

FROM PHOTOREALISM TO CANDY COLORS

Sony was recently forced to apologize to the Church of England for the “virtual desecration” of Manchester Cathedral in its highly successful Playstation 3 (PS3) game *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006). One of the game’s bloody gun battles is set inside an exact 3D rendering of the building, but Sony was forced to mount the defense that the game is mere fantasy. This did not sit easily with the fact that the PS3 was trumpeted on its launch last year for the cinema-style photorealism of its games.

The Nintendo Wii console, by contrast, has an aesthetic dominated by cute, candy-colored, and cartoonish visuals. It also has an innovative motion-sensitive controller, which allows players to direct on-screen movements with pronounced physical movements, such as swinging the controller through the air to play a tennis game, rather than by memorizing complex combinations of joystick movements and buttons that bear no gestural relation to actions performed on screen. Cheaper than the PS3, the Wii sets out to attract casual players, lapsed gamers, and non-gamers with charming graphics and easily grasped game-play.

Resistance’s apocalyptic alternate-history premise is that war with the Nazis never happened. Instead contagious aliens overran 1950s Europe. *Resistance* exemplifies the grim atmosphere and blood-soaked combat action of the first-person shooter genre. The washed-out sepia tones, ravaged environments, and bleak, “war is hell” atmosphere call to

mind World War II films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) that seek to engulf viewers in the desperation and chaos of warfare.

The shoot-em-up gameplay is framed by documentary-style cut scenes and death scenes designed to lend a veneer of historical authenticity to the main action. In between levels, a somber voice narrates the progress of the war as computer animation recreates the “Ken Burns effect,” panning and zooming over shots of black-and-white photographs, maps, and other ersatz historical documents that appear scarred and faded by time. When you are killed in action, the game cuts to a brief replay in the style of “historical footage”—the scene is re-rendered as flickering, overexposed, and dust-flecked black-and-white film, as if the moment had long ago been recorded on celluloid that has slowly degraded ever since. The game uses a representation of the material *imperfections* of celluloid in order to confer authenticity on the game animation.

Resistance could not be more distant from the astro-bright, cheerful, pop-up-book visuals and clever self-awareness of *Super Paper Mario* (2007), one of the most popular Wii games. Recalling self-referential cartoon series like Max Fleischer’s *Out of the Inkwell*, *Super Paper Mario* plays with representational conventions of depth and three-dimensional space, calling attention to the arbitrary borders of its artificial world. Unlike first-person shooters that transport the gamer into an infinitely expansive environment, *Super Paper Mario*’s landscapes abruptly end when you scroll to the right and left edge, making it

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Resistance: Fall of Man: “historical document” of alien attack (left), and the realistic first-person perspective on the battle zone. © 2006 Insomniac Games

clear that the limits of the screen also mark the limits of the game world.

