-cheek, glorified version of offensive ethnic jokes about Italians as "dirty, greasy imbeciles with an obsession for spaghetti" (Chiaro 2010: 66). Mario proclaims that "we can fix anything if spaghetti is involved", longs for "ravioli, macaroni, tortellini, linguini, and garlic ice cream", and yells "leaping lasagnas!" in its Brooklynese "Wiseguy" accent. Italianist speech and related food identitarianism thus represented an obvious chance for a luridly parodistic adaptation of the character in the US, where ethnic jokes could be considered "as American as apple pie" (Espey 1995). In the show, one can even find references to mafioso imaginaries that have otherwise been anathema in the main gaming brands, as a piece of *artwork* for the *Showdown in Brooklyn* episodes, which illustrates a turf war between Mario, his antagonist Bowser, and their respective clans as posing like rival mobsters; this shows that references to "Italian hoodlums" could be acceptable in the media as long as perceived as imaginative and comedic.

Mario would continue to speak through real-life actors in the *Super Mario Bros* live action feature film (Buena Vista, USA, 1993). The initial casting set out to hire actors associable with Italian-American backgrounds, including Dustin Hoffman, Danny de Vito, and James Belushi, thus matching their star and celebrity value with that of an Italian-American imaginary character. The role was ultimately taken up by Bob Hoskins (who later regretted the experience), who sported a matching *physique du role* and played a Brooklynese accent for the task; while Colombian-born American actor John Leguizamo starred as Luigi. The film also characterises the Brothers as working-class, ethnic underdogs, fighting off the live-action version of evil Bowser as a reptilian, Aryan-like dictator with social Darwinist values.

Across these parodistic Italianglish variants, voice amounted to a fundamental channel for humour within a dominant English-speaking culture where Italian stereotypes serve various comedic and comical aims. A popular series like *Seinfeld* (NBC, USA, 1989-1998), featuring New Jerseyan, Italian-named character Frank Costanza and his travel to Italy to find his purported ancestor, show both the centrality of Italian-American ethnic repertoires in the US at the time and the US-centred yet globally widespread influence of media like the sit-com. Such humour forms belonged to a common tradition of laughter, but could be perceived as crass, as underscored by a film journalist who quipped that there wasn't "much to say" about "a movie based on a videogame built around a character that is essentially a warped Japanese impression of an Italian-American ethnic stereotype" (Salem 1993).

Overall, the merchandising and licensing craze that ensued the popularity of *Super Mario Bros.* in the United

States fed on an existing narrative of Italian difference that worked as the fly-wheel of Mario's cultural consecration as a Brooklynese character. It took place through elements of the industry and third parties that were tangential to the main games developed in Japan, like *Super Mario Bros 3* (Nintendo, Japan 1990) and *Super Mario World* (Nintendo, Japan 1991), which sported a Japanese-looking or hybrid manga/US aesthetic. There, Mario's Italianness remained fundamentally unexplored. In contrast, the character's "apocryphal" christening as a born-and-bred Brooklynese of licenses and merchandise was explored by licensed adaptation.

Mario's Italianisation would finally become canonical: it was incorporated in a 1993 official Nintendo character development sheet (Press the Buttons 2014), which presented him as a Brooklynese. This idea would also seep down to edutainment game *Mario Teaches Typing* (The Software Toolworks, USA 1993), an adaptation of the series *Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing* (TST, USA, 1987-present), where players typed in words and sentences as they appeared on the screen, accompanied by a few voice lines by Super Mario. Here, a different kind of speech is introduced compared to the Wiseguy, Brooklynese voice of previous film and animation acting. Mario's "Congratulations" and "Welcome", performed in the first release by Ronald B. Ruben, and in a following CD-based version by Charles Martinet, inaugurated a different, inept kind of Italianate English, which would then become central to the development of the main gaming franchise's canonised speech through *Super Mario 64*.

