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The Netherlands

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Wouters, Puck

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Virtual Liminal Space Photography and Nostalgia in *Super Mario 64* (1996)

Student:	Puck Wouters s3336182
Supervisor and second reader:	Dr. S.A. Shobeiri Dr. T. Witty
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Abstract

In recent years, the worldwide web has become host to numerous new ideas and communities that occupy themselves with these ideas. The liminal space phenomenon is one of these ideas, centering around images of abandoned places that allegedly evoke nostalgic and uneasy feelings within those that look at them. These liminal space photographs can come from pictures of the real world, yet many of them are virtual photographs, taken from 3D renders or more commonly, video game environments. Nintendo's *Super Mario 64* (1996) is a video game that proves to be remarkably popular within the genre of virtual liminal spaces, and for a few good reasons. Its aesthetics and status as pivotal stepping stone in the development of 3D platformers makes it an object of nostalgia for many within the liminal space communities, and its rich legacy of creepypastas and conspiracy theories only adds to its atmosphere of mystery and eeriness. Over time, this legacy has evolved into virtual photographs of *Super Mario 64* environments circulating online, and ending up in the repertoire of liminal space communities. These photographs either originate from the game engine itself, or are created through 3D modelling programs. The nostalgia that people feel for the game adds on to the nostalgia that liminal spaces themselves perpetuate, creating a situation in which members of the online liminal space communities exaggerate nostalgia as a concept so much that they manufacture feelings for places and things that never even existed in the real world in the first place.

Acknowledgements

I hereby confirm that the contents of this Master's thesis are fully original and written by me and only me, without the assistance of generative AI like ChatGPT, as is the case study that I discuss and the academic texts that I use to discuss it. I have not copied content or ideas of other students and scholars, and every concept that I use that is not my own, I will credit accordingly.

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Introduction

Imagination is a privilege that humanity is allowed to enjoy, and over the past few decades, it has evolved to reach beyond books and simple stories. Photography, film, and video games are relative newcomers to the field of art and entertainment, and the latter especially brought with it new discourse and new ways to look at how people interact with art and narratives. Due to their interactive nature, video games provide a level of immersion that differs greatly from immersion experienced when watching a film or listening to narrative, and because of this, video games have given rise to new ways in which a work can be perceived and discussed. The ability to roam within a digital environment opens up new ways in which someone can experience a narrative, or even the environment that they are in. Video games are supposed to speak to the imagination of those that play them, and sometimes that means that the video game starts to live outside of the bounds of its own text.

Super Mario 64 (Nintendo, 1996) is an example of a video game that was able to form a legacy that concerns itself with more than merely the game's content: aside from being remembered as a nostalgic early 3D platformer, it also amassed a reputation of being a video game full of secrets and mysteries that still fascinate certain groups on the Internet long after its initial release. The belief that *Super Mario 64* possesses secret levels, characters, or even has the ability to influence and haunt people in real life lays at the foundation of a larger network of conspiracy theories and creepypastas surrounding the game, all of which stem from the simple fact that the game's ambiance, aesthetics and level design inspire a sense of unease, nostalgia, and morbid curiosity within its players.

Research Question

In this thesis, I aim to uncover the answer to the question: how does virtual photography of liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64* (1996) expand upon ideas on nostalgia? To come to a structured conclusion, I will split this research question up into three chapters, and answer each part of the research question compartment by compartment. I want to cultivate an understanding of the case study and its nature first of all, then explain the theories that I intend to use, and then bring the things that I will have discussed thus far together into a harmonious whole. Later on in the introduction, I will give a more detailed overview of what function each chapter will have in the greater whole of the thesis.

Motivation

Having grown up in the 2000s and 2010s, I am no stranger to seeing technology take massive developmental strides in a relatively short timeframe. In a rapid pace, games became more sophisticated, elaborate, and visually striking, and likewise, the Internet quickly developed from a niche experimental corner to a central platform for socialization. The end of the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s also brought with it the transition from 2D games to 3D, with home consoles becoming more commonplace, with handheld personal gaming consoles following close by. I have played a lot of games on the Nintendo DS and early variants of the Playstation, namely the Playstation 1 (1994) and 2 (2000). Many of the games on these gaming devices were considered to be technologically advanced at the time, but are rather rudimentary compared to what can be achieved in the 2020s. *Super Mario 64*'s DS remaster (2004), as well as a few similar games like Insomniac's *Spyro the Dragon* series, were a staple for me as I developed as a gamer, and looking back now, I remain with fond yet curious memories about that playing experience. Many like myself recall having a strange feeling about playing *Super Mario 64*, and now that the Internet has given that feeling a life of its own, my curiosity has risen to a level that I want to dedicate academic research into it.

The liminal space aesthetic is also a subject that has fascinated me for a longer time, to the point that most of my Bachelor's, I tried to research it and incorporate it into my work and assignments as much as I possibly could. At the time I would not have made the connection between liminal spaces and *Super Mario 64*, but now that I have the tools and knowledge to deepen my research and involve photography as an element of it, I have found it to be a strong case study. The Internet has developed at an incredibly rapid pace, and since the COVID-19 pandemic, it has shown to be a powerful platform for people all across the planet to curate their identity, as well as their nostalgia for the past. I myself have experienced nostalgia when it comes to *Super Mario 64* and other games and media from that time period, and I have seen that attempts to chase the feeling and try to express it leads to interesting new developments. Nostalgia has become an important part of forming an identity on the Internet, and as has been the case with many recent things, labelling and trends have become more important than ever. I seek to understand how nostalgia for a game like *Super Mario 64* shapes these trends, and how it reflects on how expression functions in a time period when the quickly developing Internet can turn anything into trends.

Chapter Outline

Over the course of three chapters, I will dissect my case study and apply it to theories of liminality, nostalgia, and virtual photography, as to gain an understanding of how *Super Mario 64*'s digital environment expands on ideas of nostalgia, especially within the online liminal space community.

I will do this by first contextualizing the video game and giving an overview on the genre that it belongs to, its narratological and mechanical conventions, and the cultural legacy that the case study has left behind. The purpose of this chapter is to cultivate a strong understanding of the case study, so that applying it to other theories will not be confusing or

lacking in context. I will first give a brief overview of where *Super Mario 64* came from and what the game entails, from its narrative to how it is played. Then I will provide additional context about the genre that the game belongs to, that being platformers, to give the case study a stronger background and have answers as to why certain aspects of the game turned out the way they did, in which Toni Minkkinen's thesis on platformers forms a strong foundation . Then I will discuss the cultural legacy *Super Mario 64* has left in its wake, both in how it was perceived by the game industry and its players as a whole, as well as the metatexts it brought about. Despite proving to be an acclaimed game, *SM64* has evoked plenty of discussions that do not concern themselves with the game's narrative or mechanics at all, but rather the idea that the game is hiding something from its players. This will give me a smooth transition towards the other part of the contextualization of the game, which is its more obscure side, relating to how *Super Mario 64* has become the host of many conspiracy theories, in which Travis L. Wagner's article on conspiracy theories about *Super Mario 64* is an especially helpful text. I will describe a few of these theories and explore why it is that the game attracts so many, and what aspects of the game have inspired them. After naming a few examples, I will also discuss how these theories were received around the release time of the game, that being the late 90s, versus now. The Internet has changed a lot since the game came out, and the way conspiracy theories are perceived and circulated has changed accordingly. I will also introduce the concept of creepypastas, and how this more recent Internet invention changes and expands on what already existed of *Super Mario 64*'s alleged 'dark side', where I'll use texts on creepypastas by Jessica Balanzategui and Alexander J. Zawacki.

In the second chapter, I introduce the theories about liminality, liminal spaces, and virtual photographs of these spaces that I will then apply to the case study itself. I construct this introduction to the concept in a chronological manner, where I'll start with referencing Arnold van Gennep's theories as described in Gregory Forth's review of his texts, and

progress towards the present day, passing by Edward S. Casey's and Dylan Trigg's notions on liminality along the way, and ending with Ruyu Zhao's very modern interpretation of liminality and liminal space photographs. Aside from including the basics of liminality, I will also outline a variety of liminal spaces that are present within the game, which serve to unite the theory with the visual content provided by the case study. To define and contextualize the term 'virtual photography' I will work with an introductory chapter written by Dr. Ali Shobeiri for the book *Virtual Photography: Artificial Intelligence, In-Game, and Extended Reality* (2024), so that I can define the term before I proceed to use it in my analysis of liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64*. Once I accomplish this, I will move on to connect the theories about liminality and the liminal space aesthetic to several areas from the video game, where my intention is to show the different manners in which the game proves to be liminal, and to give a face and example to theories and concepts that I bring up. Afterwards, I will zoom in on Princess Peach's Castle, a prominent central area in *Super Mario 64*, and determine through a detailed description and dissection of the digital environment, why it is a strong example of a liminal space. Once this is done I will circle back to virtual photography of the liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64* very briefly, before I make my transition into the next chapter.

In the third and final chapter, I will analyze how virtual photographs of liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64* expand on concepts of nostalgia, and how themes of nostalgia and liminality are treated in online environments. The notion of nostalgia that I will use in this chapter is based in a text by Paula Sweeney. I will give an overview of how online communities that occupy themselves with liminal space photography, virtual or otherwise, interact with *Super Mario 64*'s digital environments and visual legacy, and use these examples to analyze how the behavior of these liminal space communities reflects on how they handle the feelings of nostalgia that the liminal spaces in the video game invoke within

then. I will go over two distinct movements of communities that expand on the concept of liminal space aesthetics: The Backrooms community, and the -core aesthetics community. While it is hard to call both of these movements strict communities, it is true that various people occupy themselves with following and contributing to a certain trend, and *Super Mario 64*'s involvement on both sides of these movements. Once I have explained both sides of the liminal space aesthetic communities, I will dedicate a part of the chapter to a reflection on *Super Mario 64*'s own general presence in the broader online liminal space community, after which I will discuss how its virtual photographs of its liminal space expand on the nostalgic expression that liminal space aesthetics have allowed to thrive.

Finally, I will go over my points and unite it into a coherent whole in my conclusion. In forming this conclusion, Sweeney's theory of nostalgia and Viki Conner's text on nostalgia in the context of Internet aesthetics are of importance.

Methodology

The intention of my thesis is not to tackle the entire phenomenon of liminal space aesthetics and the many offshoots and communities it brings forth. Instead, I want to provide an overall description of this phenomenon by leaning heavily on the case study. As mentioned previously, *Super Mario 64* is a game that I have personally experienced feelings of liminality with, and as I will come to explain and prove further down in the thesis, I am not alone in my experience. The method I will use to come to my eventual conclusion will be a constant back and forth between picking apart parts of the case study to link it together with the theories provided, to establish a connection between academic knowledge that I have come to learn about, and examples from a video game that I and others within the liminal space aesthetics community have taken note of.

While the narrative of *Super Mario 64* will be irrelevant outside of contextualizing the game in the first chapter, I will give a 'close reading' of one of the environments in the game, that being Princess Peach's Castle, to which I will devote a subsection in the second chapter.

Chapter 01: Contextualizing *Super Mario 64* (1996)

Introduction

Since its inception and gradual rise to popularity in the 1970s, video games as a medium have offered plenty of insights into how players interact and perceive the digital environments of the games that they play. Whether this environment takes on the shape of a photorealistic open world or a more puzzle-oriented and abstract 2D space, there exist many ways in which a video game enables a player to navigate through the playing experience. As with many forms of media and art, the medium has expanded upon itself and evolves over time, creating a cycle in which a video game that was once considered to be innovative and pushing the technological boundaries of its time becomes the template for a new generation of games, after which it is absorbed into the canon, turning into a classic that players and game reviewers can look back on with fond memories.

A variety of games, however, are more resistant to this cycle than others, and are able to maintain their popularity long after their release. *Super Mario 64* (1996) is an example of a video game that once pushed the technological boundaries of the medium, yet, despite newer games surpassing it in terms of innovation after some time, retains relevancy far past its release date — albeit for different reasons.

A Brief History of Super Mario 64

Starting with the 2D pixelated platformer *Super Mario Bros.* in 1985, video game company Nintendo came to claim a foundational position within the canon of platformer games, and video games as a whole. For over 40 years, its titular protagonist Mario has traversed various renditions of Nintendo's fictional universe, transitioning from scrolling 2D environments to open 3D worlds. *Super Mario 64* (1996) was the first installment in the *Super Mario Bros*.

franchise to feature a fully 3D open world (Wagner, 22), and left a lasting impression on the gaming community, with it a long and rich legacy that carries on into the decades that followed its publication. As referenced in its title, the game was created to be played on the Nintendo 64, a fifth generation video game console from 1996 that was made for home use.

At the moment of writing this thesis, the original *SM64* is set to become 30 years old next year, with its equally popular DS remaster (2004) having celebrated its 20th birthday a year ago; at this age, it is not unwarranted to assume that it possesses a nostalgic quality for many (young) adults. Similar to the original game, the DS remaster released to fit Nintendo's newest console at the time, that being the Nintendo DS (2004), a small handheld video game console. Two years later, the Nintendo DS Lite (2006) released, extending the lifespan of DS remaster by giving it yet another handheld platform.

Though adhering to roughly the same plot and giving off a similar atmosphere and experience, there are some notable differences between these two versions of the game, which will be addressed as the case study is further analyzed and dissected. Most of my personal research comes from playing the 2004 DS edition, whose most notable added features are the possibility to unlock other playable characters, play with multiple players, and an improved title screen where the player can access minigames that are also unlockable through in-game collecting. The 2004 remake also came with overhauled graphics, which despite their more HD quality retain the same essence of eerie uneasiness. The thesis will discuss the original *Super Mario 64* and its DS remaster alongside each other as a combined case study, since the elements that are relevant to this research are present in both of the variants. Simply keep in mind that most of the remarks on gameplay that do not originate from an external source are based on the 2004 Nintendo DS version of the game.

