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The Damsel in Distress:
Gendered Spaces, Power and Subversion in Video Games

By Andrea Hayes 720192

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Supervisor: Jonathan Cane
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Abstract

This dissertation works with theories on spatiality within video games to determine how the damsel in distress, as a narrative trope, is perpetuated. There are three distinctive spatial modes that this dissertation has defined: The phenomenological mode of space, the screen mode of space and the diegetic mode of space. All three modes of space have been deconstructed and analyzed through a gendered lens. Through theories on ‘queerness’, each mode of space can be subverted in order to challenge the damsel’s trope. An analytical focus on the case study, *Donkey Kong* (1981), has been applied to this dissertation.

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Chapter One: Opening the Damsel's Space

1.1 Introduction and Overview

My childhood was filled with video games. Whether they were computer games or console games, my brother and I would play at every opportunity that we got. Our favourite games to play were on the SEGA Saturn (1994) console that was kept at our grandparents' house in Scottburgh, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. We spent almost every holiday there and, more often than not, our grandparents would find us playing games on the SEGA Saturn in their bedroom. As a queer child, though I did not realize it at the time, I had no problem embodying or playing male characters. I think this was because I could identify with the male gender, even though I presented as a cisgendered female. Saving princesses and beating up bad guys was something that felt natural to me. It was only later on in life that I realized that this was not the social norm for little girls at the time. I had no desire to play with dolls – most of the time I wanted to play with my brother's action figures or play video games. When I started studying video games at university, I realized that there was a pattern that occured in many of the games that I studied: the female characters were often either extremely sexualized or they were designed to be damsels in distress. It was the exception to see a strong, female-bodied character have some sense of agency or narrative importance in a video game. When I started to develop my own video games, I found myself wondering if there was a way to challenge the stereotypes that come with female characters, particularly the role of the damsel. If the female gender, or any gender representation that does not fall into gender binarism, could be portrayed to the player in a humane way, then more players would feel included in the content of video games.

This dissertation aims to critically engage with the narrative trope of the damsel in distress within video games as a misrepresentation of female bodies. A focus on the production of different modes of space will be applied in order to define the properties and functions of the damsel in video games. Space will be used as a tool to deconstruct the influence that the player, the game play and the narrative of a video game have over the damsel's character. Gender, through the concept of 'queerness', will be deconstructed throughout this dissertation as a way to determine how spaces become gendered. Gendered spaces, particularly in video games, often create unbalanced power dynamics between male and female-bodied characters, which leave the female-bodied character powerless. The purpose of this dissertation is to identify ways in which the narrative trope of the damsel can be subverted or challenged through 'queering' the damsel's spatiality in the modes of space in a video game.

I propose that there are three different modes of space that exist when looking at video games. These modes of space perpetuate the damsel and the gendered power dynamics that come with her trope. However, they can also be used to subvert and challenge the damsel's trope which will be discussed further on in this dissertation. The first mode of space relates to the phenomenological space, which is the space where players physically play a video game. This also relates to the player's emotional and mental experience of the video game, or how they respond to and interpret the content of a video game. The second mode of space is defined as the screen space. This is what the player can see on the screen when they are playing a video game. This speaks to how characters and the environment of a video game are portrayed to the player, as well as the actions that the characters can or cannot execute on the screen. In the screen mode of space, the sprites of a video game will be closely examined. Sprites refer to the 2D art, often created with pixels in a piece of software, of objects and characters in a video game. Finally, the third mode of space speaks to the diegetic world of a video game. This refers to the narrative world of a video game. It includes the social and political constructs, or the programmed rules, that the characters follow in a video game, which were created by game developers.

It is important to note that throughout this dissertation, there will not be a focus on the female body as a sexualized object. Although it is another pertinent issue when looking at the misrepresentation of female-bodies within video games, it is not a part of the scope for this dissertation. Throughout this dissertation, the words 'female-bodied', 'women', 'girl' and 'male-bodied', 'men' and 'boy' are used to describe the two opposite ends of the gender spectrum. However, it is acknowledged that many people fall between the spectrum and that gender is not something that is strictly binary. This dissertation also references the work of LGBTQ+ people and their theories. This refers to ways in which people and theories do not conform to a hetronormative social and political viewpoint or lifestyle. The concept of the 'damsel's space' is referred to throughout this dissertation. This does not imply that the damsel has any kind of ownership over, or power in, a particular space. Rather, the 'damsel's space' refers to spaces where her gendered actions or character is perpetuated or emphasized.

