

Negotiating Transitional Spaces in Classic Games

By Harrison Gish

When discussing the history of video games (a comparatively short temporal span when juxtaposed to the existence, development, and maturation of other media forms), a fairly nebulous term is consistently employed: the adjective "classic." J.C. Herz, attempting to stabilize its meaning, notes that while the popular notion of a "classic" is understood as an object that inspires nostalgia, classic video games and platforms are those "game consoles and arcade machines [that] are the first of their kind."¹ While Herz's definition is certainly broad in her use, related specifically to the technical features of platforms and the cultural acceptance of video games as a new media form during the late 1970s, it is nonetheless valuable. Those games generally considered to have significantly advanced the state of the industry and its output through innovation, which today have been displaced by further advancement, can be understood as classic. As the video game industry's output grows in size over time, it is important to note that the "classic" categorization broadens as well. A video game classic is no longer only the generative first that catalyzed industrial growth over three decades ago, such as *Pong*, but instead demarcates a wide array of games and platforms that illustrate in their design a notable progression of technology, of rule complexity, of narrativity, and of player interactivity.

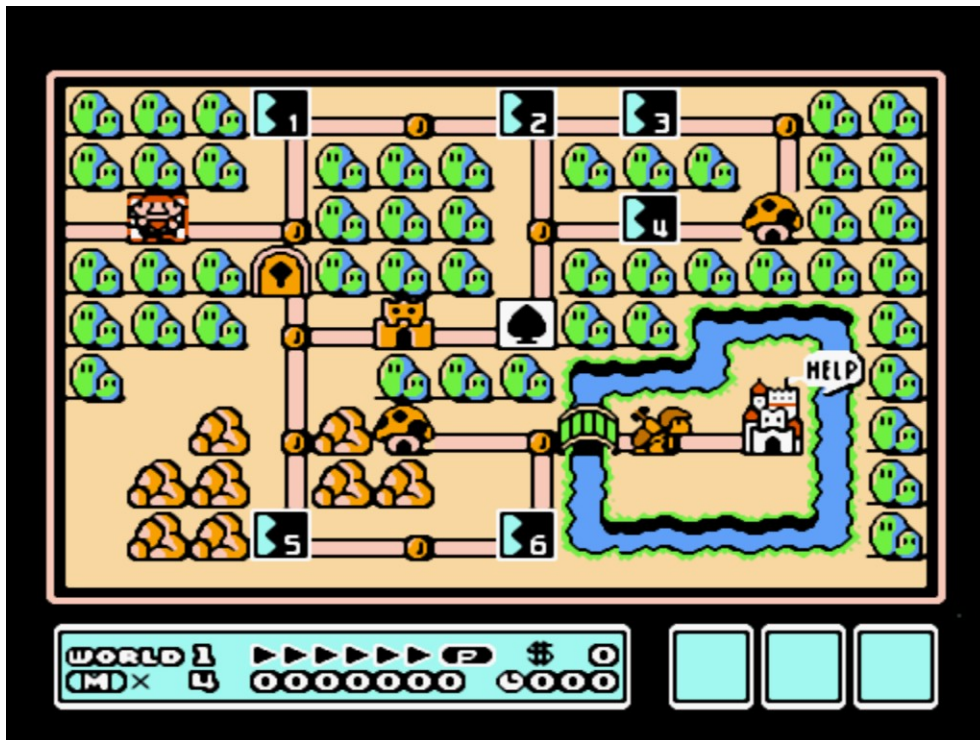
Within this historical progression, a particularly notable advancement has been the development of what I will call *transitional space*, or *in-between space*, moments in video game play that process and demarcate advancement toward the achievement of the games' overriding goal, such as the movement from a preceding to a successive level. *Transitional spaces* are those moments between the playing of levels, instances in which the computer processes the player's successful completion of a micro-level goal as the player advances toward a following objective.² While older classic games relegate *transitional spaces* to automated technical processes, in more recent classics such *in-between spaces* have become increasingly narrativized, limited by their own governing rules, further incorporated into the experience of play, and related to alternate forms of player interaction. Given the representational abilities available due to technical advancement, such *transitional spaces* within later classic games demand an abrupt and noticeable shift in the "lusory attitude," "the state of mind required to enter into the play of a game."³ As such *transitional spaces* enact a restructuring of player limitations and applicable rules, and trouble the unitary nature of the magic circle in relation to a particular game.