4 It's-a-me, Mario!

A second phase in the development of the Italian plumber's aural identity can be centred around *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1996). In *SM64*, the player could control for the first time a three-dimensional Mario in a fully 3D, real-time environment. Like other Nintendo milestones, *SM64* is one of the most impactful products in the history of the medium from the standpoint of joint interface, environment, and character design. The role of voice plays an important role in its character appeal. Upon firing up the game, players are immediately greeted by a jingle and shrill voice that shouts "it's-a me, Mario!", introducing the character's new full-screen modelled 3D face via an exuberant and Italianate entrance in the emerging paradigm of voiced characters. Unlike previously discussed licensed games, this was an in-house Nintendo gaming product expected to perform as a "killer application", i.e., a product that was supposed to be able to drive sales of gaming hardware units by means of innovation and wow factor.

The voice that accompanied the attempt was a child-like and joyful performance by Charles Martinet, who delivered a far cry from previous experimentations with adult Brooklynese accents. It was developed against the backdrop of technological, commercial, and medium-specific developments in voice acting in games, becoming since a canonical feature of main Mario game products. A step back is necessary to make sense of such developments. First, technological advances allowed designers to incorporate more extensive analogic audio tracks in games. Before the mid-Nineties, voice acting represented an exception. While experimentations hailed back to the inception of the medium, the poor quality or cost of synthesising modules and the large data required for recorded voice made speech unviable on most mainstream supports. This changed with the rise of more powerful hardware, larger storage supports like the CD-ROM, and better data compression on supports like cartridges.

A second background element can be identified in previous experimentations with Super Mario voices. Mario's exuberantly toned, infant-like register has already been introduced in the CD version of *Mario Teaches Typing*, where Martinet took on the duty of voicing the character's first 3D-animated talking face on screen. It then featured in a game that Wesley/Barczak (2010) saw as part of a "flood of ill-conceived *Mario* spin-offs", *Mario's Game Gallery* (Presage Software, USA 1995), a collection of traditional games including backgammon and checkers. In the game, a profusely talkative Mario introduces and comments each game and play round with an Italianate talk heavily interspersed with inter-consonant *uh*-syllable. It was finally featured in *Mario Teaches Typing 2* (TST, USA 1996), which further developed a more mellow-sounding, baby-voice register.

In all of these games, American actor Charles Martinet infused the character with a boyish, high-pitched, playful and joyful (if sometimes petulant) mannerism compared to previous game spin-offs and media adaptations. *SM64* and *Typing 2* were developed at roughly the same time; both feature a large, full-screen talking

head uttering the new and iconic *It's-a me, Mario* clip. However, *SM64* is the game that truly canonised Martinet's voice as Super Mario's. In this 3D action game, character voice exalts visual, kinetic, and interactive processes. Mario's grunts and squeals while jumping across are part and parcel of the gaming experience. The now quintessential *mamma mia!*, exclaimed when Mario is kicked out of one of the playable stages, falls somewhere between an invective and self-comforting release, providing an otherwise silent character with a measured amount of loquacity and unique Italianate flavour. Mario's voice exalts players' sense of closeness with Mario as the character gets back on its feet and fixes its hat after re-emerging from a deep fall in a pit.

In these games, Martinet's voice encapsulates the tenets of the aptly-named "Super Mario English" (Bouchl, 2015: 21), which one can also see as a cartoonish characterisation of broadly "Latin" (Coronado/Kight 2018) or "Mediterranean" (Herzfeld 1987) character. This voice finds its distinctive elements in what sounds –from an Anglo-centric perspective– like a hypertrophic assemblage of specific elements: the incidence of the dental vibrant *r*, the predominance of a syllabled rhyming, and the systematic intrusion of the *-uh* inter-consonant sound (Bouchl 2015). Super Mario's sparse recitations –mostly a series of one-liners and interjections that accompany his gaming antics– are minimalistic, but they still provided the character with a comical awkwardness and a *non-so-che*, an unspecified quality that made it as generic as memorable. His voice is not eloquent, and his English is caricatured and incorrect. Such traits are meant to elicit sympathy and a benevolent and well-meaning exoticism. Mario is captivating as is familiarly reassuring. Its voice matches the shapes, colours, and a silhouette of a rounded body, easy to associate with play and innocence. Its large, reassuring eyes in a neotenic face are, likewise, meant to inspire trust and serenity and allow children and adults alike to step into a dimension of playful carelessness (Carbone 2020).

