



**Playgrounds for the Digital Age:**  
*Super Mario 64* and the Emerging Identity of  
Videogames as an Immersive Medium

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*“I think great video games are like favorite playgrounds, places you become attached to and go back to again and again. Wouldn’t it be great to have a whole drawer full of ‘playgrounds’ right at your finger tips?”*

*- Shigeru Miyamoto, Creator of Mario, 1991<sup>2</sup>*

Back in 1991, Shigeru Miyamoto’s proclaimed view of videogames as playgrounds probably struck most gamers – and even many game designers – as odd. Indeed, even the most popular titles of the time, such as *Super Mario Brothers 3* and *The Legend of Zelda* were somewhat shallow in both their depth of interaction and richness of experience. Games of the time were largely physical and mental contests against the computer, against time, against the other player. But as gamers and designers have since learned, it is seldom prudent to ignore Miyamoto, the father of such blockbuster dynasties such as *Super Mario Brothers*, *Zelda*, *Donkey Kong*, *Star Fox*, and *Super Mario Kart*.

And surely enough, Miyamoto’s vision has not only become reality, but a new paradigm in videogame design. Anyone who has played such modern megahits as *Tomb Raider*, *Zelda 64: The Ocarina of Time*, and *Grand Theft Auto 3* can finally appreciate the idea of videogames as “playgrounds.” Namely, videogame worlds are increasingly fun to simply explore, interact with, and exist within. As technology improves, budgets swell, and designer creativity grows, videogames are finally attaining some degree of virtual reality. Level goals and enemies aside, the act of playing video games is becoming exhilarating in and of itself. Or, as videogame critic Steven Poole has so eloquently described, “[Playing videogames is] a ‘Zen’ experience... a kind of high-speed meditation, and intense absorption in which the dynamic form of successful play becomes beautiful and satisfying.”<sup>3</sup>

Fittingly, it was one of Miyamoto's own products, *Super Mario 64*, that catalyzed this revolution. Though *Super Mario 64* was certainly not the first game to use three-dimensional graphics, nor the first game to encourage exploration, it was undoubtedly the game that established and popularized the trend towards richer interactivity. More importantly, the game highlights the creative and technological innovations that have allowed this additional level of interactive maturity in videogames. Consequently, this paper will use *Super Mario 64* as a case study in order to discuss the more general, emerging "digital playground paradigm." After reviewing the history and impact of *Super Mario 64*, this paper will examine the nature of digital playgrounds, explore why *Super Mario 64* in particular was so successful as a digital playground, and finally discuss why such playgrounds are both rewarding and necessary in today's increasingly urban world.

### **The Little Plummer Who Captivated the World – Yet Again**

*"It is easy to forget the impact this title had on the gaming consciousness. Mario 64 was a landmark. A paradigm. A moment in time that represents a point of no return."*

*- ntsc-uk.com, online gaming magazine<sup>4</sup>*

It is only appropriate that *Super Mario Brothers*, the single most successful videogame franchise ever, would be the series to pioneer the new paradigm in interactivity. First released in late 1985 for the new Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) home console, the original *Super Mario Brothers* was instantly a success. Over the last twenty years, Super Mario games have sold over 160 million copies. *Super Mario Brothers 3*, selling over 17 million copies, remains the single best-selling videogame never packaged with a console.<sup>5</sup> In fact, *Super Mario Brothers* and its sequels generated so much popularity that Mario became a cultural icon, spawning, among other products, clothes apparel,

movies, and a television show. One national survey in 1990 even reported that “Mario was more recognizable among American youth than Mickey Mouse.”<sup>6</sup> And perhaps most importantly, *Super Mario Brothers* convinced many players that videogames were not merely a passing fad. As media studies researcher Henry Jenkins has disclosed about his own personal experience,

I had played Pong, Pac-Man, Atari, and enjoyed them but nothing had really struck me before I encounter Mario Brothers for the first time. I was amazed by the revolutionary steps forward computer games had taken in less than a decade and began to realize how much change the medium would undergo in the decades to come. This was a powerful new form of entertainment taking shape before our eyes, and I decided then and there to monitor more closely.<sup>7</sup>

In short, even by the mid-nineties it was already impossible to fathom the extent of Mario’s culturally, financially, and creative influences.

