Matthew Dessner (6465080) & Joelle Cytrynbaum (6599451)

Communication Analysis of Environment - COMS 324

Magdalena Olszanowski

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<p style="text-align:center;">"8-BIT ASSAULT"'</p>

Our project, *8-Bit Assault* aims to systematically interrogate the notion of a collective

nostalgia which has often been attributed to the famed retro video games of the late 20th century.

To accomplish this, we deliberately introduced advertising into certain celebrated titles such as

Super Mario Bros, Tetris and *Zelda,* provoking the collective unconscious of the nostalgic gamer

through a comedic intervention, and ultimately challenging and disturbing a specific set of

hegemonic discourses that have since become normalized within the industry. The project

challenges the predominantly uncontested presence of advertising in today's most popular video

games through a visceral re-exploration of a series of spaces so intricately connected to the

childhoods of many. To create a project with these goals in mind, we embarked upon a process of

reorientation. We were forced "to rethink the phenomenality of space - that is, how space is

dependent on bodily inhabitance" (Ahmed, 6); as such, when one plays *Super Mario Bros.* and

takes control of Mario, they are in effect embodying the 8-bit character and are expected to act in

a certain way (beat the levels and save the princess) and through an intentional reorientation we

can renegotiate these typical actions, engaging in a form of détournement (Debord). To better

contextualize the set of discourses we seek to destabilize, this essay will explore the effects of

nostalgia, the history and consequences of the industry's normalized approach to advertising in

video games, and finally, will explore the notion of phenomenology and the interrelated theories of Henri Lefebvre, Sarah Ahmed and Jason Farman to understand how virtual spaces become lived experiences; ultimately, the using these notions to display the manner in which 8-Bit Assault aims to subvert the discourses of a Westernized consumerist society.

The cultural significance of these games in today's discourse has shifted along with the newfound importance of elaborate plot-lines and the public's fascination for awe-inspiring graphics. The technological capabilities of the consoles made available for us today allow for incredibly large amounts of data that translate into hours upon years of gameplay that were not available in previous games. The commercial functionality of these games and the rapidity of technological change induce constant new releases with a fast assimilation into contemporary culture. In contrast, *Pac-Man*'s stability in popularity throughout history is characterized by the emotional implications of nostalgia and the resulted differences of embodiment. these emotions founded by the assimilation of past recollections, are the foundation of Mario or Pac-Man's acclaim. However the phenomenological examination of our experience of these virtual spaces leads to the conclusion that nostalgia induces more than strong emotional responses, it "boosts positive affect, self-regard, social connectedness, and existential meaning" (Natterer, 163). By doing so, it effectively instigates communal cohesion, creating a collective nostalgic body that shares similar emotions. This phenomenon characterizes the quintessential video game as a virtual space befitting of Jason Farman's definition, which acknowledges the "reality" of a space that is often considered fake (36). The embodiment of this virtual space provokes emotions that are as real as the ones we experience in "real" or concrete environments. In the project, the

familiarity of these spaces clashes with the integration of advertisements and brand names as foreign elements. *Pac-Man* and *Duck Hunt* have never been historically inclusive of external commercial materials, however they are now revisited in a contemporary context through the exploration of current practices in advertising. This creates a new embodied experience of old arcade games in which the player is no longer in control of the game. The chaotic events caused by the ads unfold for others to watch powerlessly as *Pac-Man* grows a pair of wings and bursts free from his usually undisturbed confinement (APPENDIX 1).

Through the bombardment of contradicting messages, this project highlights the absence of ads in older arcade games and questions the normality of their presence in video games today. The integration of advertisements has become common practice in the early 1990s, particularly in sports games (J. Bardzell, S. Bardzell, 3). They have evolved into a complete assimilation of brand names plastered across every new release. According to J. and S. Bardzell, these static ads soon became dynamic with an in-game online presence, in which game publishers have the ability to dynamically serve and change ads in games (4). The brands advertised in *8-Bit Assault* are commonly encountered today, in virtual as well as concrete spaces. However in our project, not only are they dynamic and interchangeable, but a significant part of our interrogational strategy was to make it so the advertisements had a significant and harmful effect towards the outcome of the game itself. While this might be a bit of an exaggeration, it is in this slight detail where our project finds its argument; if the brands didn't get in the way, they could merely be sponsoring the games instead of being a nuisance.