SM64 also reintroduces a humorous glorification of Mario's longing for Italian food. When left idle for some time, Mario dozes off. After snoring loudly for a few minutes, he talks in his sleep: "*ah, spaghetti! Ah, ravioli!*". This reference to pasta incorporates with more subtlety the crass Italianate images of some of Mario's US licensed media. It matched the obvious centrality occupied by pasta in "America's mainstream appetite" and collective imagination and Italian food's newly-acquired, post-ethnic, post-stigmata, and now "high" and glamour status in the 1990s in the US (as well as its success in Japan – Miyake 2013, 2010b: 12), which may have exerted an influence on Mario designers (Carbone 2020, 2023). In fact, pasta references did not feature in the early Japanese release of *SM64*; they can be heard first in its US version that followed after a few weeks, then incorporated in Japanese re-issue *Shindou SM64* (1997) (Carbone 2023). While the delayed incorporation was probably due to pressing development deadlines at launch time, meaning the game was further refined and debugged between these releases (Carbone 2020), producer Shigeru Miyamoto did work closely with Nintendo's localisation and marketing team in the US. This suggests that the latter played as decisive influence on the character writing (Nintendo of America's localisation manager, Leslie Swan, played the voice parts of Princess Peach in the game).

The story of how Martinet became Mario's voice is often presented in anecdotic and semi-mythical form. In Martinet's account, the actor took part by chance to a Nintendo audition and improvised "an Italian character targeted at children" without knowing anything about games; he then improvised the joyful, high-pitched voice (especially in the Japanese version; in the US *SM64*, Mario's voice is a tone lower) now associated with Super Mario after an initial half-baked attempt to characterised him as an adult Brooklynese; Martinet claims that this happened as he realised that a more child-like interpretation would be better suited to bring peace and relaxation to audiences (Great Big Story 2017). This is a mythologised story that Martinet has been promoting as part of the actor's ensuing star persona: indeed, while infusing Mario with an unmistakable character, Martinet drew and capitalised on Mario's star power, becoming himself a gaming celebrity.

Yet, it is important to set this narrative of serendipitously historic breakthrough against the professional and sociocultural background that underpinned Martinet's performance. While we cannot dismiss the role of creatives and performers in infusing characters with life, that is, to consider "artifactualist, or creationist, accounts of fictional entities" (Terrone 2017: 162), Mario's voice drew on an established cultural staging of Italian-Americans identities in US performance professions. In voicing Mario, Martinet almost certainly drew on his cognisance of Italianate voice caricature in the tradition of US media, as an actor boasting a portfolio of over a hundred voice acting jobs and a dozen film features. Most likely, the actor tapped on well-establish ways film (and media in general) perpetuated linguistic tropes of Italian Englishes that may be said to elicit immediate

recognisability among audiences (Marx and Sienkiewicz 2020: 245). With Shigeru Miyamoto in charge of the project's development for the publisher, one may realistically conceive that creatives were intent on "matching the voice so that it fits the world" (Southwick 2022:36)—a world defined by outlandish worlds, whimsical boyishness, and an adorable Italian caricature.