Older classic games, such as *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo Entertainment System, 1981), contain a dearth of transitional space in between the completion of a micro-level goal and the advancement to the next level. Upon ascending to the top of a multitude of platforms, and either positioning the player-character near the captured woman or eliminating supports upon which the titular gorilla stands, the game pauses briefly as the possibility of the player performing actions is eliminated and a musical cue signifies the goal's completion. While the visual representation of Donkey Kong falling to his death sometimes accompanies this brief cessation of interactivity, more frequently the series of platforms is simply replaced by another series, with the player-character again positioned near the bottom of the screen. Though this deployment of new obstacles may at first seem to be simply a replacement of one set of platforms with another, a transition has indeed occurred, as the constitutive rules of the game have changed.⁴ Barrels now fall toward and advance upon the player-character with greater frequency and velocity, and, as is commonly understood to occur during the playing of a game, the transition from a previous to a successive level has resulted in the increased difficulty of conquering obstacles and achieving the following micro-level goal.

Bollen, a free game released for the personal computer in 2006, replicates such near-instantaneous transitions between levels.⁵ Having a platform structure, side-scrolling advancement method, and visual background similar to *Super Mario Bros.* (NES, 1985), *Bollen* appears to be what Salen and Zimmerman term a "modification" of the classic Nintendo game, one which reduces the possibilities for player interactivity.⁶ While a pink ball has taken Mario's place, and red and green blobs have replaced the red and green turtles that populate the Nintendo game, the player-character can no longer jump, but must instead hit launch pads that propel the ball up into the air. Player interaction is limited to moving left and right with the directional keypad, and the only way to move from level to level without a launch pad is to fall. Much like games from the early and mid-1980s, including *Super Mario Bros.*, the transition from level to level, after the completion of a micro-level goal, is represented both by the replacement of one visual field with another and the appearance of onscreen text that signifies transition, demarcating a new formal element of which the player should be aware, such as "red is evil." While *Bollen's* manual states that "the difficulty is increased for each stage and it takes a lot of skill and practice to beat all 23 of them," and therefore the transition from level to level and the concurrent increment of difficulty signifies a change in both constitutive and observational rules, any transitional space in which a player can perform an action after the completion of a micro-level goal is nonexistent.⁷

Super Mario Bros. 3 (1990) is the final entry in the franchise for the Nintendo Entertainment System and stands distinctly apart from *Donkey Kong*, *Bollen*, and *Super Mario Bros.* in its representation of transitional space. While music still denotes the completion of a micro-level goal, a series of continuous side-scrolling graphics that the player must negotiate is no longer replaced by an alternate series. Instead, the player-character, Mario, returns to a map, which denotes the location of different levels, depicting their distance from another, relating to the player, both visually and spatially, the arrangement of play spaces in which micro-level goals must be completed. To engage a new micro-level goal, the player must perform an action with a distinct and established outcome, namely pressing the directional pad and moving Mario toward the following level. The rules governing the transition from level to level in older classic games, an automated process that limits player action, are in *Super Mario Bros. 3* transformed into a unique interactive space between goal-oriented progression, where player actions have functional outcomes.⁸



Super Mario Bros. 3's transitional space, its map, operates as its own discrete space, utilizing vastly divergent formal rules from those operating in goal-oriented levels. Notably, Mario's movement is limited to moving left and right, up and down, and pressing the 'A' button, an action whose reliable outcome in all three *Mario Bros.* games is to cause Mario to jump, no longer fulfills this purpose. In the map screen, interactivity is rewritten, and the 'A' button allows only for entry into a particular level or the selection of a power-up from a menu bar.⁹ Mario can no longer jump at all while traversing the map, and the consistency of an action's reliable outcome, which, as Doug Church notes, allows for player intentionality, is subverted.¹⁰



Indeed, not only has the entrance into the map's transitional space modified the possibilities of player action, but the genre of *Super Mario Bros. 3* appears to have changed as well. Mark J.P. Wolf includes *Super Mario Bros.* under his generic categorization of *platform* games (where "the primary objective requires movement through a series of levels, by way of running, climbing, jumping and other means of locomotion") and *collecting* games (where "the primary objective ... involves collecting objects that do not move"), and these categorizations can be extended to the normative, micro-level goal-oriented game play of *Super Mario Bros. 3* as well.¹¹ However, the transitional space of the map more resembles a simplistic entry in the *maze* genre, in which "the objective ... requires the successful completion of a maze," an applicable term as, to complete a map and advance onward to another space containing a different set of levels, the player must traverse the map in its entirety to enter the castle at its end.¹²