Here enter *Super Mario 64*. Along with its new sixty-four bit home console system Nintendo 64, Nintendo published and released *Super Mario 64* in the summer of 1996.<sup>8</sup>

The premise of the game stays true to its roots: you are Mario, a stubby Italian plumber, and in order to save your beloved Princess Peach, you must travel through a variety of colorful worlds laden with peculiar enemies, armed with nothing more than your agility and an arsenal of different jumps. But there ends the similarities. First and foremost, in *Super Mario 64*, the player views and controls Mario in a full three dimensions, adding an entirely new spin to the look, gameplay, and level design of the game. Moreover, levels are no longer accessed in strict sequential order. Instead, Princess Peach’s castle serves as a single “hub” world through which all other levels are accessed. As a result, levels cannot simply be traveled through or “beaten.” Rather, Mario must explore each world numerous times and hunt for hidden stars that guide his passage through the castle, ultimately leading him towards Mario’s arch-nemesis and Peach’s kidnapper King Bowser.

Even at the time of its release, *Super Mario 64* was immediately recognized as a visionary game that would alter the face of the entire industry. Premier gaming websites IGN.com and Gamespot.com, for example, both awarded the game top ratings,<sup>9</sup> and IGN's Doug Perry even went as far as to declare, "... it must be stated that *Super Mario 64* is the greatest videogame to date, and one which all games, regardless of genre, will be judged henceforth."<sup>10</sup> Other game designers were taking note, including id Software cofounder Tom Hall, who remarked, "The next big thing will be applying the new, hot 3D technology to older genres and breathe new life into them. *Super Mario 64* is really incredible, what I've played so far."<sup>11</sup> And in retrospect, many reviewers and designers agree that the release of *Super Mario 64* serves as an important landmark in the history of videogames, as echoed in the recent IGN.com reflection, "When *Super Mario 64* was first shown at E3 years ago it was a defining moment for us, it was so mind blowing and really showed the way forward for the future of videogames."<sup>12</sup>

As predicted at the time, *Super Mario 64* has indeed influenced videogame design remarkably. The game, single-handedly, as gamecubicle.com has reflected, "defined a new genre in gaming, the 3D platformer,"<sup>13</sup> blazing the path for such similarly structured games as *Sonic Adventure*, *Banjo-Kazooie*, and *Jak and Daxter*. Several producers and designers have publicly recognized the game's influence, such as Benoit Arribart, the project manager for *Mission: Impossible*, who admits,

It's difficult to overestimate Miyamoto's influence in the industry. Even if *Mission: Impossible* is really different from *Super Mario 64*, Mario really influenced us. It somewhat set up a standard for 3-D third-person games ... The camera, and the main character handling, in *Mission: Impossible* were really inspired by Mario 64. The outdoor camera mode was internally called the 'Mario mode' by the *Mission: Impossible* development team.<sup>14</sup>

And *Super Mario 64* has unquestionably influenced interactive gaming in general. As nts-uk.com argues, “At that time, nobody had dared to tackle the issue of bringing NCL’s mascot into a three dimensional space. Six years on, and the landscape of interactive entertainment has changed almost beyond recognition.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Building the Digital Playground: Combining Immersion and Agency**

*“The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content.”*

**- Janet Murray, Hamlet on the Holodeck<sup>16</sup>**

At first glance, the term “playground” may appear misapplied to the study of videogames. For instance, the act of playing tag with a group of peers on a jungle gym or actively swinging from monkey bar to monkey bar seems at odds with the practice of sitting along in front a television screen solving puzzles and exerting only the energy it takes to move a controller. Nonetheless, a closer examination clearly demonstrates the term is apt. As Media Studies researcher Henry Jenkins suggests, both activities facilitate emotional relief by allowing us to engage in immersive play that transcends our immediate environments.<sup>17</sup> In other words, pretending that the playground rope swing is a spaceship is, in its purest form, little different than assuming the role of a spaceship pilot in a videogame – that is, provided that the videogame is convincing enough in the interactive illusion it creates.

