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LCC 6215 Game Design as a Cultural Practice

Super Mario Brothers: Rhetorics of Power and Identity

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Quest-type games allow players to explore and master environments much in the same way that the text-based games of the '70s allowed. For many boys growing up in an era of confined urbanization, Super Mario Brothers and its genre of video game, with its simple but graphical interface, became a way to express autonomy. Thus, the rhetorics of power and identity becomes central to the emerging video game industry.

THE "TRAPPED" CHILD

Historically, children began growing under close maternal supervision until they became self-mobile. As their age and mobility increased, the boundaries of their physical world expanded to accommodate them.

In pre-industrial America, our agrarian culture provided a framework within which our children could develop: women remained at home fulfilling domestic chores while men commanded large outdoor spaces in pursuit of farming and hunting, activities to feed the family. Girls and boys, then, developed an identity with their same-gender parents, moms and dads, respectively. This meant that a boy had access to huge spaces and was able to mimic his role model — an important part of child development — by exploring the same outdoor spaces that his father did.

As America entered the industrial era, the same roles for parents existed: mom at home and dad away at work. But the spaces in which these activities were performed changed. The father's work space of the farm gave way to the confinements of factories, where a boy could not follow to play. A boy's play spaces shrunk to within a few urban "blocks" within a neighborhood. Eventually, even this would disappear as women entered the work force at the factories. While girls, already acclimated to the confined spaces imposed by the Victorian era, did not suffer, boys had to cope with an ever more shrinking domain in which to practice and exercise his freedom away from maternal scrutiny.

VIDEO GAMES AS SURROGATE PLAYGROUNDS

Video games afforded an opportunity to expand a boy's play space by replacing the physical space with a virtual one. The boy could become immersed in an imaginary world which his mother could not supervise.

When Super Mario Brothers was introduced, this world was perceived as boundless, infinitely scrolling horizontally. In addition, vertical levels were introduced, and "off-screen" territories came into view. Players could explore this world, discovering hidden treasures and facing adversaries and obstacles to overcome.

While the actual play is cerebral instead of physical, the psychological impact of playing was similar to that of playing outside — autonomy could be exercised, and a boy's desire to become like his father could be fulfilled.