5 Oliveface and Olivevoice

Martinet's Mario can be taken as a case study to discuss visual and aural oliveface, by which I mean the tendency to impersonate Italianist and Mediterraneanist features by non-Italian and non-Mediterranean actors. This captures a set of aural features that are specific to Italianate stereotypes, while relating it to an idea of an olive skin complexion which serves to situate Italianicity in relation to broader and relatable Mediterraneanist commonplaces. This colourist acceptation marks a distinction from whiteness, while bringing oliveness closer to brown-ness and blackness as part of a non-white continuum and therefore qualifying it as a performative type-set akin to those deployed through blackface and brownface. The ensuing issue is therefore the positioning of "Super Mario English" within the area of aural blackface criticism, pointing to the tendency of white actors to impersonate non-white characters, particularly by understanding voice as a learned and reproducible cultural attribute. Employing blackface critical theory to Italian-ness entails opportunities and limitations, largely due to Italians' ambiguous positioning in relation to racialization.

The fact that Martinet's voice firmly resides within a White imaginary of exotic Italianicity allows to sensibly frame it through blackface critical theory in the first place. This voice can be conceived of as a Japanese-mediated import of a Mediterraneanist (Herzfeld 1987) cliché, produced within white- and Anglo-centric theatrical commonplacings and framed via the "American Ethnocentrism" of video game voice acting (Brice 2011), which assumes the default English accent as General American (Miletic 2020). Its formulation can be understood as the result of conscious and unconscious culturally codified voice features, in turn identifying broader commonplaces of Italianicity, such as temperament and an obsession for food.

The case of the *-uh* vowel in the end of the syllable of Super Mario English can be taken as a signifier for such mythologies and as case in point. As most Italian lexicon ends with vowels, actors have been traditionally taught in US manuals, from Machlin (1975) to Herman and Herman (1997), to obtain an Italian impression by emphasising how natives would tend to add such a sound between words connected by consonants. As Lippi-Green (2011: 108) notes, such manuals tended in the past to be "chock full of stereotypes". Yet, even while Herman and Herman's recent editions (1997) stripped off problematic passages about volatile, hot-blooded, and temperamental Italians of previous versions, such texts retain sections titled "The Aspirate 'UH'", inclusive of suggestions that audiences have come to expect an Italian dialect to be heard as sounding like "wAWtsAH mAHrAH wEEtAH dAHtAH mAHnAH?" (What's the matter with that man?) (Herman and Herman 1997: 173).

Regardless of their presence in a given manual, such formulas belong to a much broader cultural milieu. While I am not suggesting that Martinet was necessarily trained with or reproducing the procedures from these manuals, one could reasonably guess that they willingly or unconsciously opted for a culturally brought up understanding of a funnily Italian and Mediterranean character. Nintendo might have entrusted the actor to do for Mario what Brando did for the *Godfather* (Kinney 2017), even though the performance reminds more of Nicholas Cage's Italianglish in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (see Bouchl 2015). Martinet's Mario works through theatrical clichés and typified "language carryovers" (Chia-yi Pao 2004: 359) intended as "economically" and funnily characterising types (Lippi-Green 1997).

Even though traditional actors' manuals might have been motivated by a misplaced but "good-willed" attempt to reproduce authenticity, this idea has been recently challenged as untenable—an appraisal of their potentially undesirable outcomes, including their associations with expressive laziness, has superseded indulgence. But it does not detract from imagining that Miyamoto may have conceivably asked the recruiting team or actors to "play the Italian", similarly to the reports of actors being asked by White game directors to "read black" (Miletic 2020: 38). Voice also signifies a broader set of clichés. Mario does sound like "the stereotypes that White people generally believe in and love to see/hear" in movies (Miletic 2020: 48), that is, "spaghetti and meatballs" and "loud, always fighting" people (Pagliai 2005). In *SM64*, Mario literally dreams of spaghetti,

loudly screams *mamma mia*, and punches off enemies like a weird mix of Alberto Sordi, Totò, and Rocky Marciano.

The question remains however as to whether such Italianate comedic features may be approached in the same way as the denigratory reduction to “caricatured appendices” that has been bore upon black people through minstrel shows (Miletic 2020: 128). This seems to beg a negative answer. In one way, Italian-ness could be seen as ambivalently aligned with whiteness and blackness in a way that historically aligns it with the latter. Italian-ness is undoubtedly far from residing in a post-racial space and, rather, may still carry the legacy of the racialized spaghetti-eater from the South, of the brutish and boorish oliveskins that rubbed elbows with Blacks in the ghettos of American cities.