So what are the exact ingredients that game designers have utilized in building these increasingly compelling digital playgrounds and how, psychologically speaking, are these ingredients able to captivate our imaginations much like playgrounds did when we were children? As Media Studies scholar and interactive storyteller Janet Murray suggests, a

game needs to provide a deep level of both “immersion” and “agency” in order to become sufficiently interactive and engaging.

Appropriately, as Murray points out, the term immersion stems from the experience of being submerged in water. Thus, a successfully immersive game world, much like make-believe playground worlds, implies that the game offers a curiously different existential experience. As Murray explains, such an immersion is often psychologically significant,

We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.<sup>18</sup>

More to the point, such immersion can be intensely enjoyable. As Murray explains, “We enjoy the movement out of our familiar world, the feeling of alertness that comes from being in this new place, and the delight that comes from learning to move within it.”<sup>19</sup> This partly explains why a new videogame is so enjoyable. Much like swimming or skydiving, surrendering yourself to a new world and learning and mastering an unfamiliar control scheme provides a fresh experience that challenges your very psychology. Additionally, this also helps to explain why sequels – even well designed sequels – are rarely as engaging as their predecessors. At a certain point, a world loses its freshness and, subsequently, its immersive pull.

But even the most basic videogames can be enjoyable. The difference between a rudimentary game and a richly immersive game is that the latter is not only superficially entertaining, but also generates a magical trance that rewards the player with depth of experience and psychological development. As Murray explains, this state of absorption is one in which “The enchantment of the computer creates for us a public space that also feels very private and intimate. In psychological terms, computers are liminal objects, located on

the threshold between external reality and our own minds.”<sup>20</sup> Or, as videogame critic Steven Poole has described, the experience that this threshold state resonates is almost ineffable. Poole writes, “But the magic wasn't simply done to me; it was a spell I could dive into. I could swim happily in this world, at once mysterious and utterly logical, of insubstantial light.”<sup>21</sup>

Agency, the second component of a compellingly interactive game, is the factor that fuels this trance. As Murray elucidates, agency is more than mere conscious control, writing, “Agency, then, goes beyond both participation and activity. As an aesthetic pleasure, as an experience to be savored for its own sake...”<sup>22</sup> Much like immersion, agency can also be enjoyable. Such pleasure is well demonstrated by exciting act of exploring a new environment, whether in real life or in a videogame. In both cases, as Murray writes,

... [We] experience pleasures specific to intentional navigation: orienting ourselves by landmarks, mapping a space mentally to match our experience, and admiring the juxtapositions and changes in perspective that derive from moving through an intricate environment.<sup>23</sup>

Phrased differently, agency is enjoyable because it is gratifying to observe our actions take effect in our surrounding environment. As Poole has so succinctly analogized, “Why do people enjoy driving cars? Amplification of input...”<sup>24</sup>

And the greater the agency we are given in a digital world – in other words, the degree to which we feel control over manipulating and moving within, such a world – the more convincing the overarching illusion of immersion. Thus, a careful synthesis of these factors provides the desired immersive effect. Murray stresses the importance of this synthesis, stating,

When the controller is very closely tied to an object in the fictional world, such as a screen cursor that turns into a hand, the participant's actual movements become movements through the virtual space. This correspondence, when actual movement

through real space brings corresponding movement in the fantasy world, is an important part of the fascination...<sup>25</sup>

Phrased differently, our agency within an environment endows that space and its components with a special, highly personal quality that strengthens the immersive character of that environment. Consequently, much as children develop a sense of ownership over a local playground or backyard hideout, so do gamers personalize a digital world through their interaction with that game world.

The term “playground,” we see, was very apt indeed.

### **Jumping into the Third Dimension, Squashing the Immersion Barrier**

*“Some of these efforts have resulted in exciting new game ‘breeds’ that engage the player in an experience that is all but impossible without 3D technology. Witness Mario’s jump to the 3D world in Shigeru Miyamoto’s Super Mario 64.”*

*- Richard Rouse III, “Do Computer Games Need to be 3D?”<sup>26</sup>*

The first and most obvious factor that allowed *Super Mario 64* to achieve such an unprecedented degree of immersion and agency was the game’s transition to 3D. Though the 2D, side-scrolling predecessors certainly allowed the player to interact with the levels, the two-dimensionality severely limited player freedom of movement and thus reduced the number of ways to move within the game space and interact with the game world. Even the simple act of climbing a small hill shows the huge difference a third dimension makes. In 2D, Mario can only approach the hill in two defined ways. But in 3D, Mario can approach the hill in an uncountable number of ways. And if the hill is oddly shaped, each climb has the potential to be slightly different than the last.