Gameplay and Narrative

Super Mario 64's narrative follows the same principle that previous installments of the *Super Mario Bros*. games did, where Mario and his allies have to rescue Princess Peach, a love interest to Mario and an important political figure within the universe of the game, from the central protagonist Bowser, an evil reptilian from a neighboring kingdom who resembles a dragonic turtle-like being.

At the start of both versions of the game, Princess Peach invites Mario to one of her royal castles, promising him a cake that she has baked. Mario, and in the DS version of the game, his brother Luigi and their friend Wario, arrive at Peach's Castle shortly after, only to find that Princess Peach and most of her staff is nowhere to be found. She and the resident Toads, mushroom-headed humanoids that serve the Princess, were locked away into the walls of the castle by Bowser, who stole the magical abilities of the Power Stars that once resided within the Castle. In the original *Super Mario 64*, this is where the player gains control over Mario and starts their playthrough. In the DS version of the game, however, Mario and the others are first locked up into the castle as well, each imprisoned in their respective unlockable rooms.

Instead, the player starts the game embodying a sentient dinosaur called Yoshi, and has to collect a keys to unlock Mario, Luigi and Wario as playable characters as they progress through the courses. In this version of the game, each playable character has attributes and abilities that are specific to them, such as Luigi's amplified jumping power, or Wario's superior physical strength that allows him to punch through harder materials than the other characters. Alongside their natural skills and attributes, each character also has the ability to find and use Power Flowers, in-game power-ups that allow them to use a personal super power such as firebreathing for Yoshi or the ability to inflate like a balloon and float to otherwise unreachable platforms for Mario. The player is only able to play one of these

characters at the time, though in certain cutscenes, the characters may appear alongside each other (Fig1.1).

Figure 1.1: In the ending cutscene of the DS version of the game, all four of the playable characters meet Princess Peach, who expresses her gratitude for being saved. Source: Link (accessed on 29 Aug 2025).

Regardless of who the player starts their playthrough with, the mechanics of the game remain roughly the same. The player enters Peach's Castle to search for the Power Stars that Bowser has stolen to rescue the Princess and her servants. To do this, the player has to jump through the canvases of magical paintings scattered throughout the castle in various rooms and corridors. These paintings transport the player to levels, or courses, which are subworlds that contain obstacles and enemies that the player has to face off against to acquire the Power Star. The ambiance, theming, and opponents differ from course to course, and aside from the specialized boss level courses, the player is able to return to the levels multiple times to complete other quests and earn more Power Stars. In the original *Super Mario 64*, the player

can collect a total of 120 Power Stars, whereas in the DS remaster, this number is increased to 150. The player can find these additional Power Stars by completing new missions added to existing courses, as well as collecting 100 coins within each course.

Throughout the game, the player needs a set amount of Power Stars to progress further in the storyline. Doors to other parts of the Castle, as well as boss fights, require a set amount of Stars, which means that the player is only able to defeat Bowser and reclaim Princess Peach's domain after collecting enough of them. In the DS version of the game, the player has the additional option to collect keys to unlock the other playable characters and mini-games in Princess Peach's recreational room, which they are then able to play via this room or the game menu. The game's narrative comes to an end when the player defeats Bowser for the third time and thus frees the Princess, after which they are able to return to the Castle and roam freely in case they want to replay missions, collect more Power Stars, or unlock more mini-games.

About Platformer Games

Platformers are one of the many classical types of video game, with the *Super Mario Bros*. franchise harboring many renowned games within that genre. Even the titular protagonist Super Mario finds his roots within the genre, as at the time of his inception, he went by the name of "Jump Man" (Cohen, n.p.). Traditionally speaking, platformer games center around the player controlling a character that navigates a 2D or 3D environment by walking and jumping, usually with the additional objectives of taking out enemies and collecting items. The environment the player character exists within is either a single-screen game, meaning the entire level that the player plays in is confined to the screen of the computer, or a scrolling platformer, in which the level expands as the player approaches the edge of the screen (Minkkinen, 2).

In his thesis documenting the history of the platformer genre, game theory scholar Toni Minkkinen identifies seven subgenres of platformer games: hop and bop, run and gun, puzzle platformers, metroidvania, cinematic platformers, isometric platformers, and endless runners (5-11). All of these subgenres correlate with the technological advancements of their respective time periods, starting with the hop and bop subgenre in the early 1980s, of which *Super Mario Bros.*'s predecessor *Donkey Kong* (1981) was one of the pioneers. As the earliest version of platformer video games, hop and bop platformers primarily resolve around the mechanic of a character running across a 2D environment and attacking opponents by jumping on top of them, often utilizing a colorful and cartoonlike aesthetic (Minkkinen, 5). Within the same decade, puzzle platformers and run and gun platformers also rose to prominence, with the former emphasizing on the player having to solve puzzles within their environments, and the latter being very similar to hop and bop platformers, save for the addition of projectile weapons (Minkkinen, 6).

Towards the latter half of the 1980s, metroidvania and cinematic platformers also made their way into the platformer video game canon, with each of these subgenres expanding on the use of digital game environments in their own unique ways. Metroidvania games emphasize on exploring large open world environments, where the player has to collect items and progress through challenges to unlock new parts of the world (Minkkinen, 7). Instead of having to walk from point A to point B, the player now possessed the ability to roam and reject the linear conventions of older and more traditional platformer games. Figure 1.2. shows an example of this in Konami's 1987 *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* game, where a player of the game made a map with instructions to help other players navigate through the large levels and cope with the newfound freedom of a non-linear explorable game world. *Castlevania* also happens to be part of one of the two game franchises that the subgenre owes part of its name to, the other being *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) and its sequels.

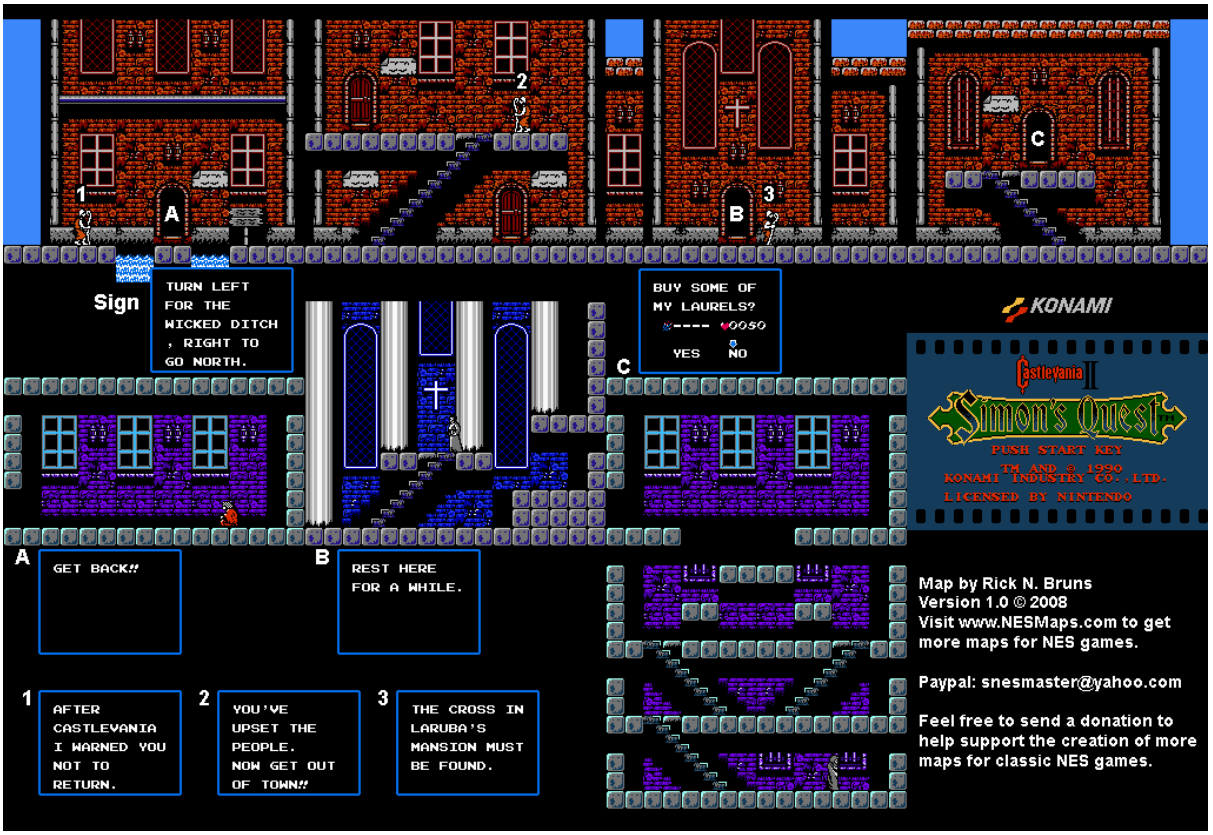

Figure 1.2: A screenshot from the original Castlevania (1986), showing a map of all the levels in the castle that the player is able to explore and unlock. Source: Link (accessed on 29 Aug 2025)

Closer to the end of the same decade, this sense of immersion was further expanded upon by cinematic platformers, which prioritized realism and cinematic qualities. They invested heavily in more realistic graphics and game physics, and often used rotoscoping techniques to make their character animations appear more fluent and lifelike (Minkkinen, 8).

In the 1990s and the early 2000s, platformers began their shift towards experimenting with 3D environments. The so-called isometric platformer has its roots in the late 1980s, and achieved the illusion of a 3D-environment through a method called isometric projection. Isometric platformers provide the player with a top-down view of their environment, where every coordinate axis is foreshortened and cross each other at 120 degree angles. This specific perspective gives the illusion of depth, and thus creates a digital 2D environment that

appears to be 3D (fig.1.3). The polygonal 3D models and environments that *Super Mario 64* and all the 3D video games that succeeded it make use of were still outside the realm of possibility with the technology available at the time, yet isometric platformers managed to create an imitation of this, thus opening up new ways in which players could navigate their game environments. No longer bound to the same 2D sideway view that had dominated the platformer genre for the past two decades, the environments of isometric platformers had more room for details and layering of objects.

Figure 1.3: An example of isometric projection in *Spyro: Attack of the Rhynocs* (2003). Source: Link (accessed on 29 Aug 2025)

Additionally, as time went on and technology grew more advanced, game studios produced attempts at genuine 3D platformers. So-called 2.5D games featured pre-rendered 3D sprites in 2D environments (Minkkinen, 9), bridging the gap between 2D and 3D step by step. The very first game to be considered a fully 3D platformer, though, would be Exact and Ultra's

1995 game *JumpingFlash!*, at least according to the Guinness Book of World Records[1]. Around this time period, *Super Mario 64* itself released in 1996, after which the change from 2D to 3D set in rather rapidly, with other acclaimed 3D platformers like Naughty Dog's *Crash Bandicoot* (1996) and Sega's *Sonic Adventure* (1998) arriving shortly after.

Lastly, the latter half of the 2000s leading into the 2010s brought another subgenre of platformer video game, called "endless runners" (Minkkinen, 11). True to its name, this genre of 3D platformers actually take a step back in terms of narratological depth and open world exploration, and instead focuses on creating an endlessly generating course for the player to run across, dodging obstacles as they do so (Minkkinen, 11). Games like *Subway Surfers* (Kiloo and SYBO Games, 2012) and *Temple Run* (Imangi Studios, 2011) are examples of platformers within the endless runner subgenre. As is the case with most of the games in the subgenre, including the two mentioned above, these platformers primarily cater towards mobile use and thus were made to require little to no complex input (Minkkinen, 11).

Rather than following a narrative and progressing towards the end of a level, endless runners require the player to keep their character running for as long as possible, usually collecting items on the way that they can use in-between rounds to upgrade their characters, change to a different level location, or purchase different visuals for their player character. Contrary to the subgenres that came before, endless runners intentionally cycle back to a more simplistic video game format, which prioritises the base mechanics of running, jumping, and sometimes sliding over previously explored mechanics such as roleplaying, open world exploration, or experimenting with dimensions and graphics.

Super Mario 64 released shortly before the turn of the millennium, with its DS remake following a few years into the 2000s, so although the influence of endless runners on the game's mechanics and aesthetics would be non-existent, it is not unfair to claim that the

[1] Link to the Guinness World Records website, that cites *JumpingFlash!* (1995) as the first true 3D platformer game. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

platformer subgenres that came before all contributed to how the game takes form. Without isometric projection, the jump towards a fully 3D environment would not have been possible, and without the metroidvania platformers' experimentation with open worlds and unlockable level mechanics, *Super Mario 64* would not have had the same opportunities for non-linear exploration and functional item collection. Furthermore, *Super Mario 64* is by no means a stand-alone game, and its existence would not have been possible without Nintendo's early hop and bop games either.

Legacy and Cultural Impact

As mentioned previously, *Super Mario 64* is a game that possesses a rich legacy that is still honored decades after its release. This already became evident with the publication of the DS remaster in 2004, and was emphasized on further when Nintendo re-released the original 1996 variant with in *Super Mario 3D All-Stars* (2020), alongside its two succeeding classics *Super Mario Sunshine* (2002) and *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007). *All-Stars* released as a compilation game meant for Nintendo's new handheld Switch console, and re-released all three games as a package deal with upgraded graphics. Worth noting is that Nintendo deliberately chose for the version of *Super Mario 64* that came without additional playable characters, mini-games, and Power Stars, likely to embrace the theme of bringing the classics back for its new generation of gaming consoles.