In its drastic modification of player interaction and its differentiation of play style and objective, the transitional space of the map transforms the rules of *Super Mario Bros. 3*, exceeding the alteration of visual and aural aesthetics by abruptly redefining the formal systems of player control and game structure.¹³ A steadfast rule of older games, that non-completed levels will immediately replace completed levels, is in this instance modified to allow for player access and agency, providing the player with an increased sense of potential interactivity and possibility. In the transitional space, actions that cannot occur during the traversal of levels are possible, such as blowing a warp whistle to move to a different map further along in the game. Additionally, power ups, which must be discovered by smashing blocks within individual levels, can be applied to Mario at any point within the transitional space, allowing the player to alter Mario's functional capabilities before returning to *platform* game play. Finally, players no longer necessarily need to proceed from level to level sequentially, as certain levels (such as level four in world one) can be bypassed entirely by maneuvering Mario around them in the map. In this way, not only does the map alter the game's rules of play, but also it increases the player's perception that they have an increased interactive potential with the game itself, as it allows for the player to *interface* with the game in ways not previously possible.¹⁴

While allowing the player to interact within a meta-structure that contains all the levels which make up the core of *Super Mario Bros. 3*'s game play, the transitional space also allows for an increased, expanded narrative within the game. While the establishing narrative of all *Super Mario Bros.* games relate that Princess Toadstool has been kidnapped and Mario must traverse a series of individual levels to effect her release, the map in *Super Mario Bros. 3* creates a narrative that interconnects the disparate levels. Henry Jenkins, writing on the spatial aspects of storytelling in video games, notes that "game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces."¹⁵ Noting the ubiquitous setup that propels the narrative of all *Super Mario* games, Jenkins discusses that the narratives contained within individual games cannot be disassociated from the exploration of "complex and imaginative graphic realms," and "that the core narratives behind many games center around the struggle to explore, map, and master contested spaces."¹⁶ Quite clearly in *Super Mario Bros. 3*, "the organization of the plot becomes a matter of designing the geography of imaginary worlds," a geography that structures all individual levels as existing simultaneously.¹⁷ The transitional map allows for a more fleshed out, concrete narrative than is possible in older games that transition from level to level immediately; by manipulating Mario through a spatial field understood to contain the individual levels of the game, a narrative of player intentionality, traversal and progress is constructed, binding the multiple levels together through the player's own actions.

Britta Neitzel, writing on the interrelation between player action and narrative deployment, defines the experience of playing computer games "as a process of self-observation with continuous feedback. In this process, the position of the player is doubled. In addition to the position as an agent that the player has in every game, he or she is also assigned the position of an observer."¹⁸ The visual qualities of the transitional map, including its aerial perspective, the structure of paths Mario must traverse to progress within the game, and the position of the player-character within a rapidly apprehended visual field, inform the player of their relative progress and accomplishment within the game, structuring them as an omniscient observer who is aware of upcoming obstacles before they engage these obstacles in direct play. This doubled observation, of both Mario traversing a distinct level and Mario's progress within the game as a whole, situates the player as a highly informed participant in the game, with a range of knowledge that exceeds their player-character's current situation or position.

As a transitional space, the map in *Super Mario Bros. 3* not only increases the player's narrative apprehension and participatory knowledge, but also provides the player respite from involving themselves within the magic circle. As entering the transitional space has significantly modified the limitations upon player interaction, the lusory attitude of the player, which Salen and Zimmerman define as the acceptance of a particular set of limitations structuring game play, is altered as well.¹⁹ The player must accept new limitations, for the most part wholly divergent from those structuring the traversal of individual levels, and therefore the boundaries that define the game as an "explicit" magic circle are challenged. Notably, if the player, while traversing a level, leaves the game in the middle of play, their player-character will eventually perish – either time will elapse, a foe will run into Mario, or a side-scrolling screen beyond player control will push Mario into a hole or crush him against an obstacle. In the transitional space, no such rules apply. The players can remove themselves from the game with the assurance that, when they return, all elements will be the same as when they left. While negotiating the map's space, the urgency of immediate action is not palpable, and the explicit boundaries of the magic circle are momentarily blurred as players enter a formal structure that does not require their immediate input.