The potential variety of the resulting navigation and exploration in such a game is unfathomable. Such realistic variety is essential, since, as Murray so succinctly emphasizes, “The more we feel that we are actually there, the more we want to fly off in it [the game

world] and have adventures.”<sup>27</sup> And predictably, this exponential increase in freedom was well noted by the game community. Doug Perry of IGN.com, for example, wrote at the time, “In fact, this game is exactly as one might hope it would be: Mario in 3D. More freedom, more space, more options.”<sup>28</sup>

Misguided critics might complain that *Super Mario 64* lacks realism that harms the game’s immersive persuasiveness, in that the perspective is third-person rather than first-person and that the graphics are overly stylized and primitive. As for the former point, time has shown that the third-person view enjoys several key advantages. The third-person view, as Poole argues, gives the player a stronger sense of the relation of his/her character to the surrounding environment,

The external view of the player's character, although putatively less “realistic,” is very often more desirable in gameplay terms than the fashionable first-person view... because the player is given an overview of the action surrounding his ship, so Tomb Raider enables the player to navigate far more easily and intuitively around the playing areas, because she can see immediately how close Lara is to the side wall, or just how far away that nasty spiked ditch is, in order to navigate its edge safely.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, as Poole continues to point out, the first-person view, as implemented by current technology, suffers from several large problems in realism, including marginal distortion and overly narrow fields of view. Subsequently, Poole asserts,

Videogames presented in a first-person viewpoint thus far have failed to overcome these problems, and their hyperbolic claims to a sort of ‘realism’ must therefore be qualified.... a critical level of realism will never be achieved, and the experience of playing Quake and its siblings will always be more like remote-controlling a robot with tunnel vision rather than being there yourself.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, despite the remoteness of third-person view, it seems that the heightened sense of spatial awareness inherent in the third-person view makes the view a smart choice in

encouraging immersive interaction, especially when that interaction is heavily exploratory in nature.

Addressing the second criticism, it is indeed true that the graphics of *Super Mario 64* are somewhat average. Even back in 1996, the game, in terms of graphics, was far outshined by breakthrough 3D games such as *Tomb Raider*. Nevertheless, videogames, as opposed to film, are an interactive rather than a visual media. Hence, it is ultimately gameplay rather than graphics that determines how immersive the experience becomes. In addition, the brightly colored, cartoon-like stylization allows the game to more convincingly absorb the player into its curious, quirky world. Poole even argues that stylized graphics often exert a stronger immersive pull than non-stylized graphics, writing, “Good software simulation of grass, for instance, can, in its necessary stylization, be more aesthetically interesting than a field of real grass on film.”<sup>31</sup> Miyamoto himself has defended such stylizations, explaining,

... when you have realistic graphics and you have a character moving through and around objects in an unnatural way, it just stands out all the more. It's even more unnatural than having these toon-shaded style graphics with natural and realistic movement. That's why we've spent so much time and energy with the director and the designer to really go through and focus on making the gameplay fun...<sup>32</sup>

Thus, although the adopting the third dimensions helped establish *Super Mario 64* as such a successful digital playground, it is important to note that the creative energy was primarily focused on smooth controls, enchanting environments, and freedom of movement, as opposed to realistic graphics for the sake of realistic graphics.

## The Miyamoto Effect

*“Probably the biggest challenge, or I should say the biggest question was whether this game would be really called ‘a game’ and whether this new genre of games can be appreciated by players.”*

*- Shigeru Miyamoto, on Super Mario 64<sup>33</sup>*

The third dimension was not the only factor that yielded such a compelling, exploratory adventure. As evidenced above, Shigeru Miyamoto fully intended this “playground” quality while designing the game. Thus, Miyamoto himself was a second crucial ingredient in the success of *Super Mario 64* as a digital playground. Indeed, examining Miyamoto’s history and general videogame philosophy underscores several creative insights and design principles that directly account for the game’s depth of immersion.