As Nintendo's flagship platformer that marked the transition from 2D to 3D video games (Fong, 4), it would not be unfair to assume that a lot of *Super Mario 64*'s legacy comes from its status as a pioneer in its field, and an acclaimed one at that. IGN, a leading online platform in the field of video game journalism, considers *Super Mario 64* to be one of the best video games of all time, placing it at seventh place out of a hundred[2], as did video

[2] Link to IGN's article *The Best 100 Video Games of All Time.* Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

game magazine *Electronic Games Monthly*, who placed the game at number four out of a hundred[3]. Additionally, *Super Mario 64* won numerous gaming awards following its release, such as Game Informer's Game of the Year[4], Spotlight Awards' award for Best Use of Innovative Technology[5], and Electronic Gaming Monthly's Best Graphics award[6].

One of the things that made *Super Mario 64* memorable for the 3D-platformers that succeeded it, was its world design. *SM64* allows the player to traverse what is called a compound world: a collection of microworlds divided by differentiations in world organization (Gingold, 38). In the case of *SM64*, the boundaries between these microworlds are visibly defined by painting frames, with each teleporting painting usually existing in a separate room that the player can access through communal halls, staircases, and unlockable doors. The mechanics of the game itself also assist in further emphasizing the boundaries between worlds, as most of the microworlds — with the exception of boss fight worlds like Goomboss Battle or unique locations like The Princess' Secret Slide — first present the player with a selection screen before they are able to enter into the microworld. This selection screen shows how many Power Stars still remain within the microworld, and as the player keeps returning to the microworld, they are able to unlock more Power Stars by completing their respective missions. In the 2004 DS version, some of these quests can only be completed by a specific player character. Most of the levels also have an unmarked Power Star that the player can acquire through often hidden and more demanding challenges.

Other 3D platformers from its time period began to follow a similar format, such as Insomniac Games' *Spyro the Dragon* (1998) and *Spyro 2: Gateway to Glimmer* (1999). In both games the player embodies a purple dragon named Spyro, who traverses platformer

[3] Link to a digitalized version of Electronic Gaming's November 1997 issue with their Top 100 List of Best Games. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[4] Link to Game Informer's overview of their Game of the Year from 1992 to 2017. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[5] Link to a digitalized version of NEXT Generation's July 1997 issue, in which they discuss SM64 winning the aforementioned award. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[6] Link to a digitalized version of Electronic Gaming's 1996 special feature issue reporting on their 1996 Game of the Year Awards. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

levels to defeat opponents and collect items. Its formula is very similar to *Super Mario 64*, with gemstones replacing coins, and freeing petrified dragons and collecting talismans replacing the mechanic of retrieving Power Stars. Contrary to *SM64*, however, the *Spyro* franchise takes the compound world dynamic a step further and allows the player to progress and travel between multiple hub worlds, each of which possess portals to their own set of microworlds. Furthermore, even video games outside of the 3D platformer genre took inspiration from the hubworld or compound world format, such as Ubisoft's 2011 action-adventure game *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*[7].

There is, however, another component that contributes to *Super Mario 64*'s that is far more ambiguous in whether or not it appreciates and praises the game. Ever since its release, the belief that playthroughs of *Super Mario 64* invoked negative emotional auras within its players (Wagner, 31), creating a sense of suspense. The decision to take *Super Mario 64* as a case study for a thesis that primarily takes an interest in themes of liminality, nostalgia and disquieting ambiance is based in the fact that there have been others that observed a sense of intrigue and eerieness within the game. In order to understand how liminal spaces and nostalgic environments connect to the game, I am going to start off by explaining the preceding ways in which *Super Mario 64* became an object of mystery and unease: namely, through its conspiracy theories.

Expansiveness and Conspiracy Theories

In their paper ""Every Copy is Personalized": Queer Obsolescence and Ludic Nostalgia in Super Mario 64 Conspiracy Theories", Travis L. Wagner, a scholar in information science and the digital curation, states that *SM64* is a cultural object that is a host to a great number of "ardent and persistent gaming conspiracy theories" (23).

[7] Link to the Destructoid article that cites this claim. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

What is of note, though, is that during the time of *SM64*'s release and peak popularity, the way of communicating thoughts and interpretations of a game were quite different from how they are discussed today. As Wagner states, many of the *SM64* conspiracy theories relied on a level of mutual trust between those that created and consumed the theories, since most of the descriptions of the gameplay were written and offered only a few small screenshots (36), if at all. Furthermore, Wagner claims that because the original *Super Mario 64* used cartridges instead of the more contemporary CDs at the time of its release, the physical particularities of the cartridges made every copy and playthrough of *Super Mario 64* unique, which is something that in the modern age of emulators is not the case (28).

A particularly obscure conspiracy theory connected to this notion that a lot of the other theories base themselves in, is that *Super Mario 64*'s cartridges would possess a "personalization AI" (Wagner, 23). Compared to the rigid uniformity that would be expected of a computer game, *Super Mario 64* instead transforms into an erratic and ever-changing entity that customizes and reinvents itself on a whim. In the largely textual walkthroughs mentioned previously, players described glitches and unique occurrences in their copy of the game that others could not replicate (Wagner, 28). Rather than this discrediting the validity of the occurrences and adjacent conspiracy theories, it actually allowed players to bond over the unpredictability of the game at the time (Wagner, 28).

Even Nintendo themselves were aware of certain conspiracy theories that surrounded their video game, and played into one of the theories in their magazine *Nintendo Power*, in April of 1998 (Wagner, 29). The conspiracy theory that they referenced is called "L is Real 2104" , and based itself in the belief that the player would be able to unlock Luigi as a playable character — it goes without saying that this conspiracy theory is exclusive to the original variant of *Super Mario 64* — if they played the game in a specific manner (Wagner, 29). *Nintendo Power* referred to the theory as "L is Real 2041", but the accepted consensus

seems to default to calling it “L is Real 2401” instead. Since *Nintendo Power* only referenced the theory in good humor and claimed that the reader could find a step-by-step instruction on how to unlock Luigi as a playable character on a page that did not exist, players went on to invent their own methods to try and test the theory, going as far as to collect all the Power Stars, collect exactly 2104 coins, or run around Peach’s Castle exactly 2104 times (Wagner, 29). Whether or not a player would able to prove and document a conspiracy theory was nearly irrelevant, as the acknowledgement of the erratic nature of each cartridge and playthrough was enough to convince players that even if they weren’t able to replicate an assumed anomalous occurrence in the game, it was still within the realm of possibility.

Most of the conspiracy theories, according to Wagner, are inspired by the game’s “seemingly unending expansiveness” (23), and it is not hard to see where they are coming from. *Super Mario 64*, as a game, experiments with themes of spaciousness and infinity a lot. A more on-the-nose example of this is the infinite staircase (fig.1.4), a sublocation in Peach’s Castle that the player encounters when they seek to access Bowser’s final boss fight before they have enough Power Stars to face him. As long as the player is not in possession of the right amount of stars, the staircase up to the final level will continuously expand as they climb it, infinitely stretching as an anxiety-inducing tone plays in the background. While *SM64*’s world is by no means one that adheres to an Earth-like logic, this staircase stands out from the rest of the fantastical elements in the game in that it offers the player no way to explore or overcome it: as long as they do not have the sufficient amount of stars, they are never reaching the boss fight and will instead continue running into the void until they give up and turn back.

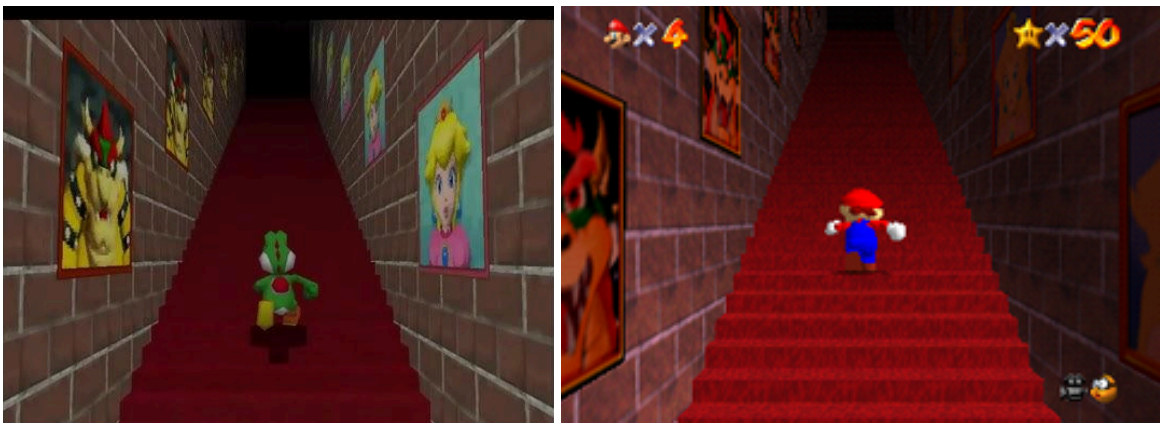

Figure 1.4: The endless stairs in Super Mario 64: DS (2002) and Super Mario 64 (1996) respectively.

Source: [link] (accessed on 29 Aug 2025)

What is interesting about *Super Mario 64*'s conspiracy theories, is how they migrate through the ecosystem that is the game's own discourse and legacy. Wagner states that the players' nostalgic sentiment towards the gameplay of *Super Mario 64* as it were at the time it released, before the Internet became as accessible and populous as it did in the decades that followed, contributed to how certain conspiracy theories managed to persevere (28). A lot of the theories are anchored into how gaming culture and game discourse operated in the late 90s and early 2000s, with the aforementioned lack of detailed visual playthroughs and the mutual trust that players had in each others' unique experiences being central to how the conspiracy theories were fabricated and spread. Notably, however, this all changed as the theories persisted and continued to evolve with time.

At the start of the 2020s, *Super Mario 64* conspiracy theories, particularly those of a more horror-themed nature, rose to popularity[8]. According to Wagner, online discussion boards and social media platforms like Reddit, YouTube, and Twitter became breeding grounds for the invention of new conspiracy theories (31), many of which are chronicled and organized in what is called an iceberg meme (fig.1.5). Each layer of the iceberg represents a

[8] Link to a Polygon article on Super Mario 64 conspiracy theories, by Patricia Hernandez. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

layer of obscurity when it comes to conspiracies, with the more well-known ones residing at the top, and the more sinister and lesser known ones residing in the bottom layers. “L is Real 2104” is located in the upper layer of the iceberg, which is reasonable considering the media attention it received from *Nintendo Power*.

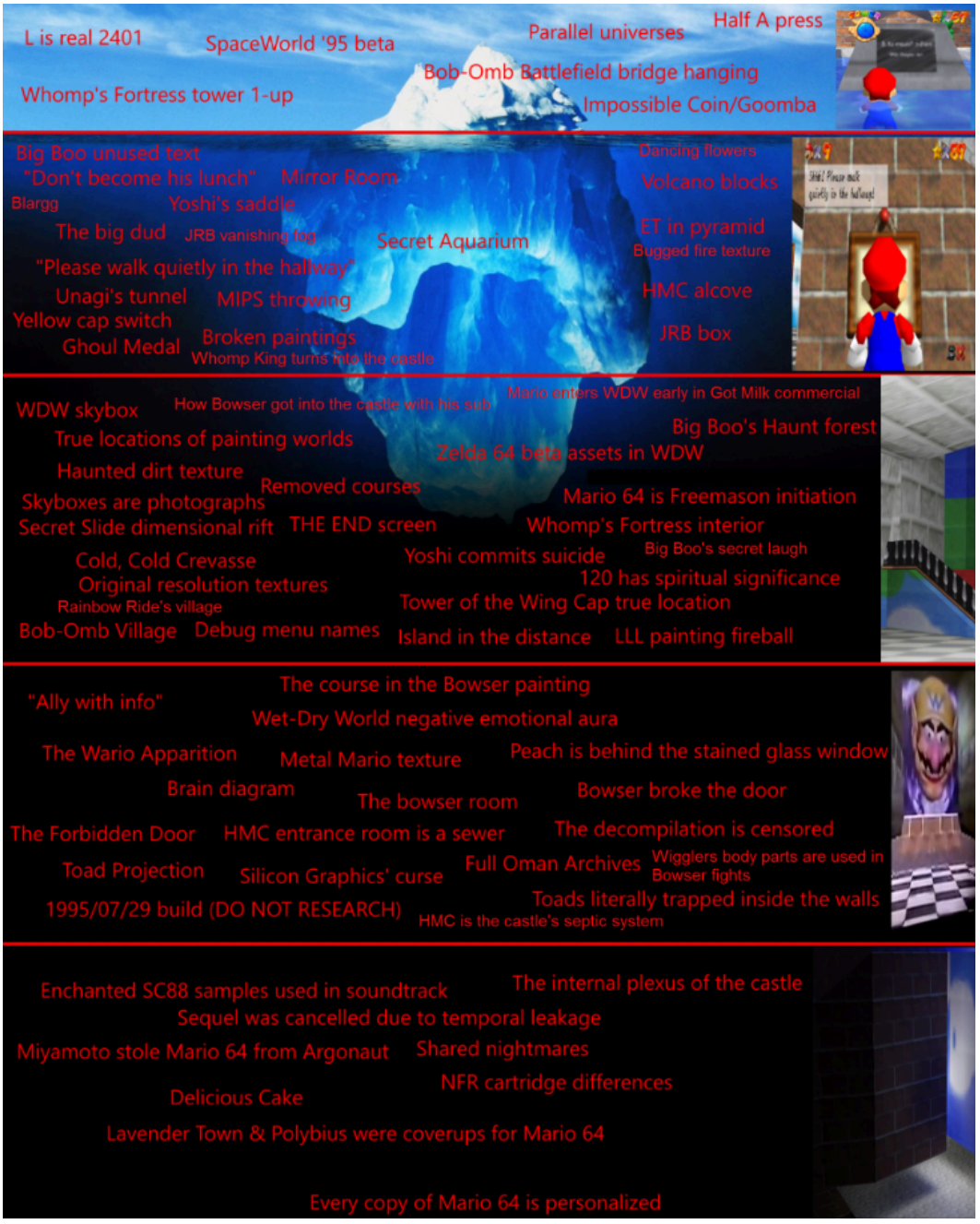

Figure 1.5: “The Super Mario 64 Conspiracy Theory Iceberg” meme originates from 4chan, another discussion board that engages in the conspiracy theory discourse. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