Yet, Italians’ alignment with white privilege in the US and globally offsets the idea of approaching the perpetuation of cartoonish Italianate clichés in the way black stereotypes can be framed. A few naïve attempts by bloggers to copy-and-paste critical race and blackface theorization to suggest that Super Mario does a disservice to Italians may do a disservice to black and brown people. Mario’s olive face or voice are not immediately offensive, contrarily to blackface. Italian-Americans are not suffering comparable misrepresentation and under-representation (both political and in the industries), and as voice actors they are arguably entertaining a different, complex relation of power with Anglo-Saxon sonic norms. Culturally and racially, the more ambiguous and more favourable positioning of Italian-Americans in the US and global hierarchies of power suggests an inadequate direct criticism of white/black binarism with Italians positioned in the second category.

Yet, Super Mario’s aural oliveface might still be consistent with aural blackface at a processual level. The character’s features belong to a system of “global stereotypes and metonymies mainly created by the Western world” (Dore 2020: 1, discussing Di Giovanni 2003), where White norms and actors take on Othered linguistic entities. Mario’s case resembles the way other multinationals like Disney have been traditionally assigning linguistic variation in their products to facilitate the construction of ‘exotic’ stereotypes. Super Mario’s olivevoice is consistent with Lippi-Green’s study of patterns of settings and characters (2011), which demonstrated how ethnic stereotypes and cultural appropriations may work also via multinationals and dominant industries’ use of Standard English (usually American), in contrast to a system of differential others where characters speak with a foreign accent.

This reminds the audience of the setting and create an “exotic feeling”, via intentional deviations from “standard speech” (Chia-yi Pao 2004: 355). In the case of Super Mario, stereotyping processes have been selectively focusing on positive characteristics of Italianness. This may have an effect on how these stereotypes are perceived and employed. Mario’s “accent of an accent” may amount to “the very definition of a stereotype” (Chia-yi Pao 2004: 360, discussing William Labov), but simultaneously be taken by some as a light-hearted representation of ultimately desirable features of “good” Italianicity. Undesirable clichés, like mafia, violence, sexism, superstition, familism, and parochialism have been expounded from Mario’s canon, leaving at best generic references to their positive equivalents, such as loyalty, passion, strength, traditionalism, good faith, love for the family, and group pride—elements expressed through Super Mario’s embodiment of a high-pitched, good-willed, trustworthy, and friendly hero of family-oriented video games.

Conclusions

This paper has shown the development of Super Mario’s character through its aural characteristics, an under-researched and yet key dimension for the study of cultural types. It has also shown Mario’s Italian-American identity as emerging from a combination of technical developments and transnational cultural exchanges, particularly via Super Mario’s domestication in the US, which was central for the character’s alignment with ideas of Italianicity and Mediterranean-ness. This process took form initially through inter-media adaptations, that is, via often uncoordinated attempts by different agents to transpose the vaguely Italianate character from *Super Mario Bros.* to film and animation and other gaming genres. Yet, spin-offs and licensed products resulted in a gradual experimentation and later incorporation of Mario’s Italian-ness into an official character design sheet and finally into in-house, powerhouse killer application *Super Mario 64*. By historicising Mario’s ethnicity as the result of colour-blind casting, processually akin to aural blackface, the study also introduced the notion of an oliveface and olivevoice character and suggested that Italianicity entertains an ambiguous

relation with ideas of blackness and whiteness, characterised by a closer if complex and ambiguous alignment with white privilege.