Given his adventurous childhood, it is unsurprising that Miyamoto was the designer who catalyzed the paradigm shift towards virtual exploration. As a child, Miyamoto frequently adventured through the creeks, fields and forests. In fact, Miyamoto has shared that one of his most memorable childhood experiences was the exploration of a dark cave in a hill by his home.<sup>34</sup> As an adult, Miyamoto remains obsessed with the idea of adventure. This passion for exploration is particularly apparent when Miyamoto talks about general game design, proposing scenarios such as,

What if you walk along and everything that you see is more than what you see... What if, on a crowded street, you look up and see something appear that should not, given what we know, be there. You either shake your head and dismiss it, or you accept that there is much more to the world than we think. Perhaps it really is a doorway to another place. If you choose to go inside you may find many unexpected things.<sup>35</sup>

Without a doubt, this bold, adventurous spirit provided the inspiration in *Super Mario 64*, a game in which a colorful variety of worlds must be explored and reexplored in order to progress through the game.

But Miyamoto's creative vision is more than a mere fascination with adventure. In particular, central to Miyamoto's design philosophy is a childlike wonder for fanciful worlds and the imaginative ability to turn the mundane into the exciting. And because Miyamoto believes that this youthful awe and excitement is the ingredient that makes a good game so enjoyable, one of Miyamoto's main goals in each project is to successfully convey his own sense of wonder for the game world. Indeed, Miyamoto's commitment to reaching the child within each gamer is reflected in one of his most famous design aphorisms, "An adult is a child who has more ethics and morals. That's all. When I am a child, creating, I am not creating a game. I am in the game. The game is not for children, it is for me. It is for the adult who still has a character of a child."<sup>36</sup>

Finally, *Super Mario 64* also reflects Miyamoto's strong commitment to deep interactivity. As Miyamoto has admitted himself,

But I feel that I am not a movie maker, but rather that my strength lies in my pioneering spirit to make use of technology to create the best, interactive commodities possible, and use that interactivity to give users a game they can enjoy and play comfortably.<sup>37</sup>

This dedication has granted Miyamoto a unique methodology of character and level design that lends itself perfectly to the digital playground concept. For instance, revealing why Mario is such a quirky, atypical character, a gamecubicle.com history of Miyamoto explains, "In designing the game's hero, Miyamoto sought to create a silly character with whom gamers could connect."<sup>38</sup> More specifically to *Super Mario 64*, this methodology can be observed in the game's vast, immersive worlds. In approaching the level design,

Miyamoto's primary goal was to make the level environment compelling and immersive. The specifics of each level were decidedly secondary to the more general ambience. Or, in Miyamoto's own words, "It is often easier to create landscapes and then figure out what to do with them... We wanted to make a snowy mountain in *Super Mario 64* - a really big one. That came first, and afterward we talked about ideas of how to make use of this mountain."<sup>39</sup>

In terms of design philosophy, it is therefore clear that the difference in *Super Mario 64* was not the specific character and level goal designs, but, more abstractly, Miyamoto's unique vision for the videogame medium. In the end, it was a passion for exploration, a youthful excitement for new worlds, and an unfaltering commitment to interactivity, rather than clever puzzles or frenetic gameplay, that nurtured such a successful interactive environment. Unquestionably, improving upon today's digital playgrounds will require a similar, free-thinking vision. Fortunately, such creativity may not be as rare as we might think. In the famous words of Miyamoto himself, "After all, we can get inspiration from the ordinary things that everyone is experiencing in our daily lives, by looking at them from a different angle."<sup>40</sup>

### **To Each His Own Mario – Personalizing the *Super Mario 64* Experience**

*"In each Mario game, players sometimes move around without any specific purpose, yet they may find some secret as a result. While wandering around, players get accustomed to the gameplay so that Mario moves just as they want him to. Then gamers feel some attachment to the game and don't want to sell it to used-software shops. So, the more you play, the more attachment you feel."*

**- Shigeru Miyamoto<sup>41</sup>**

As Miyamoto implies in the above remarks, the third great success of *Super Mario 64* in constructing a digital playground is its purposely loose structure, which encourages

players to craft their own narratives through the framework of the game universe.