Three levels lower, on the fourth level of the iceberg, the image mentions the "Wario Apparition" conspiracy theory, a theory that helped popularize and revive *Super Mario 64* conspiracy theories in the 2020s[9]. This conspiracy theory suggested that in certain playthroughs, Wario's giant disembodied head would appear above the entrance of a course (Wagner, 33). Footage of Wario's head does exist, as Nintendo presented a video of Wario addressing the audience of a 1996 E3 game exposition[10], voiced by Charles Martinet, the same voice actor who also portrayed Mario in the original game, and all three of the human playable characters in the DS remaster. Nothing of note happens in the recovered video clip, but the conspiracy theory of the "Wario Apparation" suggests that Wario's head is actually an anomaly hidden inside the game. Rather than relying on text-based accounts and tiny screenshots to report on the phenomenon, those involved in spreading rumors about the conspiracy theories instead create videos allegedly documenting the anomaly, uploading edited video clips of Wario chasing the player down a hallway in Peach's Castle (Wagner, 37). They either achieved this by recreating fake playthrough footage through 3D modelling programs and CGI, or used the game's debug mode to insert Wario into the game itself (Wagner, 37).

Super Mario 64 being a video game contributes greatly to how these conspiracy theories were able to come into existence in the first place. As Aubery Anable, a scholar in the field of game studies, claims in her introduction to her book *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (2018), "video games are affective systems" (xii). *Super Mario 64* is a game that, as described in previous paragraphs, evoked various sentiments and feelings within its players, not all of which are to be expected from what the game is meant to be at face value. Furthermore, Anable adds that "video games ask us to understand, on a cognitive level, the underlying logic of their systems" (xii). In the case of *Super Mario 64*, it is the

[9] Link to a video that allegedly shows the Wario Apparition. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[10] Link to the original footage shown at the 1996 E3 convention. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

exact underlying logic of the system that players challenge when they engage with the game's conspiracy theories. In the very beginning, the logic of *SM64*'s systems was not always apparent to those that played the game, as the cartridges that the game was stored on were prone to generating abnormalities that were particular to a singular copy of the game. This unpredictability created the tension within the playerbase that its interest in conspiracy theories was born from. In more recent years, the legacy of *Super Mario 64*'s unpredictable and enigmatic nature persists, despite the cartridge-based mode of playing having become less accessible to the general audience. In their own manner, players continue to challenge the logic of *SM64*'s system, which brings this thesis to the subject of creepypastas.

Conspiracies and Creepypastas

The conventions and methods of circulation of the newer conspiracy theories resemble that of Creepypastas (Wagner, 37), another horror-related Internet phenomenon where the creators involved blur the lines between reality and fiction on purpose to create suspense. In her text "Creepypasta, 'Candle Cove', and the Digital Gothic" Jessica Balanzategui, a scholar of media and cinema, a creepypasta "derives from the term copypasta, a portmanteau of copy and paste that is believed to have first appeared on the Anon community of imageboard website 4chan, and refers to content with viral potential that is copied and pasted across numerous websites" (188). Not every *SM64* conspiracy theory is a creepypasta, yet the ways in which they are circulated and discussed does resemble them. For instance, creepypastas are authored by anonymous or pseudonymous creators, and their point of origin tends to fade into obscurity rather quickly once a creepypasta rises to popularity (Balanzategui, 190). The purpose of conspiracy theories and creepypastas alike is to be circulated around a wider audience, with little concern for preserving and praising a singular author. They are concepts more than an author's narrative, and as will be explained in the third chapter on liminal

spaces and nostalgia, there is no real authority that decides how these texts should be interpreted or how they should end up developing.

Moreover, many earlier creepypastas centered around specific images and formed narratives around these images that had their roots in urban legends from a pre-digital era, which is similar to how the 2020 resurgence of *Super Mario 64* conspiracy theories brought back and expanded on both theories and content from a time period that predated the current iteration and workings of the Internet. Likewise, the 4chan discussion board is the point of origin for the first creepypastas (Balanzategui, 188) and the *Super Mario 64* conspiracy iceberg alike.

Other than the COVID-19 pandemic and the unique sense of isolation that this time period brought, there is another component to why creepypastas of *Super Mario 64* rose to popularity in the early 2020s. Alexander J. Zawacki, a scholar in game studies and horror studies, wrote in his 2024 article "Glitches and Ghosts: The Digital Uncanny in Video Games and Creepypasta" that in the decade preceding the 2020s, "retro gaming – the self-conscious playing or replaying of much older games – became mainstream" (94). This trend continued on into the 2020s, and as Zawacki describes it, retro gaming allows players who find themselves in the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood "to look back on the games of their youth and find them imbued by temporal distance with an uncanny charge" (95). This uncanny charge is the same driving sentiment behind the creepypastas about *Super Mario 64*, and the conspiracy theories that preceded it.

The reason why creepypastas are relevant to mention is because the liminal spaces that will be discussed in the upcoming chapters have a lot of overlap with how creepypastas behave as a phenomenon. They prove to be a central piece in bridging the gap between *Super Mario 64* conspiracy theories from the late 90s and early 2000s, and its liminal spaces as they are talked about in the 2020s.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Super Mario 64* is a video game that retains its relevance in modern day pop culture due to its innovative use of the then newly developing 3D platformer format, as well as its legacy of conspiracy theories that persist far into the 2020s. In many ways, it is a clear cut example of an early 3D platformer that helped to set a standard for video games released in its wake, while simultaneously honoring the developments and inventions of the preceding platformer subgenres.

An acclaimed game on the one hand, a large part of *Super Mario 64*'s legacy exists outside of taking the game at face value, where conspiracy theories keep discourse about the game alive long after its novelty wore off. While the majority of these theories stem from the era in which the game released, the conspiracy theories and the game's association with mystery and uneasy intrigue persists, taking on new forms. How this more recent fascination with *Super Mario 64* takes form, will be dissected in the next two chapters.

Chapter 02: Liminal Spaces in *Super Mario 64* (1996)

Introduction

Having established that *Super Mario 64* has its fair share of metatexts chronicling its alleged secrets and obscurities, I can now move on to describing another phenomenon previously unmentioned: liminal spaces in *SM64*, or rather, virtual photographs of the video game's liminal spaces. To refrain from jumping to conclusions, it is imperative to first garner a basic understanding of each of the elements mentioned above, and then apply it to examples from the game itself. Liminality and liminal spaces are subjects that require proper introduction, as the specific iteration of the terms used in this thesis compared to the original, less location-focused definitions are a relatively new phenomenon. Likewise, virtual photography requires additional explanation before it can be involved in the analysis of *Super Mario 64* virtual liminal space photographs. Once both terms have been defined, the thesis will return to focus on the case study more and point out what liminal spaces *Super Mario 64*'s digital environment harbors.

The Basics of Liminality

In the human experience, it is not uncommon to visit a location more than once. Be it domestic spaces, workplaces, local landmarks or vacation spots; human psyches are packed with memories of places that they've been, or have seen second-hand through photographs and film. Yet time and time again, memory has proven to be a whimsical and often unreliable master, especially when it comes to remembering the layout and atmosphere of a location.

Liminal spaces are a manifestation of how the faltering nature of human memory can influence how they perceive certain places. A term originally indigenous to anthropology and other homocentric studies, liminal spaces in the context of this thesis refer to transitional

spaces that evoke a sense of deja vu, uncanny recognition, and nostalgia. An abandoned hotel lobby, a playground at night, an empty mall after dark; a location that inspires wariness within those that look upon it, the reason of which is hard to decipher. Over time, different scholars have aimed to define liminality as a concept. In order to understand how it is defined in the context of this thesis and its case study, four chronological definitions of the term will be described and analyzed, starting with the earliest and ending with the present-day, most relevant definition of liminality.

Back in the day, as Gregory Forth describes it in his review of 20th century anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's text Rites of Passage, the notion of the liminal was connected to a metaphorical image of society as a house, with each room in this house representing passages in life that human beings move through (2). Following Van Gennep's line of thinking, liminal spaces would be the spaces connecting the fixed rooms of this metaphorical house, which surprisingly resonates quite a bit with the more aesthetically-focused liminal spaces that I discuss in this thesis. Liminal spaces, after all, often display spaces that are heavily associated with being in transition: think of the lifeless airport halls, and the open mall plaza's that serve as nothing more than giant waitings rooms that people would traverse to get from one store to another. They are the spaces that connect more meaningful and functional places to each other, and since they are only regarded as a transitionary space, centering them as the subject of a photograph feels off and awkward. When scouting for a good hotel to stay in when planning a vacation, it makes more sense to look at pictures of the rooms, the dining hall, facilities, and the surrounding neighborhood instead of the lobby and the connecting corridors.

Liminality as a word is derived from the Latin words 'limen' and 'limes', meaning threshold and boundary respectively (Malpas, 2); both words have a significant relation with how *SM64*'s worlds are structured. Edward S. Casey, a scholar of philosophy, writes about

this in his text “The Edge(s) of a Landscape: A Study in Liminology” (2011), and identifies two types of edges or boundaries that landscapes are able to possess. The Salient Edge and the Subtle Edge are, according to him, extremes, with the former referring to a strict and tangible edge, like a window frame or the edge of a table, and the latter referring to a more ambiguous and conceptual edge, like the fold in a tablecloth or differently colored patches within a lawn of grass (92). Edges and boundaries are, in this interpretation of liminality, very physical and based in spatial terms rather than metaphorical or psychological ones, thus coming closer to the definition of liminality that is used in the context of this thesis and *Super Mario 64*’s liminal spaces.

Having said that, while many liminal spaces feature transitionary spaces, not all of them are. If the space themselves does not have a transitional function, they may be framed in a phase of transition instead: think back on the playground, and how stripping it of daylight and playing children also strips it of its homely and friendly atmosphere. In the very opening paragraph his text “Place and Non-place: A Phenomenological Perspective” (2017), Dylan Trigg describes the feeling of the reader returning from an idyllic vacation in a villa surrounded by nature, and experiencing the airport on their way home as a place that is not memorable or pleasant (127-128). The only meaning and function of the airport is to contain people who are transitioning from one place to the other: from their vacation spots to their homes, from one country to the other.

Ruyu Zhao, an author in the field of fashion technology, brings the theories of liminality to the present and gives an overview of the modern Internet-based definition of liminality and liminal spaces in their article “Liminal Space Theory” (2024), in which they summarize the essential traits of liminal space images. According to Zhao, there are three main components to liminal space photographs that make them liminal. The first is “a chaotic and contradictory feeling of absence, and this kind of space will confine the viewer to a

smaller field of view" (15). This resonates with Casey's ideas on edges in landscapes, and the edges that Zhao names as examples, such as heavy fog and darkness (15), are clear examples of Salient edges within the landscape of a liminal space image. Secondly, Zhao names repetition and simplification as common conventions in liminal space photographs (16). This is what makes the spaces feel empty (16), which in turn contributes to the eerie sentiment they evoke. Thirdly, a distinct lack of people is also characteristic of liminal space photographs (Zhao, 16).

Worth noting is that, convenient as it may be for a thesis written by a photographic studies student, the iteration of liminal spaces that are to be discussed in this paper primarily manifest in the form of images of places, and not so much the places themselves. There are a couple of reasons for this.

Firstly, there is the quite simple and practical aspect of liminal spaces being a flexible concept, rather than a fixed cultural object. Many places can be framed as aesthetic liminal spaces through photography, but for them to carry that meaning and atmosphere, they need to meet very specific and variable standards: a playground overrun with laughing children on a sunny cloudless day does not have the same liminal quality as the exact same area during a dark and misty night. Framing, like with any photograph, is very important when attempting to invoke a certain sentiment through atmosphere and visual language.

Secondly, liminal spaces are often, if not always, deprived of other human beings. Though the traces of human activity are nonetheless present, the spaces strip away human subjectivity (Zhao, 16). Not only does this specific characteristic emphasize the feelings of emptiness, abandonment, and loneliness that are often associated with liminal space photographs, it also gives the image an uncanny quality, where the familiarity of the space's raw form meets the unfamiliarity of its "human deficiency" (Zhao, 16). A human deficiency is only possible in an image, because within the framing of an image, human figures can be

left out. This is logically impossible if the space itself was the object of study, since in order to study the liminal space, human beings would inevitably enter it and thus take away the liminal qualities of the space with their presence.