In any discussion of discourse - and the practice of détournement, one must take a look at the systems of power which provide and nurture said discourse. Games and advertisements both serve economic purposes. Games are made to be sold while advertisements are made to sell. In this project, our systematic assault on nostalgia for the purposes of critiquing a particular practice engaged in by advertisers simultaneously comments upon the games' inherently economic motives. Every single retro-game featured in *8-Bit Assault* was produced to be sold; in fact, the first *Super Mario Bros.* sold more than any other game in the series at 40.23 million copies. This notion of economic value speaks to the way in which the virtual space of video games is produced. Henri Lefebvre discusses how space is defined through social practices and in using his notion of the triad we can analyze the relationship between the industry and the player (289-290). In playing *Super Mario Bros.* and taking control of (embodying) Mario in order to save the princess, we are adhering to a certain set of socially produced ideologies; in other words, "since embodiment is always co-created alongside space, it must be noted, embodiment is always site- specific to the particular cultures, histories, and relationships that serve as catalysts to such production" (Farman 19). When we buy video games, we are assumed to be consumers and are expected to play the game as the developer intended. In Lefebvre's terms, *8-Bit Assault* forms a "differential space", because it uses the same space which the developer created to question the capitalist practice of its consumption (293). This differential space becomes a battleground of ideology; on one hand, a viewer of our project might laugh because the situations we created were comedic (re)representations of nostalgic memories - for instance, the way in which Link's sword in *The Legend of Zelda* becomes a roll of Bounty paper towels seems funny, but imagine if you tried saving *Hyrule* with a roll of paper towels (the player wouldn't survive

very long!) (APPENDIX 2) - but on the other hand, our project highlights the way advertising

has infiltrated all sorts of media today and the way capitalism makes money through our

collective nostalgia. While in game advertising might not actually be present in the *Mario*

Brothers games, think about all the remakes and re-releases which Nintendo developed over the

years and it is easy to see the economic rationale behind their production. In this way, our

"assault" becomes personal because by playing these games throughout our childhoods, they

have in effect, shaped who we are today. Sarah Ahmed describes this phenomenological notion,

reminding us that "spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that

unfolds in the folds of the body" (9). Our systematic introduction of advertising as a seemingly

foreign element into these classic video games is simply an ode of the logic of the commodity

and a crude reminder that we are but products of a deceptive and prosperous "culture

industry" (Adorno & Horkheimer). As we aim to save the princess or eat another ghost, we are

simply keeping ourselves entertained, but we must remember that "the man with leisure has to

accept what the culture manufacturers offer him (Adorno & Horkheimer 124). As a man (or

woman) who engages in these video games, we must keep in mind that we are using a piece of

entertainment provided for us by an industry with but one goal; remembering this notion may not

be as crucial when engaging with mindless entertainment like *Super Mario Bros*. or *Pac-Man*,

however when today's games are becoming inundated with advertisements and product

placements, it is a valuable message to consider.

    8-Bit Assault is not intended to devalue the nostalgic experiences attributed to these

classic video games. Despite how we've also highlighted their inherent economic purposes, our

intentions were more interested in using this relationship to highlight the way in which

advertising and capitalism runs rampant through the world of video games - and the media we

consume daily. To highlight this notion, one of the final "brands" we included in *8-Bit Assault*

was the United States of America, as represented by the American flag (APPENDIX 3); never

mind saving the princess, save yourself - recognize that you are a product of a capitalist system

and subvert the discourses which have become normalized.

Team Reflection

The creation of 8 bit assault involved research and a time-consuming process of

production, animation and editing. We worked together in the creation of the visuals and the

conception of ideas, and we fruitfully combined our skills and abilities to the final result, such as

Matthew's skills in Adobe Premiere and Joelle's ease with Adobe After-Effects. Because the

project was so work-intensive, our past experience working together on group projects combined

with our experiences in animation and in film editing was very beneficial.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Appendix 2

Appendix 3