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Planets as small as your house: A review of *Super Mario Galaxy*

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The purpose of the present review is twofold: first, to gain more insight in the meaning and context of one of the most popular and critically acclaimed video games of the recent years, and second, to show how games could be reviewed from a 'literary' or cultural perspective. The American game scholar Henry Jenkins and others have argued that the discourse around games lacks authoritative and influential criticism of games as cultural and aesthetic objects, which would be the greatest obstacle of the low status of video games in our culture. (Jenkins 2005, p.186-187; Koster 1999)

When I first read the superb children's book *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the imagery and the descriptions of little planets the size of a house strongly triggered my imagination. The idea of living on such a planet gave me a warm feeling of security, protection, intimacy; a feeling of 'home.' Everything you needed was close and within reach, and the whole world was orderly overseen from the comfort of where you stand. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard explains that some types of spaces can give us a safe 'nest' feeling, and he shows how fiction writers can describe and produce spaces that provide these kinds of experiences for the reader. (Bachelard 1994, p.38)

It is highly probable that the imagination of Shigeru Miyamoto, the producer of *Super Mario Galaxy*, has been triggered by the reading of *Le Petit Prince* as well. The game consists of a large number of small planets, some as small as your house, others somewhat bigger. But the planets are always tiny enough to let the horizon appear only a few steps ahead of you. The awareness of the peculiar size of the planet is thus always reinforced. Similar to *Le Petit Prince*, this produces an experience by the player of the game space as a safe, orderly and intimate place.

Super Mario is one the world's most recognizable game characters, also outside of the world of games. He has especially reaped fame from the two-dimensional games of the 1980s, which were shown from a side point-of-view. In the mid-1990s, however, Super Mario was also one of the first to make the transition to three-dimensional game worlds with *Super Mario 64*. The spaces of video games were revolutionized, as these three-dimensional landscapes became the norm. In 2008 then, twelve years after *Super Mario 64*, another innovative and radical change has been made in the spatial make-up of the world of Super Mario; the extensive and explorative three-dimensional environments have been replaced by a universe of a large number of multi-directional miniature planets. The way to navigate these spaces, and the way of 'being-in-space' in these environments has changed radically due to this innovative spatial structure. The Dutch artist and scholar Martijn Hendriks has analysed the spaces of games from a phenomenological perspective, and he has argued how the structure of the space, in collaboration with the actions of the player, produces a specific experience of 'being-in-space.' (Hendriks 2004, p. 26-27)

On the one hand the spatial structure of *Super Mario Galaxy* produces an experience of intimacy and security, as explained above, but on the other hand the game provides the player with a feeling of spatial alienation. The mode of being-in-space is radically different from the way we naturally experience navigation, horizons, and landscape in everyday life. It therefore provides the player with a fresh experience of space, in the same way as the *Il Carceri* etchings by Piranesi or the impossible architectures of M.C. Escher. The British journalist and writer Steven Poole has argued in 2004 that because the spatial representations of games are directed toward realism, there has never been the next step of artistically tinkering and playing with spaces as in Modernist art. *Super Mario Galaxy*, with its innovative spatial make-up, has finally taken this step.[1]

The British game scholar James Newman has argued that game spaces do not have to mimic spaces from reality in order to be perceived as believable by the player. Instead, the game should make use of spatial 'reality effects.' (Newman 2004, 122-125) *Super Mario Galaxy* features a strong spatial reality effect, because the planets that the player is going to travel to are observable in advance from the surface of a previous planet. This makes the game space feel like a coherent universe, with objective spatial relations. But the effects of the spatial structure of *Super Mario Galaxy* would be even stronger if the designer had chosen to afford the possibility of freely travelling to distant planets. In the 2002 GameCube game *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* the player travels over a wide open sea scattered with small islands. It is possible to see distant islands, like the distant planets in *Super Mario Galaxy*, but in *The Wind Waker* you can at any point decide to set sail to the island, which becomes clearer and more detailed as you approach it, to the point that you can set foot on land and explore it as a veritably navigable environment. In *Super Mario Galaxy* you can only travel to distant planets by pre-fixed non-navigable paths, while it would give an exceptional experience if you could see a celestial body in the sky and actually be able to travel to and set foot on it. Unfortunately, the joys of exploration and discovery are diminished by these design choices.

The narrative drive of Mario to travel to these various planets is that the age-old antagonist Bowser has picked up in the air Princess Peach and her castle and transported it to the centre of the galaxy. During Mario's quest through the galaxy he

meets the small creatures called Luma. These cute creatures live on a space ship where the player spends a lot of playing time. The history of the Luma consists of the background story of the game. Each time when the player finishes a level, a new chapter is added to the book that tells this story. This actual book is also greatly inspired on *Le Petit Prince*, as it is about a little girl who finds a small Luma that has stranded on earth in a mushroom shaped space ship, who feels homesick and wants to return to its home. They then travel together to a series of miniature planets, and the girl finally feels nostalgic for home herself.

This nostalgic and melancholy feeling of being in distant space is also very strong in *Le Petit Prince*. But there is a great difference between *Le Petit Prince* and the in-game book on the hand, and the game play and major part of *Super Mario Galaxy* on the other hand: the planets in the book are experienced in a much more poetic, emotional and personal way than the planets in the video game. In the book the planets represent loneliness, friendship, love, nostalgia, and growing-up, while in the game the planets are much more pragmatically designed as obstacle courses for the player. The cute art style with its bright and hard colouring also diminishes the slightly melancholy tone of *Le Petit Prince*. Although the game goes beyond the conventional three-dimensional spatial structure of video games, it is still emotionally one-dimensional in comparison with the book.

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Notes

[1]   Also in 2008, a game has also been produced that incorporated Escherian impossible architectures: *Echochrome* for the PSP.