Liminal Spaces as an Aesthetic

Another important aspect of aesthetic liminal spaces is that the iteration as described in this thesis largely finds its roots in how the Internet came to define it. Liminality as a concept may have its origin in the academic field, but liminal spaces as physical locations that are discussed through the sharing of photos and videos are a phenomenon that the Internet helped to give rise to. The thesis will go into greater detail in how this phenomenon has taken form over the past few years, as well as the communities that helped to popularize it, but what is relevant for this section of the chapter is how the communities that perpetuate aesthetic liminal spaces define them.

Online discussion boards such as 4chan and Reddit are two of the multiple social media platforms that contributed to popularizing the liminal space aesthetic, and although there is no strict Internet-wide consensus on what a liminal space is supposed to be, a category on Reddit called r/LiminalSpace provides a definition that seems to be generally accepted (Lasky, n.p.). According to a moderator on this Subreddit[11] by the username of 1nf3rn06006, who wrote the community guidelines that govern what can and cannot be posted to the discussion board, liminal spaces have to meet four main criteria to be considered suitable and worthy of discussion[12].

Firstly, liminal spaces should represent a transitional point between two regions or states, comparable to a state of limbo, and mixing both concrete and abstract qualities which

[11] On Reddit, people are able to start Subreddits, which are discussion boards within the site that other users can join, which focus on a special subject. In the case of r/LiminalSpace, this is liminal spaces.
[12] Link to the r/LiminalSpace guidebook, posted by 1nf3rn06006, a moderator on the Subreddit. Accessed 29 Aug 2025..

would account for a complex and deep transition rather than something simple and one-dimensional. Secondly, because of this complexity, liminal spaces should represent and depict the decision to linger in a place or state that would usually be passed or ignored without a moment of thought, which would refer to lingering in a place and viewing it differently from how it would normally be perceived. Thirdly, much like Zhao states, liminal space should be fully absent of people (16), as the surrealism of viewing an empty area that would normally be populated with people contributes to the liminal feeling of a space. Fourthly, the moderator states that in order to be an acceptable entry to the Subreddit, a liminal space photograph has to stand on its own and shouldn't require a lot of written context or personal anecdotes, since the interpretation of the photograph should be left up to the viewer themselves.

Reddit is not the only online platform that hosts the circulating of liminal space images and related discourse, but it is one that managed to bring forth a set of guidelines that a portion of the Internet seems to agree with. That is, when it comes to the most basic of liminal space images. As is often the case with artistic phenomena, change and development is bound to happen, and how liminal spaces have developed and expanded further, will be touched on in the next chapter.

Virtual Photography and Super Mario 64

Liminality and liminal spaces are not phenomena that are exclusive to the real world and real life environments. Similar to how landscape paintings can be appreciated for their beauty, even if the environments depicted within them are based in fiction and imagination, photography is not exclusive to the tangible world either. Before liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64* can be discussed, it must first be explained how virtual photography is relevant to the images people create of these spaces.

In his introduction to the book *Virtual Photography*, Ali Shobeiri, a scholar of photography and visual culture, starts to define virtual photography by defining the 'virtual' first. Initially, he writes that virtual photography could be considered a contradictory concept, since photography is a medium that specializes in capturing reality, whereas the virtual has an aversion against being realized (7). The virtual refers to something that has the virtue of something, without actually being or realizing the object that it has the virtue of (Shobeiri, 13). That would mean that a virtual photograph would have all the virtues of being a photograph, without being one in reality. To further explain this idea, Shobeiri follows along to a theory by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who differentiates between the realization and the actualization of an object. In Shobeiri's words: "if the realization of the possible is a means toward an end (i.e., the real), the actualization of the virtual is a means without an end: (15). In the context of virtual photography, however, this can be rephrased in quite a simple manner. Virtual photography, in Shobeiri's words "refers to a kind of photography that retains the efficiency and function of real photography (made with or without a camera) while manifesting these in an unfamiliar or noncustomary form" (16). Even if the environments and characters in virtual photographs of *Super Mario 64* are not real, the photo itself serves the purpose that a regular photograph depicting the real world does. Furthermore, the method of acquiring such a photo would indeed be considered unfamiliar and noncustomary, because the player who makes the photo would either take a screenshot of the game, which is already a non-traditional way to take a photo, or use a camera to take a picture of their screen, which also subverts the idea of how photography functions.

Further along in the chapter, Shobeiri points out three prevalent categories of virtual photography, that being Extended Reality (ER), images generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI), and in-game photography (18). It is the last category that is of importance to this

research. Shobeiri notes that initially, in-game photography was only possible by taking screenshots, but that over time photo modes and camera modes became available (18).

Super Mario 64 does not possess a photo mode in the way that it would be defined in other video games — that being the option to freeze all gameplay from the game menu to pose characters and take an in-game photograph —, though it does have a camera mode that allows the player to have a say in how they want to position their screenshot. By using the Lakitu Bros., the player is able to manipulate what they see on screen. The Lakitu Bros. are a sentient cloud with a turtle-like being on top that operate a camera and follow the player around, making them an in-game narrative-friendly explanation for how the camera can move around the player, either zooming in or out on them, or changing the angle in which the player can look at their character and their environment (fig.2.1).

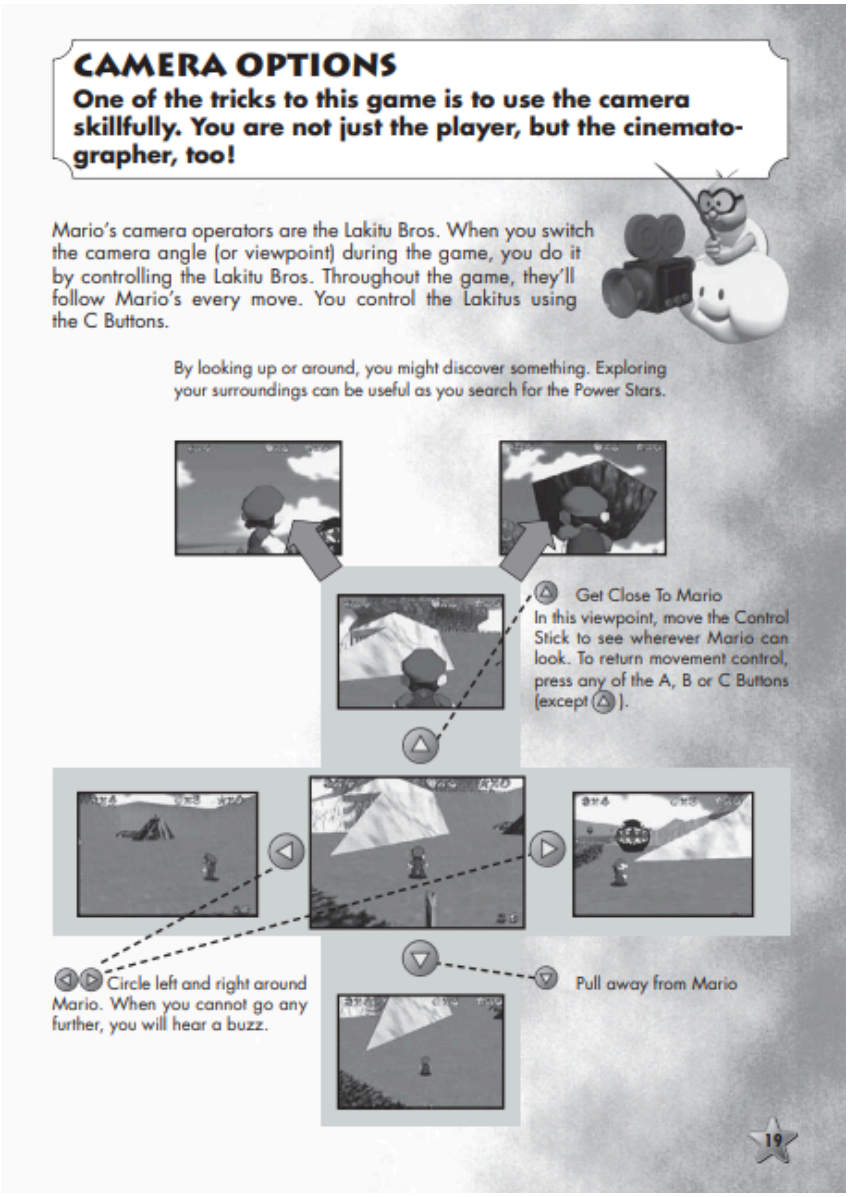

Figure 2.1: An excerpt from Nintendo's *Super Mario 64* player's manual, displaying the controls of the game's camera function. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

In addition to this, the methods used to acquire virtual photographs of the game is even more noncustomary than would be the case in newer games, since up until the age of emulators, it was very difficult to capture a photo of the in-game content, let alone pass it along between devices to spread it. The original version of *Super Mario 64* was bound to the Nintendo 64, a console that could be connected a television, which would then display the game. Recording what happened on the television would be the most viable method to get a

screenshot of the game. In the DS remake this proved to be an equally complex matter, since at the time, the DS and the DS Lite that the game was made did not possess a built-in screenshotting feature.

Nevertheless, before it can be addressed how virtual photography of liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64* functions and what forms these photographs take on, there will first be given an overview of what liminal elements and liminal spaces can be found within the game to begin with. The game was never intended to be a liminal platformer, and neither should it be assumed that every environment in *Super Mario 64* is a liminal space. Some courses and areas in the game have a more liminal atmosphere about them than others, and in many cases, virtual photographs of these spaces can be manipulated to make certain spaces in the game appear more eerie, abandoned, or confusing.

An Overview of Liminal Spaces in Super Mario 64

In an environment so rich in fantastical and unrealistic elements, feelings of deja vu and nostalgic liminality are not to be expected; after all, a video game like *Super Mario 64* hardly features locations that a real human being could have possibly visited in real life. And yet, many players of the game appear to have strong feelings of liminality when it comes to its locations. Across the online platforms where liminal spaces as a concept have started to flourish since 2019, such as Reddit, Tumblr, TikTok, and YouTube (Lasky, n.p.), many players have reported on their sentiment towards *Super Mario 64*'s liminal spaces. Whereas some of them feel unsettled[13], others even claim to have had dreams about it[14], and there even are players who say that playing the game made them feel uncomfortable[15].

[13] Link to a Reddit thread that notes feeling strange about *SM64*. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[14] Link to a Reddit thread claiming the user dreamt of *Super Mario 64*'s liminal environments. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[15] Link to a Reddit thread where a user describes feeling uncomfortable playing the game. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

As mentioned previously, the expansiveness of the game's environment is what makes it a source of inspiration for players' own interpretations and theories about the game. The expansiveness of the game is also what creates an interesting relation between *Super Mario 64*'s universe and concepts of liminality.

When looking at *Super Mario 64*'s world structure, the player comes across a fair mix of both types of landscape edges. Within the levels that the player accesses, the landscape's borders are often Salient, with many levels like Whomp's Fortress (fig.2.2) and Tall, Tall Mountain featuring a very distinct edge at the outer rim of the course, where the player is confronted with either a fall into the ocean or an ambiguous void. Other levels, like Jolly Roger Bay (fig.2.3) and Shifting Sand Land, have cave walls or dunes to mark the Salient edges of the level's landscape. If these boundaries are crossed by the player, they are bound to fall into the void and are forced out of the painting that they entered the course through, losing a life in the process.

Figure 2.2: An overview of Whomp's Fortress, showcasing the cloudy 'void' around the landscape.

Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

Figure 2.3: Jolly Roger Bay and its surrounding walls that act as its boundaries. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

There are, however, boundaries in the game that are far less defined, and those are what especially contribute to the expansive feeling of the game. For example, in the aforementioned Shifting Sand Land, there are multiple quicksand 'whirlpools' that the player has to avoid getting sucked into. Although two of them lead to certain death and the player being expelled from the level, one of them actually is a secret entrance into the pyramid that is at the center of the level. In a way, it is similar to how the paintings in Peach's Castle lead the player into fantastical levels: there are thresholds hidden everywhere throughout the game. Holes in the Castle walls, unmarked spots at the end of a frosty, broken down bridge, there are many ways in which the player can cross over into another space without there being a distinct boundary that tells them where to go.

All of this contributes to how expansive and unpredictable SM64's universe feels to the player. While the minimap present in the DS version of the game provides a bit of direction by providing the player with a top-down overview of the level, usually with the location of

the Power Star visible, neither the DS version nor the original version forces the player in any specific direction. This open-world aspect allows players to give meaning to the levels and locations they are in on their own accord, and blurs the functions and definitions of the boundaries in these levels.

Princess Peach's Castle as a Liminal Space

Although a lot of the courses in *Super Mario 64*, mentioned above and otherwise, have strong liminal aspects or can be considered liminal spaces themselves, it is Princess Peach's Castle that stands out amongst all the others. Interior locations of the Castle appear in many of the liminal space photographs that circulate around the Internet, specifically Princess Peach's entrance lobby, as well as the red-carpented hallways that the player can access from there. It can be argued that Princess Peach's Castle is the most prominent liminal space of the game both in an aesthetic and functional way. Both of these ways will be elaborated on, and analyzed accordingly.

There are the aesthetic aspects of Peach's Castle that give it a liminal feeling, most of which resonate with the visual elements that achieved a similar goal with the aesthetic liminal space photographs that I touched upon in the previous chapter.