The core case study of this dissertation, which will be introduced in subchapter 1.3 An Introduction to The Case Studies, is that of the 1980's arcade video game *Donkey Kong* (1981). Whilst this dissertation will analyze, deconstruct and criticize this video game from a queer and gendered lens, it will not cover the intersections of class and race, due these discussions remaining outside of its scope. It is important to acknowledge, however, that *Donkey Kong* (1981) does contain racial connotations through the representation of the characters in the video game. In *Donkey Kong* (1981), the

character of the damsel is trapped by a monster, in the form of a non-human, giant ape and must be saved by the European-Italian character, Jump Man. The game's narrative and characters were based off of the movie *King Kong* (1933). Further research would suggest that the giant ape that kidnaps the damsel is a form of simianization, in which the ape is a representation of a black man:

> At the time of King Kong's production the public in the US was riveted by a rape trial. The Scottsboro Boys were nine black teenagers accused of having raped two young white women. In 1935 a picture story by the Japanese artist Lin Shi Khan and the lithographer Toni Perez was published. 'Scottsboro Alabama' carried a foreword by Michael Gold, editor of the communist journal New Masses. One of the 56 images showed the group of the accused young men beside a newspaper with the headline "Guilty Rape". The rest of the picture was filled with a monstrous black simian figure baring its teeth and dragging off a helpless white girl (Hund and Mills, 2016).

Donkey Kong (1981) is a video game that is filled with problematic representation, from all racial, economic and gendered perspectives. Whilst this dissertation will only cover the gendered perspective, it is important to acknowledge all the issues that it presents because of its incredible commercial success and massive public consumption during the 1980s.

The rest of this introductory chapter will define and explore the historical production of the damsel in distress in other forms of media to understand how it was produced. It will introduce the main case studies of this dissertation, in relation to the damsel's narrative trope. The concept of gendered spaces and the power dynamics that come with these spaces will be introduced and defined. Finally, this introductory chapter will provide an outline for the rest of the chapters and their content in this dissertation.

1.2 A History of the Damsel in Media

The history of the damsel in distress, as a narrative trope, dates back to ancient Greek mythology. These stories and tales feature many powerful goddesses, but also feature the damsel as a main archetype in their narrative plot. One of the most notorious stories from Greek mythology is that of Andromeda. In this tale, Andromeda's parents King Cepheus and his wife Cassiopeia boast that Andromeda is more beautiful than the Nereids, who are the sea nymphs which accompany the god of the sea, Poseidon. This upsets Poseidon greatly, and to punish King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia, he sends out a monstrous beast to destroy the coastline of their land. In desperation, King Cepheus and Queen Cassiopeia have Andromeda chained up to a rock on the

coastline, as a sacrifice to Poseidon, in order to win his forgiveness. After Andromeda was chained to the rock, Perseus (who was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman Danaë) was travelling home from slaying the monster, Medusa. On his travels back home, Perseus came across Andromeda tied to the rock on the coastline. At first sight, Perseus instantly fell in love with Andromeda and fought off the beast that Poseidon had sent to destroy the coastline. Using Medusa's head, Perseus turned the monster into stone and watched it crumble into the waves of the ocean. Shortly after the incident, Perseus married Andromeda, even though she had already been promised to her uncle (Grant and Hazel, 2002). The plot of Andromeda seems to have set a precedent for the damsel as a narrative trope. In other forms of stories that will be discussed, the damsel is typically taken or kidnapped against her will and is threatened or watched over by a monster or villain. She is helpless in this situation and requires rescuing from a male character. Often the damsel and the male hero enter a romantic relationship once she has been rescued from her dire situation – as depicted in the tale of Andromeda and Perseus.