In introducing oliveface and olivevoice as aural features specific to Italianate stereotypes but related to broader Mediterraneanist commonplaces, I suggested oliveness as close to brownness and blackness in a non-white continuum of performative typesets. This may allow to capture distinctions between as well as intersections of cognate national, ethnic, and colourist constructions. Oliveface and olivevoice alerts to the under-theorised commonalities and different nuances and positionalities of ethnicized features. Methodologically, it might suggest understanding olive, black, and brownface as broad containers for more granular sub-sets of stereotypes. In this paper, Super Mario's often ambivalent renditions, as variously deployed by different instantiations of the characters, have offered chances to observe an exotic Otherness that traverses a broad spectrum of clichés, including Brooklynese Italian-American, Italianicity, Mediterranean-ness, or sometimes Latin-ness. As I am now going to suggest, the management of the Mario brand seems to suggest a form of controlled stereotyping on the part of the parent company as a way to purposefully benefit from the vagueness of juggling exoticism and familiarity through the convenient surface neutrality of non-realistic characters.

This issue can be approached by considering Nintendo as a globally projected company facing potentially very different forms of reception and frames of value of ethnic types and stereotypes. For instance, the most recent flagship Mario game, *Mario Odyssey* (Nintendo, Japan 2017), seemingly entrenches its canonization as an Italian via numerous nods to its Brooklynese ascendancy by setting an entire stage in the New Donk City replica of New York, where Mario can even drive a Vespa scooter, reminding of the actual made-in-Italy brand. This remains a stereotypical, condensate simulacrum of New York, even though the actual name of the city, along with Paris and Tokyo, would later be mentioned in *Mario Kart Tour* (Nintendo, 2020), a smartphone spin-off of the flagship *Kart* franchise for Nintendo's proprietary gaming platforms. This seems consistent with a broader tension between Japanese anime, Western media aesthetics, and globalized tourism settings and tropicalist tropes in Nintendo products (Carbone 2020).

Odyssey also builds on *SM64*'s and the *Super Mario Bros Super Show*'s introduction of Mario as a spaghetti enthusiast to make the character dream about and mention some thirty varieties of pasta, ranging from nationally, industrially available ones (*ravioli*, *vermicelli*, *linguine*, *maccheroni*) to relatively lesser-known regionalist specialties (*perciatelli*, *circiole*, *bigoli*, *pici*), as well as fantasy signature dishes ("capellini al Mario") (Looygi, 2019). Mario also mentions the city of Bologna (famous for its rich food tradition and global export of the made in Italy). Yet, other Italian-American sounding distortions of food ("fedicini", "matricini") sound unequivocally Italian-American, while the only food-inspired stage features a quasi-Mexican setting. Mario could also wear a wide-brimmed sombrero hat (which however was removed from a box art due to being called out as stereotyping – u/AguirreMA 2017), and he dreamed of a *princesa*. Between refined regionalisms and crass clichés, *Odyssey*'s Italianate flavour became the equivalent of a Big Mac served with protected origins *parmigiano* shaves and the odd global marketplace jalapeño pepper. Mario ends us mixing up a series of various stereotypes, amounting to a cartoon equivalent of Rocky or a playable Speedy Gonzales.

This has led fans to wonder whether he would now be considered a Latinx stereotype as well (Quora, 2019a). Actor John Leguizamo, who had starred as Luigi in the 1993 *Super Mario Bros* film, also complained about an "all white" cast of interpreters (with Chris Pratt as Mario, Anya Taylor-Joy as Princess Peach, and Charlie Day as Luigi) for the upcoming *Super Mario Bros. 2023* film, implying Mario's non-whiteness, and hailing back to the 1993 film's characterisation of the Mario Brothers as ethnic underdogs. Memes also emerged, including ones about whether Italians qualified as White (Hays 2021; Urbanski 2021). This seems to suggest Nintendo's experimentation within a changing audience landscape. Yet, even in the context a growing demand for diversity, accompanied by concerns about the cultivation effects of stereotypes, Nintendo's Japanese-global ventriloquizing of 'Western' white stereotypes of Otherness may be motivated by market considerations as much as the intention of appeasing Anglo-Saxon performative equality efforts.