Abandoned by its resident princess, it is inhabited by a handful of servant Toads and a few ghosts that roam around the courtyard. Due to the mechanic of each player character being trapped in their respective rooms, only one human being is visibly present in the castle at any given time, and that is always the player themselves. There are, of course, a few remaining Toads at the Castle, as well as a couple of ghosts, a handful of rabbits that carry keys to specific doorways on the map, and the Lakitu Bros., the turtle and cloud that occasionally appear to follow the player with their camera, reporting on their actions. None of these NPCs resemble humans in any sort of way, and the interactions with them are very

basic, to say the least. Compared to RPGs or other more story-driven games, there is no real dialogue between the NPCs and the player: they simply blurt out a few lines when interacted with, and usually will repeat these lines until eternity. While this is not necessarily unique for (older) games where character interaction and narrative are not the main priority, it does contribute to making the player feel lonely in their pursuit of Princess Peach. So, even if there are other entities present within the realm of the game, they hardly contribute to making the player feel less lonely in their quest.

Although it can be argued that the Castle's layout simply is the way it is to serve the player and not create any unnecessary clutter in a game that couldn't yet technologically afford it, it does contribute a lot to how unusual and uneasy the Castle feels. Compared to any real lived-in spaces, the enormous structure does not have any rooms that serve a domestic purpose: there are no living rooms, no kitchens, no bathrooms, and no bedrooms either. The only room that seems to serve an actual purpose is Princess Peach's rec room, where the player, if they recover the right keys from the rabbits they can catch throughout the Castle, can access mini-games to pass time in-between their adventures. All the other areas in the Castle are either chambers dedicated to paintings that the player can access levels through, or hallways and chambers that precede these 'level rooms'. Even the courtyard garden in the middle of the Castle is just a ghost-infested waiting room for a level that the player can access later down the line.

Aside from the absence of a lived in feeling, a lot of structural details in Princess Peach's Castle are presented in a manner that only furthens the liminal qualities of the environment. In the entrance hall of the Castle, the walls are painted a bright sky-like blue, dotted with white clouds and decorated with green treetops or hills underneath (fig.2.4). Though likely meant as a way to cheer up the ambiance of the otherwise empty Castle, it instead creates a confusing layout. Furthermore, as the blueness of the fake sky rises up

towards the ceiling, it becomes clear that the entrance hall does not seem to have a defined ceiling at all. When talking about landscapes, and in this case, the encased space that is the Castle's entrance hall, Casey claims that the human eye has a tendency to move towards the edges (103). The walls and the floors are clearly defined, yet if the player wants to identify the edge of the upper bound of the space, they will not find it, and will instead be left guessing about where the upper boundary of the space is. In exterior levels this would not be much of a problem, since environments that mimic outside locations would not be expected to have a ceiling, yet with an interior level such as Peach's Castle, the lack of a upper boundary is something that makes the room break away from the comfortable and familiar.

Figure 2.4: An in-game view of the entrance hall of Princess Peach's Castle from the original *Super Mario 64* (1996) Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

There is no denying that Peach's Castle is an actual Castle, as its inner architecture matches the tall white towers seen in the starter area that the player starts their journey in, yet at the same time it lacks signs of life or being lived in, creating an uneasy sense of alienation where the player is left on the threshold between feeling at home, and entirely forlorn. The player

may not be fully alone or in a hostile environment, but they can not feel at ease either. This is the experience of a liminal feeling as Malpas describes it: it feels as if the player is constantly crossing the threshold without actually reaching a state where they'll feel familiar with what they see (4). Regardless of whether or not it was Nintendo's point to make the player feel 'at home' in Peach's Castle, they feel hesitant all throughout, as the Castle's emptiness is neither fully terrifying, nor inviting.

Again, Van Gennep's comparison to liminality and the spaces within a house comes to mind, as well as the concept of *Super Mario 64* being a compound world, filled with microworlds. Every chamber and their respective microworld have a function of some sort, where each microworld that the player accesses is rich with missions and methods to acquire more Power Stars to progress through the game. Aside from these clearly defined and functional rooms, though, the house — or Castle — primarily consists of transitional areas such as winding hallways and chambers that serve no function other than leading to other chambers. Even the iconic entrance of Peach's Castle serves no other function than being a lobby to the rest of the building. Every time the player succeeds at securing a Power Star from a level, or loses a life in the process instead, they are transported back to the deserted chamber that they initially found the portal to the course in.

That brings us to the functional or literal aspect of Peach's Castle being a liminal space: it acts as a central hub that the player uses to enter the pocket dimensions where the actual gameplay takes place. By jumping through paintings scattered around Peach's Castle, the player accesses the pocket dimensions where they fight against Bowser's minions and other local dangers, learn new skills, and collect Power Stars that in turn allow them to unlock new areas in the Castle hubworld. Peach's Castle is, by function, a waiting room in-between levels. It serves its purpose as a transitional space that leads the player from one level to the

other, a means to an end to eventually finish the game, defeat Bowser, and rescue the Princess.

Furthermore, the Castle itself is also in a state of transition, and changes as the player keeps progressing through the courses and increases their secured number of Power Stars. Doors that require a certain amount of stars to be opened transform from ominous obstacles, often accompanied by an eerie tune and warning from Bowser, to simple gateways to move from one area to the next. Likewise, after the player collects 10 Power Stars, they return to the Castle to find a beam of light shining down from the ceiling in the entrance lobby that was not there before, which leads them to the skyborne Tower of the Wing Cap level, in which Mario unlocks the ability to wear a winged cap and fly freely in certain levels. Unless the player has completed *Super Mario 64* multiple times or has read a walkthrough or other texts that explain when these transformations of the Castle's spaces are supposed to happen, Princess Peach Castle will appear to be in a constant and unpredictable state of transition.

Again, this resonates with Wagner's notion of how players of *Super Mario 64*, and its older cartridge-based version specifically, were able to tolerate a lot of unusual theories and reports on anomalous occurrences in the game, since the erratic and unpredictable nature of the game was a generally accepted fact that players in fact bonded over (28).

Video Games and Virtual Photography

These in-game liminal spaces, of course, cannot be fully explained without being documented visually rather than through descriptions. Neither version of *Super Mario 64* embeds photography into either its narrative or mechanics, though that of course does not mean that it is impossible to take screenshots of the game, as is proven by the websites that host and perpetuate the *SM64* conspiracy theories that Wagner discusses in their text. As discussed earlier in the chapter, taking a screenshot of the game used to be a complicated process but

became considerably easier to accomplish once emulators of the game appeared on the Internet.

Another aspect of these photographs that is worth considering, is their source. There are numerous liminal space photographs of SM64 spaces that do not actually originate from the game itself; rather, they are images taken from a recreation made in a 3D sculpting program like Blender or a video game engine like Unity or Unreal Engine. These HD recreations allow for a greater picture resolution, yet maintain loyalty towards the original game's low-poly aesthetic, with the added bonus of more realistic water, fire, and lighting.

Despite not originating from *Super Mario 64*'s source material or game engine, these virtual photographs inspired by the game's environments are virtual in a very essential sense of the word. As Shobeiri stated earlier, the term virtual "comes from the Latin virtus, which means "having the virtue of."" (13), which in the case of these 3D-sculpted virtual photographs has a double meaning. On the one hand, the photographs themselves are virtual, since they have the virtues of a photographs in that they depict an environment in a manner similar to a real photograph depicting a real life location. On the other, they also have the virtue of a virtual photograph of *Super Mario 64*, in the sense that they look to be a perfect example of a photograph taken of a liminal space in the game, except that they in reality do not make use of the actual game's contents at all, and instead replicate its appearance and aesthetics.

How this ties into nostalgic sentiment, will become apparent in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Overall, aesthetic liminal spaces are a phenomenon that lends itself quite well to video game environments. Despite existing outside of the tangible world, digital environments and virtual photographs of these digital environments are able to carry the same sentiments of unease and

eeriness as photographs of spaces in the real world can, and *Super Mario 64* has a fair share of such liminal spaces. Moreover, the fact that the virtual photographs of *SM64*'s liminal spaces come from a digital world actually allows for a broader exploration of liminal themes, such as the boundaries that the liminal spaces get their name from.

Chapter 03: *Super Mario 64*'S Nostalgic Internet Culture

Introduction

The urge to fabricate conspiracy theories and create virtual photographs of *Super Mario 64*'s liminal spaces does not come out of nowhere. Theories and images alike do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, similar to how the particularities of the original game created a reason for early *SM64* players to bond over their playing experiences, the current fascination with the game's conspiracy theories, creepypastas, and liminal spaces has also given rise to communities of its own. Although *Super Mario 64* is the source material that the creepypastas and liminal spaces are based on, actually playing and discovering the game has become secondary; instead, it is sentiment that brings people together. To them, an iconic game from the late 90s and early 2000s is an object of nostalgic sentiment, and by breathing new life into the game's relevance by creating videos, photographs, or other content relating to the game's conspiracy theories and liminal spaces, these communities reflect on their nostalgia. The aim of this chapter is to define nostalgia as a concept and apply it to the aforementioned online communities, and analyze how they use nostalgia to curate their creations.

Liminal Spaces and Nostalgia

What is important to note is that feelings of nostalgia are interwoven with the modern aesthetically-focused liminal spaces that this thesis reports on. With the Internet being as sprawling and effective at community-building as it is, liminal spaces have evolved into a cultural phenomenon of their own. I have written extensively about the Internet culture surrounding liminal spaces in a past thesis, though for the sake of this text the thesis will revisit only the essential aspects of this variation of liminal spaces. This online fascination for

liminal space aesthetics is mainly perpetuated by Generation Z, who use liminal space photographs to represent their fragmented perception of their youth in the early days of the information age (Zhao, 14). Nostalgia is an ever-present factor in how these people perceive and interpret liminal space photographs, as it causes them to attach meaning and emotion to an otherwise bland and unassuming image.

In her text "Nostalgia Reconsidered", Paula Sweeney, a scholar in the field of the philosophy of language and logic, argues that the three standard notions of nostalgia being directed towards the past, a memory of a past event, and having to involve a feeling of irretrievability towards that past, do not hold (185). In the case of feeling nostalgic about liminal spaces, this tends to be true, as the spaces displayed in the photographs hardly ever feature a location that the viewer has personally visited in their past. She proposes modes of nostalgia that are generally not considered, one of which being "nostalgia for an experience one has never had" (188), which is a type of nostalgia that is frequently associated with some of the more dreamlike liminal spaces. Especially when talking about nostalgia for a game like *Super Mario 64*, this is an interesting notion, as players of the game often sympathize with occurrences that they themselves haven't experienced.

It is also the visual characteristics of these images that contribute to the feelings that they evoke. Liminal space photography, by its nature, rarely comes in the form of a well-illuminated, high-definition image. According to Zhao, the poorer quality and fidelity of liminal space photographs lowers the amount of information it gives about the location depicted, thus leaving more room for the viewer to fill in the gaps and insert their own memories and associations (15). This ambiguity, forced upon the image by its own graininess and low fidelity, lends itself to personal interpretation from its viewers. *Super Mario 64*'s low-poly graphics were impressive at the time of the game's release, though were still ambiguous and coarse enough to create this sense of eerie ambiguity.

Other prominent social media platforms that occupy themselves with liminal spaces are far more lenient on how much nostalgia and emotional markers, as are the online communities that seek to expand on how liminal spaces can be used as an artistic form of expression. So far, there seem to be two distinct ways in which liminal spaces have been expanded on from their simplistic origin as bare photographs of abandoned locations. One of these is The Backrooms, a more horror-oriented offshoot of the Internet's interest in liminal spaces, which mostly developed in the form of found footage videos and fictional encyclopedias documenting these Backrooms. The other, which I consider to be more relevant to *Super Mario 64* as a liminal space case study, is the -core aesthetic community. They experiment with the other forms that virtual or regular liminal space photographs could take one, and have often used virtual photographs from *Super Mario 64* in their pursuit of expanding what liminal space photography and images could be.

Liminal Spaces and The Backrooms

As previously mentioned, the 2020s brought a resurgence of *Super Mario 64* conspiracy theories and creepypastas, which aligns with how aesthetic liminal spaces rose to popularity within the same timeframe. The lockdown period during the COVID-19 pandemic forced a lot of people to stay inside of their homes, which caused them to turn to the internet for social interaction. At the same time, this lockdown period cleared the streets of people, giving rise to many pictures of abandoned locations that would otherwise be heavily populated (Lasky, n.p.). Yet unlike actual ghost towns where the buildings had become eroded by either nature reclaiming it or the natural disaster that was to blame for the town's abandonment, the deserted cities and buildings from pandemic era photographs looked to be very intact otherwise, making the lack of humans present more uncomfortable and confusing.

In May of 2019, the first seed of the liminal space fascination was planted on the online message board 4chan, where a photograph of what appears to be an abandoned former office (fig.3.1) appeared alongside a thread that asked fellow users to upload "disquieting images that just feel "off""[16]. Although many images with a similar atmosphere followed, it was the first image that ended up becoming the flagship photograph of the Internet's take on liminal spaces. With its gritty quality, decaying carpet and wallpaper, and charmless fluorescent lights, it was quick to inspire the uncanny and nostalgic feeling that many had felt before, but never addressed.

Figure 3.1: The original image that was posted to 4chan and later became the face of The Backrooms phenomenon. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

On the one hand, there were people who leaned more into the vaguely threatening ambiance of the uncanny photograph, and from this horror-focused sentiment, The Backrooms were

[16] Link to (archived) 4chan thread. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

born. On the very same thread that the uncanny images were posted on, a 4chan user added a description to the first yellowed image:

> If you're not careful and you noclip out of reality in the wrong areas, you'll end up in the Backrooms, where it's nothing but the stink of old moist carpet, the madness of mono-yellow, the endless background noise of fluorescent lights at maximum hum-buzz, and approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms to be trapped in.
>
> God save you if you hear something wandering around nearby, because it sure as hell has heard you." (n.p.)