This divergence between the formal rules structuring the traversal of levels and those constituting the transitional space of the map has lessened in more recent classic games. In *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 64, 1998), the transitional space between highly structured missions with specific goals is relatively indistinct from the negotiation of the space within a level. The player's actions, and their results, performed within the opening Kokiri Village, are identical to the actions and outcomes within the game's first distinct level, The Great Deku Tree. The interactive potential, and the formal structure the rules provide, remains constant whether the player is journeying to a space where the completion of a new micro-level goal awaits, or whether they are negotiating a level itself. The result of this formal unity between direct, demarcated missions and free exploration solidifies a continual narrative that is not beset by abrupt changes in visual apprehension or structuring rules. Whether freeing the Great Deku Tree from a curse or exploring the vast expanse of Hyrule Field, the player of *Ocarina of Time* is assured a continual, uninterrupted engagement with game play through a constant, unchanging lusory attitude toward the game.

Whether one conceives of classic games as the corpus of popular games preceding the current technological moment, or as only those games that innovated new methods of player interaction and narrative accessibility, all classic games testify to the developmental nature of video game production. As game technology advances, new modes of narrative deployment become both possible and increasingly complex, a progression that is indivisible from the potential for interaction that systems with increased processing capacity provide the player. In the maturation of the video game from *Donkey Kong* (and *Bollen*, which nostalgically recalls that era's simplicity) to *Super Mario Bros. 3* to *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, new formal structures demarcating the interrelation between player action, narrative deployment, and game play can be seen to develop and emerge. The construction of *transitional space*, a meta-space incorporating and containing individual fields of play directed toward the achievement of micro-level goals, exemplifies the transitory nature, over time, of game development and its resultant complexity, an issue that is still being negotiated by video games emerging within the contemporary moment.

Notes

1. J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds* (New York City: Little, Brown, 1997), 71.
 2. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman note that, within games, "Just as important as the final win condition, the macro-level goal, are the tiny moments of directed play, the micro-interactions that move a player through a game." As games "can explicitly provide short-term goals," the completion of individual levels is here understood as a micro-level goal, which, repeated numerous times, will bring about the game's completion. See Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 343.
 3. According to Salen and Zimmerman, the magic circle is "the space within which a game takes place," demarcated by distinctive boundaries and with its own specialized forms of associative meaning. *Ibid.*, 99.
 4. Salen and Zimmerman define constitutive rules as "the underlying formal structures that exist 'below the surface' of the rules presented to players. These formal structures are logical and mathematical." *Ibid.*, 130.
 5. *Bollen*, Monokey, 2006, <http://www.daikenkai.com/monokey/>
 6. "The starting point of a modification exercise is an existing game that is altered through an act of design." Salen and Zimmerman, 18.
 7. *Bollen* readme file, Monokey, 2006. Salen and Zimmerman define operational rules as "the guidelines players require in order to play" which "are usually synonymous with the written-out 'rules' that accompany board games and other non-digital games." Salen and Zimmerman, 130.
 8. In digital gaming systems, "rules of a digital game are those aspects directly related to shaping player behavior." As such, the automated transitions of *Donkey Kong* and the interactive space between levels in *Super Mario Bros. 3* both constitute rules of the game. See *Ibid.*, 143.
 9. Salen and Zimmerman note that "at the heart of interactive meaning is the action > outcome unit, the molecule out of which larger interactive structures are built." *Ibid.*, 63.
 10. "As the player learns moves ... consistency allows planning – intention – and the reliability of the world's reactions make for perceived consequences." See Doug Church, "Formal Abstract Design Tools," www.gamasutra.com, July 16, 1999, quotes in Salen and Zimmerman, 62.
 11. Mark JP Wolf, "Genre and the Video Game," 201 and 197, respectively.
 12. *Ibid.*, 200.
 13. Salen and Zimmerman note that "aspects of the program that are not involved in the formal dynamic structure of the game, such as visual and audio aesthetics, are not part of the rules," while anything that "has an affect on the formal structure of how the game proceeds [is] part of the rules." Salen and Zimmerman, 144.
 14. Jesper Juul considers interface to be one of three ways game media support games, defined as "How detailed an influence the players have on the game state." Jesper Juul, "The Game, the Player, the World: Looking for a Heart of Gameness," keynote address at the Level Up Conference in Utrecht, November 4-6, 2003.
 15. Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 674.
 16. *Ibid.*, 675.
 17. *Ibid.*, 678-9.
 18. Britta Neitzel, "Narrativity in Computer Games," 230.
 19. Salen and Zimmerman, 97-9.
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