Importantly, such a structure allows the player to personalize the game space, much as a child develops a sense of ownership over a school playground. In other words, by so deeply investing themselves in the game universes, gamers author memorable histories influenced by but not wholly dependent upon the game world.<sup>42</sup> And ultimately, the greater the degree of personalization generated, the more compelling the illusion of the game world becomes. The immersive trance is deepened, agency is empowered, and the digital playground is constructed.

But how does *Super Mario 64* facilitate such player narrative, and how does the game succeed over its predecessors? Certainly, the original two-dimensional Mario games were engaging, and allowed the player to interact with each level environment.

Nevertheless, there are several key differences in game structure that make *Super Mario 64* a much more suitable framework for player narratives. Most significantly, the Nintendo 64 incarnation, unlike its ancestors, does not enforce a time limit for each level. This change was nothing short of monumental in fostering greater immersion. Without the time pressure, level designers were now free to make level goals increasingly involved and force players to more carefully explore each world. And perhaps more importantly, because each level was now much more than a time challenge, gamers could ignore the level goals, lose themselves in the game world, and play around for the sheer sake of existing and moving within a virtual reality.

Also noticeable in *Super Mario 64* is the marked degree of non-linearity. Breaking the Mario tradition of a strictly sequential path through the game, levels in *Super Mario 64* can be played in any order, as long as the desired level has been unlocked. In fact, the game

is so non-linear that many players end up ignoring two or three of their least favorite levels entirely. This extra freedom was warmly received by the gaming community, as evidenced by game critic Doug Church's reflection,

Players always have lots to do but are given a lot of choice about which parts of the world they work on and which extra stars they go for. The game also avoids a lot of the super-linear, what's-on-the-next-screen feel of side-scrolling games and gives players a sense of control. In Mario, players spend most of their time deciding what they want to do next, not trying to get unstuck, or finding something to do.<sup>43</sup>

Yet another, related change that nourished immersion was the evolution towards goal-oriented levels. In *Super Mario 64*, there are only fifteen levels – far fewer than the number of levels in any Mario predecessor. However, each *Super Mario 64* level is massive, and players are not expected to merely travel through a level, but instead need to revisit each level several times in order to find and collect Princess Peach's stars. The new goal-oriented system not only increases the immersive pull of each level, but also grants gamers greater freedom in authoring their own narratives, subsequently strengthening the immersive pull of the game as a whole. Even upon its release, gamers immediately recognized and appreciated the huge, free, playground nature of each level. As Doug Perry commented in ign.com's original *Super Mario 64* review, the game owns "a huge selection of vast levels that can be revisited simply for the joy of it."<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the overarching level scheme of *Super Mario 64*, the detail of interaction present in each of the game's characters, buildings, and landmarks also increases the immersive intensity of the game. Every component of every level serves a gameplay purpose. If there is a tree, Mario can climb it. If there is a building or mountain, Mario can somehow clamber to the top. There are multiple ways to kill most enemies and multiple routes and methods to achieve each level goal. This interactive potential lies in

stark contrast to many modern 3D games, in which many buildings and landscape features serve solely as decoration. But as Miyamoto has so often stressed, since the inability to interact with a virtual world reminds players that they are only playing a game, depth of interaction greatly facilitates the immersive trance. And *Super Mario 64* certainly benefits as a result. Remarking on the free, playground quality that emanates from such interaction, ign.com aptly observed,

Like many previous Mario games, experimentation is integral to the experience of playing. You must explore everything, leave no rock unturned, no mushroom mute, no door unopened. Mario himself has so many possible movements, and the environment is so intensely interactive, that even the least experimental players will spend hours on the first level without achieving anything in particular.<sup>45</sup>

Gamespot.com's *Super Mario 64* review also praised the effects of the game's pioneering innovations in interactive detail, remarking, "With realms so vast and detailed, and yet so graphically clean and simple, one instinctively wants to go exploring."<sup>46</sup>