This mention of The Backrooms would become the first of many, as the concept of an alternate liminal reality was soon picked up by the rest of the Internet and inspired many creators around the world to build more narratives and content around this concept. A fictional online encyclopedia that documented The Backrooms as if it were a real anomalous location emerged[17], with hundreds of logs and accounts that detailed the properties of these spaces and the creatures that allegedly lived inside of them. Slowly but surely, the notion of The Backrooms being an abandoned, forlorn space shrouded in mystery and ambiguous sentiment, turned into The Backrooms becoming an object of horror. Initially, The Backrooms started like a creepypasta (Lasky, n.p.), an urban legend of sort that after its conception on 4chan circulated further throughout the Internet, where it was picked up by other users, who expanded on the idea or gave it their own twist.

This was further emphasized in 3D-generated videos on websites like YouTube, where creators 'explored' these liminal spaces, following the visual conventions of a found footage video. YouTuber Kane Pixels, who released *The Backrooms (Found Footage)*[18] on January 7th 2022, popularized this genre of Backrooms content, with many attempting to copy his

[17] Link to the Backrooms Wikidot website. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[18] Link to Kane Pixels' original Backrooms video. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

formatting, to the point of ridiculing the actual content. The Backrooms' horror, first consisting of abstract and alienating entities chasing the cameraman through the endless liminal hallways, soon turned into an Internet meme, where irony ruled and the entities were swapped out for whatever character was a viral meme at the time, thus straying further and further from the liminal source material.

Super Mario 64 was not immune to the growing trend either. YouTube became a host to found footage videos similar to Kane Pixels' Backrooms videos, except that they took place in environments from the video game[19]. In some cases, these videos merely copied the filming style of the found footage Backrooms videos, but other cases they were intended to be part of the phenomenon, by either introducing the regular Backrooms to a playthrough video, manipulating *SM64* environments to become a part of the universe, or both[20].

The Backrooms as a concept aligns with what Zawacki writes about the role of glitches in the construction of video game creepypastas. The no-clipping mentioned in the original Backrooms 4Chan post is a form of glitching, and as Zawacki states, "glitches can be eerie and unsettling, defamiliarizing the game on both ontological levels, even imbuing it with the semblance of unnatural agency" (87). This, in turn, resonates with *Super Mario 64*'s unpredictability as a game. When an anomalous activity occurs in a playthrough of *SM64*, the player is reminded that not everything within the game's system is within their control, and the awareness of this lack of control is what contributes to feelings of eerieness.

The virtual photographs of *Super Mario 64* liminal spaces resemble also Backrooms environments in many ways, as seen in Figure 3.2, where the spaces resemble real game levels, but appear anomalous, as if their appearance was caused by a glitch or a player no-clipping through a wall or floor and accessing unfinished or flawed content in the process.

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[19] Link to the video that replicates the concept of the Backrooms with the aesthetics of *Super Mario 64*. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.
[20] Link to the video that combines The Backrooms with *SM64* liminal spaces. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

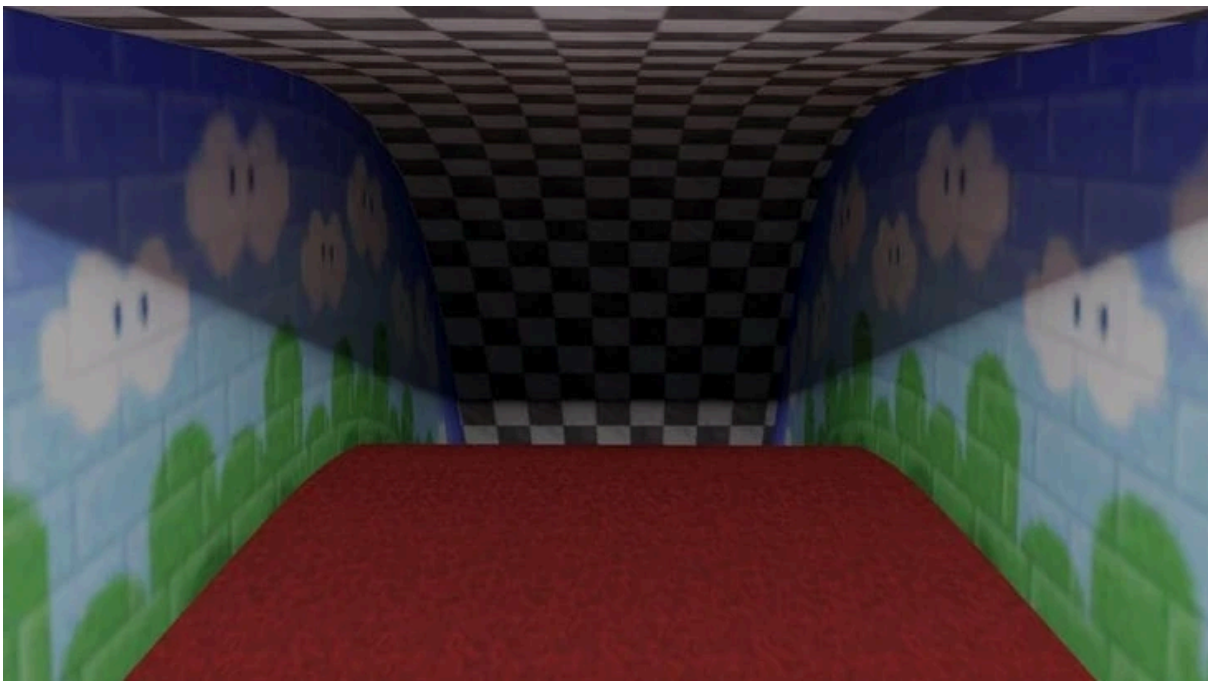

Figure 3.2: A virtual photograph of *Super Mario 64* displaying unusual architecture that does not exist in the base game. Source: Link. (Accessed 29 Aug 2025)

The Liminal -core Aesthetics

Meanwhile, on the other hand, some people were more inspired to give in to the nostalgia and ambiguous uncanny sentiment that the photographs invoked, rather than turning it into horror. This movement consists of many subgenres of liminal space photography that each follow distinctive aesthetic conventions that each center around specific themes and emotional atmospheres, most of which are labelled with a name that ends in -core (Song et. all, 2). Dreamcore, weirdcore, and traumacore are three major subgenres within the umbrella term of liminal space aesthetics. What is most notable about these three subgenres is that they depart from 'raw' bland photographs and instead alter their images to further amplify the atmosphere and emotion.

Since the -core digital aesthetics family primarily exists and circulates on several different online platforms, there is no strict hierarchy that is responsible for monitoring and

defining the subgenres. What one person considers to be a weirdcore image may be interpreted as a traumacore work by another, and in many cases, both can be true at the same time. In order to gain an understanding of what consensuses are within the online communities that occupy themselves with these -core subgenres, it is best to source from the websites they frequent, such as the Aesthetics Wiki, which catalogues a wide variety of established and obscure aesthetics. On a basic level though, it can be assumed that all the subgenres base themselves in a regular liminal space photograph, and then alter this photograph through lighting, editing, or even collage to steer the atmosphere of the photograph into whatever direction the -core subgenre occupies itself with.

Dreamcore is the most 'innocent' of the three selected subgenres, and aims to encapsulate the whimsical and surreal nature of dreamscapes. As dreams often tap into a person's memories, it is not uncommon for the environments of dreams to consist of a mash-up of places that a person has been, thus creating a strong sensation of deja vu. Fragments of the familiar are mixed together into a dreamlike space, and that atmosphere is what dreamcore aims to embody. Blue skies with clear white cloud formations are common backdrops of dreamcore images, often paired with pastel color schemes and bright or unusual lighting (fig.3.2). In more heavily edited versions of dreamcore photographs, may also feature rainbows, bubbles, sparkles, visual elements relating to the older Internet, and sometimes even strange characters with eyes, mouths, or random items for heads. This seems contradictory to how liminal spaces are supposed to be deprived of human presence, but worth noting is that normal humans never appear in these photographs, as the entities that are edited in either does not resemble human beings at all, or are reduced to black phantom silhouettes.As a subgenre within the liminal space aesthetic, it does still emphasize on creating an atmosphere of disorientation and deja vu, yet rather than fearing these sentiments,

the photographs aim to put the viewer at ease with what they are seeing, or at least embrace the strangeness of the dreamscape.

Figure 3.3: An example of a dreamcore image. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

Super Mario 64's own aesthetic of bright colors and clear skies fits in quite well with what dreamcore images usually portray, and it should come as no surprise that certain environments of the game, such as the green clearing outside of Princess Peach's Castle (fig.3.3), can easily be interpreted as a dreamcore space, rather than something more sinister.

Figure 3.4: The exterior of Princess Peach's Castle follows several conventions of a dreamcore image, with its bright colors, cloud-dotted blue skies and bright green hills. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

Weirdcore has a more unnerving element to it, and leans more towards sentiments of confusion, alienation, and disassociation. In a way, this subgenre is very self-aware, as it emphasizes how unstable the human memory can be deceptive, and it seeks to push the boundaries of how much absurdity the viewer is willing to tolerate before the effect of nostalgia and deja vu does not take hold anymore.

Compared to dreamcore, weirdcore photographs are often subjected to more edits and alterations, replicating a nightmarish effect. Distortion of the image or elements in the image are common, as are the addition of disembodied eyes, out of place objects, and sometimes flavored texts. Whereas dreamcore can often speak to the imagination and aims for a softer, more whimsical aesthetic, weirdcore is confusing and unpleasant to look at. This is intentional, as weirdcore is inspired by the graphics of the early internet era[21], and favors

[21] Link to the Aesthetics Wiki entry on Weirdcore's visual conventions. Accessed 29 Aug 2025.

low-fidelity images and visual elements like image compression and intentionally amateur editing. Weirdcore as a subgenre is also more tolerant to elements of horror, but arguably handles it with more subtlety than certain Backrooms content would.

A lot of *Super Mario 64* liminal space and horror content fits the description of a weirdcore image, especially when it comes to distortion and low image fidelity to give a more nostalgic and mysterious atmosphere. Most photographs associated with *SM64* conspiracy theories and creepypastas would be able to fit into this category, especially the images associated with the "Wario Apparation". Its long winding hallways that seem to resemble a heavily distorted and alienating version of what the player is used to accurately follows the conventions of a weirdcore photograph.

Traumacore lives up to its name by attempting to capture the essence of fragmented traumatic memories within liminal space images. Many of these traumacore photographs are edited to create a stifling and uncomfortable atmosphere, mirroring the repressed and uncertain nature of the creator's traumatic memories. They sometimes form an exception to the rule of the human deficiency mentioned earlier, as some traumacore images feature shadowy figures or people with corrupted or blacked out faces. Zhao, however, does acknowledge this convention in liminal space photography, stating that blacking out people or objects makes it so that "specific semantics have been erased, but the center of the coordinate axis of space and time is firmly established in the liminal space" (16). The blacked out objects and people are acknowledged, but deprived of their context, which reduces them to a symbol and leaves enough ambiguity for viewers to fill in the gaps with their personal sentiments. Other visual elements like self-deprecating texts, cartoon characters, and the excessive usage of the color pink aim to encapsulate how these memories feel for the creators of the images. Compared to the other subgenres, traumacore tends to use the liminal space photographs as a backdrop to a more autobiographical and 'flavored' image, where the

uncanny and ambiguous qualities of the spaces support the overall disquieting atmosphere of the image.

Due to the heavy and often personal nature of this subgenre of aesthetic liminal space, *Super Mario 64* virtual photographs tend not to make many appearances in traumacore images. While it is true that creators of these images often add iconic fictional characters from an era that is nostalgic to them, such as characters from the *My Little Pony* franchise or characters associated with the *Sanrio* brand, Nintendo characters are not likely to appear in such a position. The blacked out characters and objects, however, do make an appearance in a few virtual photographs (Figure 3.5).

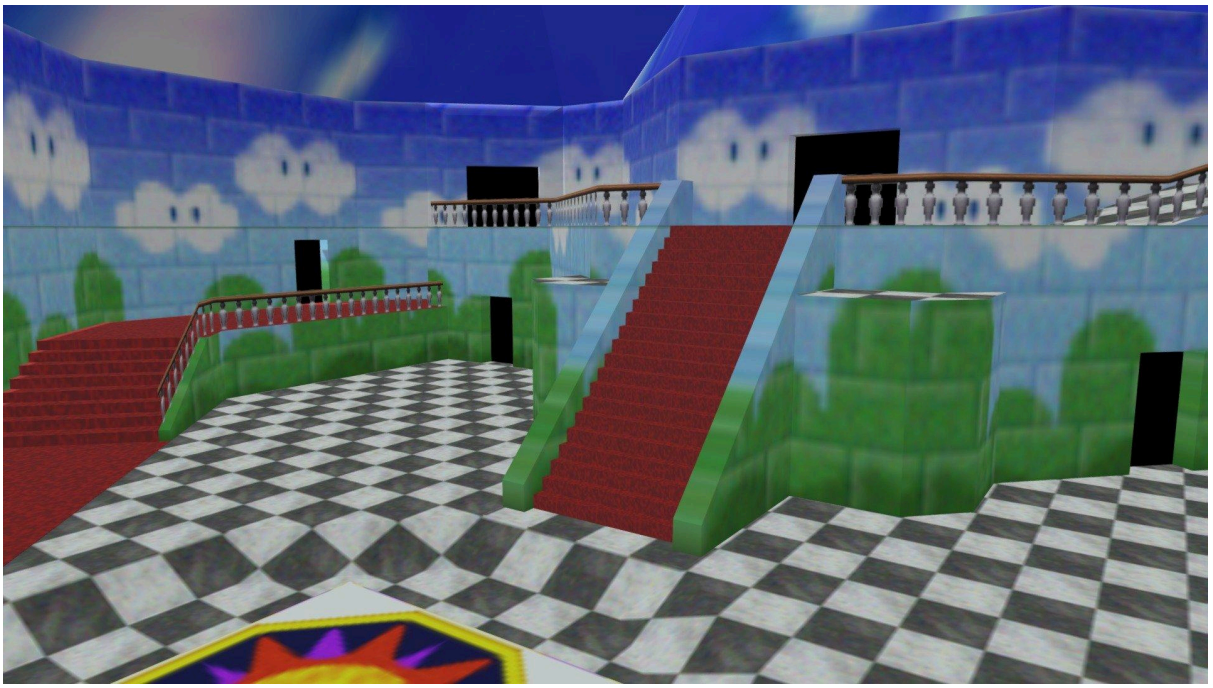

Figure 3.5: A virtual photograph of *SM64* with blacked out doors. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

Many of the creators involved in expanding on the visual canon of the -core subcultures borrow imagery from existing cultural objects, with Super Mario 64's environments being one of these. Princess Peach's Castle is an especially popular liminal space that -core creators

use in their virtual photographs. The black and white checkered floors and grassy hills and cloudy skies painted onto the walls make for an iconic and easily recognizable environment.