Audience reception could be considered in future studies as a further way to approach who would consider such characters as offensive caricatures. Audience perceptions are far from ruling out stereotyping. Yet, their diverse positioning reveals different attitudes to what a stereotype might consist of and why. For Italian-Americans commenting on Mario on forums, the character is far from being offensive and even exalts ideas of Italians as good-hearted (Quora 2019b). In Italy, this debate is lost on indifference or framed as funnily

irrelevant to national identity. Mario is perceived mostly as an American character, and has only been naturalised vicariously, by humorously attaching the ‘Super’ descriptor to real-life figures like economist Mario Monti (even in academic papers – see Garzia/Karremans 2021) and football champion Mario Balotelli.

Whether Mario’s squealy *Mamma mia* represents an unbearable cliché and the butt of joke for a stereotyped country or an ultimately alien and inoffensive cliché (at least to home Italians) ultimately reside on audience demographics and the political and cultural positioning of the listener, which may reveal interesting planes of cross-ventriloquising. From Nintendo’s perspective, perhaps ‘Sombrero Mario’ experiments with the audiences of the large South America market, where both identification and a debate might spin sales. This seems possible with a character malleable enough to cover a broader sellable spectrum of Others than just Italianist caricatures.

This paper could only scratch the surface of such issues, but it pointed to the high relevance of character design, focusing in particular on voice acting. Methodologically, it suggested we look at characters to make sense of cultural attrition, adaptations, and exchanges, or in other words, that characters are useful heuristic models to make sense of broader cultural dynamics. It also suggested we avoid the naïve prosumerist fantasy of transmedia universes as coherent wholes; rather, characters are sites of legal, economic, political, and sociocultural attrition and conflict between different social agents. Tensions and ambivalence in representation and audience projections are a constitutive field of franchise development and management (Florack 2010). The *Super Mario Bros.* 2023 film, seemingly drawing on both its now traditional voice actor Martinet and from the celebrity and star quality of Chris Pratt, may turn out to be a case to investigate relations “between studio-managed intellectual property networks and star brand” (Thomas 2022: 244) in an era of increasing convergence between film and gaming.

Throughout these fields of value, the voicing of Mario has emerged as a crucial site to investigate the entanglements between IP branding and the politics of casting. Super Mario’s Italian stereotypes cater to an ambivalent place of Italianicity in US and global culture, which may be framed with its ambiguities within the broader politically timely terrain of the ethnopolitics of corporate representation and casting, especially due to the character’s apparent malleability in embodying conflated and sometimes conflicting ideas of Italian-ness, Mediterranean-ness, and Latin-ness.

While this article was being sent out for publication, a new trailer (Nintendo UK 2022) saw Chris Pratt’s Mario vocalise but a feeble hint of the Italianate *uh* in the character’s signature “let’s-a go” line. With the film serving as a fan-servicing, nostalgia-prone intergenerational homage to the games franchise, the trailer was introduced by a YouTube presentation starring designer and games superstar Shigeru Miyamoto, addressing viewers to discuss the challenges of bringing game characters to the big screen; voice actors were also presented as novel game celebrities and celebrated for their role in bringing life to characters. They included Anya Taylor-Joy, voicing Princess Peach, praised for “finally being more than a simple damsel in distress”. A large number of comments focus on voice acting, showcasing that increasing attentions should be played on this key element of entertainment practices, in conjunction with celebrity and star value.

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Marco Benoît Carbone – Brunel University London (United Kingdom)

✉ marcobenoitcarbone@gmail.com

Dr Marco Benoît Carbone holds a PhD in Intercultural Studies from University College London. He has taught media and cultural studies at UCL, UAL, and London South Bank and is currently a Senior Lecturer at Brunel University, London. His research focuses on the cultural construction of identity and heritage and on transnational and regional Italian cultures. He is the author of *Geographies of Myth and Places of Identities* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and in the Editorial Board of Intellect's *JICMS – Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*.