Much as children enjoy pretending to be pirates or pilots on the playground, so do we delight in the escape of assuming the identity of our favorite videogame characters. The key to perpetuating the illusion, however, is granting players the freedom to author their own stories via the experiential and spatial framework of the game universe. As Murray points out, the act of play is active, rather than passive.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in order to realize the full potential of the medium, videogames must respond accordingly. In the words of virtual reality researcher Brenda Laurel,

If... the goal is to create a technologically mediated environment where people can play - as opposed to being entertained - then VR [virtual reality] is the best game in town. When children play, they typically use their imaginations quite actively and constructively to invent action and assign meaning to materials (or make or find new ones) as the need arises. In VR as in children's play there is no sharp distinction between "authoring" and "experiencing."<sup>48</sup>

Thankfully, in large part due to its unparalleled degree of interactive freedom, *Super Mario 64* demonstrated that this distinction can be overcome.

### **The Increasing Need for Digital Playground in the Modern Age**

*“Perhaps, my son finds in his video games what I found in the woods behind the school, on my bike whizzing down the hills of the suburban back streets, or settled into my treehouse during a thunder storm with a good adventure novel — intensity of experience, escape from adult regulation; in short, ‘complete freedom of movement.’”*

*- Henry Jenkins, media studies scholar<sup>49</sup>*

*Super Mario 64* may indeed have catalyzed the digital playground paradigm, but why is this new trend in game design so significant? First, this new immersive identity represents an important level of maturity in videogames, a development that will help the medium realize its true potential. Videogames, the first fully interactive medium, mark an important achievement in human communication and ingenuity. Therefore, we must exploit videogames’ unparalleled degree of interactivity if we want to achieve the wealth of art and entertainment inherent in the medium. Surely, we can and should do better than games that simply provide cheap thrills by merely challenging our puzzle-solving skills and testing our hand-eye coordination.

Second, as Henry Jenkins has argued, immersive, digital playgrounds are becoming increasingly necessary as open space disappears and society urbanizes. As Jenkins points out, “Social reformers sometimes speak of children choosing to play video games rather than playing outside, when, in many cases, no such choice is available. More and more Americans live in urban or semi-urban neighborhoods.”<sup>50</sup> The shrinking amount of access to backyards, woods, and playgrounds is indeed a concern, since unrestricted outdoor play helps children develop psychologically and emotionally. As Jenkins writes, immersive play

allows children “to achieve an appropriate level of ‘holding power’ that enables [them] to transcend their immediate environments...”<sup>51</sup> Or, as Jenkins summarizes of child psychologist Roger Hart’s identity formation argument,

Roger Hart... stresses the importance of children’s manipulations and explorations of their physical environment to their development of self-confidence and autonomy. Our physical surroundings are “relatively simple and relatively stable” compared to the “overwhelmingly complex and ever shifting” relations between people, and thus, they form core resources for identity formation.<sup>52</sup>

Videogames, as Jenkins suggests, may provide the solution. Jenkins explains,

Video games constitute virtual playing spaces which allow home-bound children like my son to extend their reach, to explore, manipulate, and interact with a more diverse range of imaginary places than constitute the often drab, predictable, and overly-familiar spaces of their everyday lives.<sup>53</sup>

And the idea is gaining popularity. For example, Keith Feinstein, President of the Video Game Conservatory, has asserted that videogames provide children a venue with which to explore both the world and themselves, writing,

Video games present the opportunity to explore and discover, as well as to combat others of comparable skill (whether they be human or electronic) and to struggle with them in a form that is similar to children wrestling, or scrambling for the same ball - they are nearly matched, they aren't going to really do much damage, yet it feels like an all-important fight for that child at that given moment...Video games play with us, a never tiring playmate.<sup>54</sup>

And though videogames may not function as well as a local forest or creek, we must settle for what is available in this increasingly urban society. If games such as *Super Mario 64* can already stimulate the imagination to such an impressive degree, consider the medium’s potential as technology and designer creativity continue to evolve. The backyard clubhouse is looking less and less attractive every day.

## Endnotes

1. The title graphics is a screenshot of *Super Mario 64* taken by said author
2. *Mario Mania Players Guide*
3. Poole (168)
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16. Murray (98)
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21. Poole (3)
22. Murray (128)

23. Murray (129)
24. Poole (148)
25. Murray (108)
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