Fake Screenshots and Nostalgia

There is a significant detail about a lot of virtual photographs of *Super Mario 64* liminal spaces that I pointed out previously that is relevant to this case: a lot of photographs are not from the game itself, and instead attempt to replicate the game with the use of CGI and 3D modelling programs. Figure 3.4 shows a virtual photograph of the flooded basement or dungeon area in Princess Peach's Castle, though in a much higher definition than what can be expected of either *SM64* game engines, with more sophisticated lighting and water textures; the author of this photograph admitted to using Blender to recreate this liminal space in the game[22]. Figure 3.5, on the other hand, shows a virtual photograph of Peach's Castle that is more faithful to the game's actual graphics, yet this creation, as well, turns out to be made in the 3D modelling program Blender[23]. Nostalgia and memory are subjects that strongly resonate with one another, and as described previously, it is false memory that assisted in giving way to conspiracy theories about the game, that in turn invoked a feeling of uncertainty and eeriness within the players who engaged with the game and its theories. Zawacki's notion of the lack of agency within games and how this invokes an eerie sentiment within players of a game is especially interesting when applied to this context. Glitches and anomalous occurrences in games such as *Super Mario 64* serve as a "reminder of the impossibility of truly understanding any given medium, of technology's frustrating resistance to bend fully to human will and of the presence of agencies whose methods and intent we do not comprehend" (95), yet the virtual photographs made through 3D-modelling programs seek to embody this uncanny lack of agency.

[22] Link to the original Reddit thread that the photograph originated from. Accessed on July 11th 2025.
[23] Link to the original Reddit thread surrounding the photograph. Accessed on August 8th 2025.

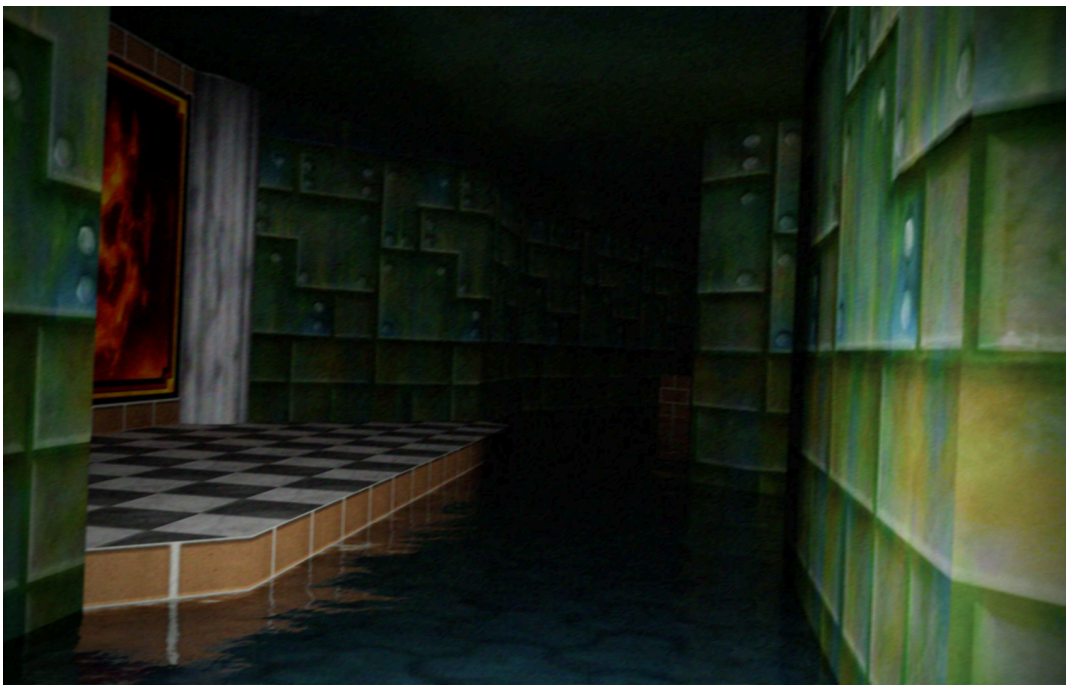

Figure 3.6: A virtual photograph of the flooded basement in Princess Peach's Castle. Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

Figure 3.7: A virtual photograph of a non-existent room that is made to look like Princess Peach's Castle.

Source: Link (accessed 29 Aug 2025)

Avoiding the actual game altogether when sourcing virtual photographs of liminal spaces in *SM64* strongly illustrates how nostalgia can become performative, or even unrealistic. As Sweeney proposed earlier, nostalgia can be considered a longing for an experience that a subject has not actually had (188), and the manner in which these virtual liminal space photographs are created resonates with this notion.

Sweeney also states: "Citizens of the 21st century are experiencing modernisation at an astonishing rate. As such, our nostalgia tends to be directed towards the simpler objects of the past rather than an irretrievable homeland. But at root, the emotion is the same—only its object has shifted" (190). Keeping in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s was the starting point for most of the nostalgic liminal space trends that *Super Mario 64*'s digital environments played a role in, the increased interest in nostalgia makes a lot of sense.

The nostalgia associated with *Super Mario 64* liminal space photography may even be regarded as performative. In her article "Fever Dreaming on TikTok: A Conceptual Framework for Performative Nostalgia", scholar of communication and digital culture Viki Conner describes how TikTok videos tagged with terms such as #nostalgia and #nostalgiacore are examples of performative nostalgia (2469). Performative nostalgia, in her words, "shifts emphasis from the *what* of nostalgia (i.e., affective valence/mood or representational form/mode) to *how* its modalities come together in particular socio-technical contexts to generate meaning and possibilities for action for subjects" (2287). While the TikTok videos that Conner chose as her case studies do not reference *Super Mario 64*, their format and intention is very similar to how -core aesthetic videos about *SM64*'s virtual liminal spaces take form. Likewise, similar to the connection between Internet aesthetics and *Super Mario 64*, Conner also states that "Internet aesthetics (as textual modes with particular moods) afford modalities of nostalgic association" (2481). Internet -core aesthetics are, in a certain way, tools that are used to explore and expand on feelings on nostalgia. *Super Mario*

64 is an example of a cultural object that is a recurring convention within the aesthetics and its associated content, acting as a vessel for the nostalgic association that this content communicates.

Conclusion

In conclusion to this chapter, nostalgia has caused interesting new developments when it comes to developing concepts like liminal space aesthetics, and *Super Mario 64* is a solid example when it comes to games that experience a resurgence in popularity because of it. Aside from the minimalistic types of liminal spaces discussed in the previous chapter, it has been shown in what other ways virtual photographs of *Super Mario 64*'s liminal space can be utilized. This was accomplished by analyzing two distinct ways in which creators on the Internet use liminal space photography to shape their own narratives or aesthetics subgenres: The Backrooms and the -core aesthetics. Both of these variations of online liminal space photography make use of the liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64*, further solidifying the video game's position as a classic source of virtual liminal space content. Once this was established, it was analyzed how the construction and content produced by these online communities align with and diverge from previously discussed notions of nostalgia. *Super Mario 64*, in the context of online communities that occupy themselves with liminal space content and aesthetics, is utilized as a convention that is frequently used in liminal space photographs, whether these are supposed to be about the game or not. The game's liminal and nostalgic nature exists outside of the narrative, and is instead used by online liminal space and creepypasta communities to be at the center of their personal creative expressions.

Conclusion

To bring all my findings back together, I will come to the conclusion that *Super Mario 64* is a game that both released at the right time and came with all the right attributes to become an object for the liminal space communities to integrate into their work. On the one hand, it established itself as a 3D platformer pioneer right when the transition from 2D platformers to 3D platformers was occurring, which gave it plenty of opportunity to set a standard for the many within its genre — and even games outside of its genre — to come. On the other hand, the video game's aesthetic and vast level design created a sense of lingering unease within the players: the game appeared to be so simple, yet so extensive and full of hidden surprises and secrets.

The plot of both variants is nearly identical and does not necessarily put a spin on the narratives that came before, but the execution of the narrative is unique, especially with the game being a flagship of Nintendo's campaign to develop a successful 3D platformer. With Nintendo's own experience creating Mario games, and plenty of platformer history to precede it, *Super Mario 64* unites positive aspects and developments of the games that came before in an — at the time — innovative manner. It left a dual legacy: acclaimed by many game journalists and receiving a lot of accolades from game awards at the time, *Super Mario 64* also inspired a community that bonded over the games eccentricities, and created conspiracy theories about as they slowly uncovered the game. These theories persisted through the decades, and gained a resurgence in popularity around 2020, when creepypastas of *Super Mario 64* became popular and an iceberg meme full of old and new conspiracy theories spread the concept to a wider audience. Contrary to the earlier variants of conspiracy theories, these new theories and creepypastas put more emphasis on an element of horror and mystery, and came with more visual evidence to support themselves.

Around this time period, liminal spaces as an aesthetic and Internet phenomenon also rose to popularity. Feelings of liminality pertaining to locations or spaces are not a new invention by any means, and there is overlap between how academic sources define liminality and liminal spaces, and how the Internet has come to define them as an aesthetic. *Super Mario 64* has no shortage of liminal spaces itself, and Peach's Castle especially is one that makes an appearance in many online liminal space photographs. Not only do rooms and hallways of the Castle have a liminal atmosphere, the Castle as a game location also has a very liminal function, acting as a hubworld that the player only uses to get from one level to the next. To capture these liminal spaces in the video game, players would either have to photograph their screens, or use an emulator so that they can access the game on a device like a personal computer with screenshotting functions.

The nostalgia that members of liminal space communities aim to celebrate through their creation of -core images, Backrooms videos, and other liminal space content, does align with the common notion of nostalgia focusing on a romanticized past, but also expands upon this. Liminal space nostalgia actually goes a step further and instead turns nostalgia into a longing for places and experiences that the subject has never actually had. The fantastic and fictional elements of Backrooms content and -core aesthetics like dreamcore and weirdcore emphasize on this concept, as the virtual photographs used in these liminal space subgenres are often manipulated to exaggerate the emotional atmosphere of the space, or add things that would only exist inside the imagination of the viewer rather than their memories. *Super Mario 64*'s virtual environments, such as Princess Peach's Castle, regularly make an appearance in the content of these liminal space communities, which further adds to the idea that their sense of nostalgia has expanded outside of the traditional reminiscence over memories. Despite being a work of fiction that features spaces that are practically lines of code transformed into

images, it still manages to evoke the feeling that the viewer has visited the location before and has strong memories attached to it.

There is an additional layer to this, as many of the virtual photographs from *Super Mario 64* do not originate from the original game, but are instead recreated with a 3D modelling program, or by using a game engine to alter existing levels or create new ones. Although the virtual liminal space photographs reference the original game and the nostalgia associated with it, the photographs themselves are separate creations. This further emphasizes how liminal space aesthetics stray from classic definitions of how nostalgia can be experienced, as even the game that they claim to feel nostalgic towards is presented in a recreated non-original state.

In short, the answer to the question "how does virtual photography of liminal spaces in *Super Mario 64* (1996) expand upon ideas on nostalgia?" would be that the virtual photographs of *SM64* are used as objects of nostalgia for experiences that fall outside of the traditional conventions of what nostalgic memories are: they represent a longing for experiences that a subject has never really had. Due to *SM64*'s unpredictable nature as a video game, players were quick to attach a sense of eerie mystery to the game, attaching it to conspiracy theories and creepypastas about experiences and content that may or may not actually be in the game. Likewise, the memories and nostalgia that they then connect the game to also relies on experiences that they may or may not have had

Nostalgia, in this expanded view on it, is no longer an emotion that is bound to a limited selection of old photograph or items that are associated with a subject's past. Instead, creators can manufacture their own objects with nostalgic value, in this case using digital environments from *Super Mario 64* as a template and source of inspiration for their work, which they then share in their online circles. While this type of nostalgia may not be entirely authentic since it fabricates photographs and locations for viewers to feel nostalgic about, I

will argue that this is a positive development, as it grants viewers the ability to reflect on their nostalgia from the new angles provided by the virtual liminal space photographs.

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