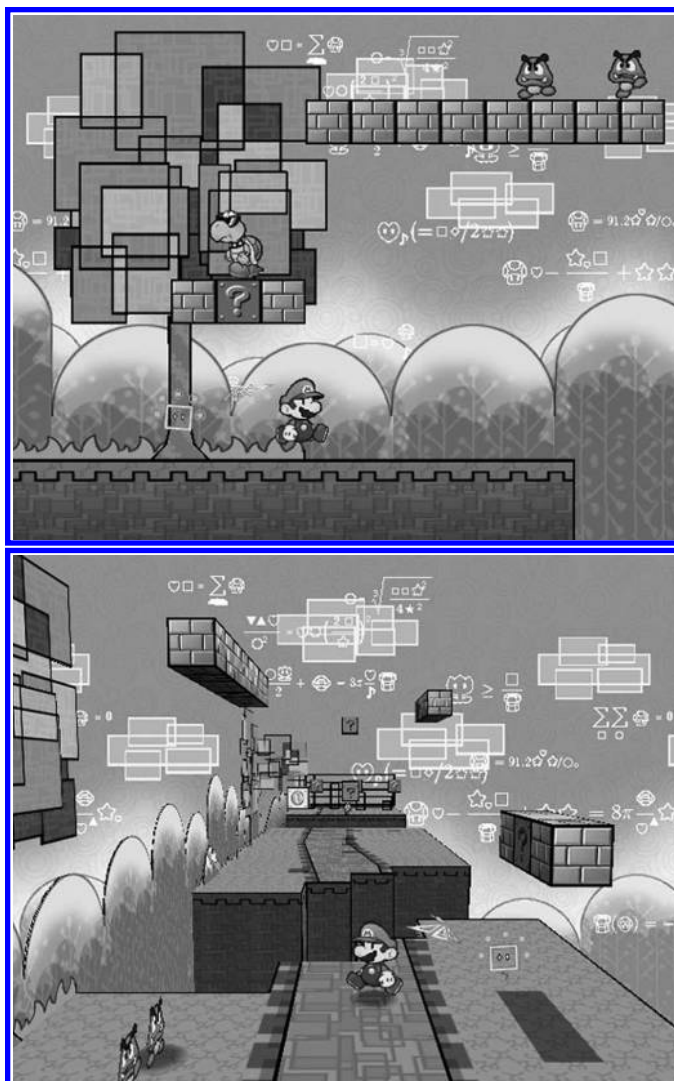
The game also requires players to flip between 2D and 3D versions of the game in order to progress. The wall that seems impenetrable or the monster that seems overwhelmingly huge in 2D do not necessarily carry weight in the 3D world. Raised platforms that seem solid beneath your feet in 2D become wire-thin in 3D, causing you to tumble to the ground. Shifting between dimensions shows objects and creatures in the environment puffing up and flattening out unexpectedly, upsetting any stable spatial relationship between you and others, figure and ground.

Resistance and most other PS3 titles aim for the three-dimensionality of live-action cinema. Space is uniformly ordered through first-person linear perspective, unfolding before you as a vast, continuous field. The game's physics engine carefully simulates real-world physical laws, particularly as they apply to the behavior of weapons fire—sprays of shrapnel leave differently shaped dents on walls and alien armor depending on the force of impact. The environment forms an internally coherent given for players to penetrate. In *Super Paper Mario*, the transformation of space between dimensions *is* the action. Space is not static ground on which figures move or where actions occur, but something that forms and re-forms as you flip between 2D and 3D perspectives.

Super Paper Mario incorporates the screen aesthetics we encounter in our daily use of computers—the accumulation of windows layered on top of each other as we shuffle between browser windows, media players, instant messaging, or office applications with graphics of varying quality—and turns these into a form of play. Line-drawn animations that resemble Etch-a-Sketch doodles and blocky, 8-bit graphics lifted from classic games intermingle with high-resolution 3D animation. Selection boxes expand over sections of the game screen that are then “cut” and “pasted” elsewhere to transition Mario from one world to the next.

By calling attention to our screen interfaces, *Super Paper Mario* discloses the dimensional strangeness of the way that we interact with digital-image screens as if they were simultaneously windows and sheets of paper, both deep and depthless. We experience the proliferating screens of our computers, cell phones, iPods, and televisions as portholes into a three-dimensional world beyond, as when we watch a movie on DVD, *and* as flat surfaces, as when we type on a word-processor page or click through an online photo album.

The success of the Wii is a reminder that photorealistic exploration-and-combat is only one kind of gaming. Wii games, especially those that make most inventive use of the system's controller, adopt an alternative paradigm that re-



Flipping between 2D and 3D in *Super Paper Mario*.

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quires different kinds of play and bodily engagement with the thick physical world we occupy away from the screen. The way Wii players situate their bodies between real-world space and on-screen game images is like the way they constantly flip between 2D and 3D in *Super Paper Mario*.

A theoretical question is always implicit. How can we be simultaneously here, waving a controller at the television in a room with friends (for Wii games are often designed to be played in a group), *and* there, on screen, hitting a baseball into the distant horizon? *Super Paper Mario* points up the optical illusion of the photorealist paradigm in gaming and makes us delight in its constant undoing and reconstruction. Our relationship to computer screens may often be one we take for granted. *Super Paper Mario* requires us to remain curious about the paradoxes of immersion in digital space.

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