Later on in history, the damsel's trope retained the same narrative plot overall, with some minor changes, depending on the media in which she was found. After seeing the damsel in ancient Greek mythology, she appears again in post-classical history. This time, she is found in fairy tales which were mostly created as children's stories. Examples of these fairy tales include *Snow White*, *Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty*. All three of these stories include a villain who either kidnaps, traps or curses the female character. Consequently she is made to rely on the male hero of the story, typically a knight in shining armour, to come and save her and defeat the villain. The damsel's character was often a feature in medieval romances, and so she became a popular archetype, during and after, post-classical history. An archetype is defined as "a very typical example of a certain person or thing; types that fit fundamental human motifs" (K, Butler. 2016). Archetypes act as models or frameworks for certain types of characters within a storyline. The damsel's framework consists of typical narrative beats or plots, as mentioned above, as well as a few physical traits. Typically, the damsel is portrayed as a beautiful, white woman who is physically much weaker than her male counterpart. She normally wears a dress, skirt or is completely naked as in the case of Andromeda. These physical attributes reinforce the idea that the damsel needs to be beautiful enough to make her hero counterpart fall in love with her, as she is unable to save herself. In their article, "Dystropia: How The Damsel in Distress Has Evolved" (2013), Troy Farah states that "the most unfortunate implication of the Damsel in Distress is women are inherently weak and their only strength is their beauty" (Farah, 2013).

Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the damsel continued to be a thriving narrative trope in the stories of songs, novels and melodramas. A few examples of these stories include *The Spanish Lady* (1682) – an English ballad, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) – a four-volume novel by Ann Radcliffe, as well as the theatre production, *Faust* (1806) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. All of these stories, whilst taking form in different media, feature the theme of the damsel or a young woman in some kind of persecution. In the 20th century, the damsel started to appear in new forms of media and popular culture such as films, comic books, and television series. One of the most popular films to appear on the silver screen was that of *King Kong* (1933) directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Shoedsack. The story of *King Kong* follows a young wildlife filmmaker from New York named Carl Denham. He is set to go on an adventure to a remote island for a new project. He meets, and subsequently takes, a young woman with him called Ann Darrow, who is to be an actress in his new wildlife film project.

Carl and his crew, along with Ann, journey to Skull Island where there is rumoured to be a giant monster called Kong. They arrive on the island and meet native villagers who, later on that night, kidnap Ann and take her to an altar that they have made for Kong. They surrender Ann to the altar as a sacrifice to the giant monster. As Ann and Kong notice one another, and Ann realizes that Kong is a giant ape, they are attacked by a giant Tyrannosaurus rex, which Kong defeats in battle. Eventually, a man from the crew named John Discroll manages to help Ann escape from Kong whilst the beast is busy fighting off another predator. Kong shortly realizes that the two are trying to escape and chases after them. Just as they get to the boat, Carl Denham sees Kong, and is determined to bring him back to New York alive. He manages to knock Kong unconscious by throwing a gas bomb at him. Kong is brought back to New York in chains and is presented to an audience in an exhibition as ‘Kong, the Eighth Wonder of the World’. Whilst the audience are taking flash-photography of Kong, he gets scared and breaks free from his chains. Ann and John, who are on the same stage, are taken away to a nearby hotel. Shortly after, Kong manages to find Ann, smash through the hotel window and kidnap her once again. Kong then decides to climb the Empire State Building whilst grasping Ann in his hand. Kong is shot at by multiple airplanes, and destroys one of them, but then eventually succumbs to his wounds and falls from the building. Ann is rescued and romantically reunited with John, whilst Carl is seen inspecting the lifeless body of Kong. Carl speaks the now-famous lines as the movie ends: “No, it wasn't the airplanes. It was Beauty [that] killed the Beast” (King Kong, 1933). Whilst deviating slightly from the above mentioned narrative plots of the trope of the damsel, *King Kong* still references and makes use of the damsel, through Ann Darrow’s character. Ann is kidnapped against her will multiple times within the story,

she is a beautiful, young white woman who relies on other male characters to save her (sometimes including Kong himself) and her rescuing at the end of the film leads to a romantic relationship with John Discroll. This draws on many narrative beats that happen in the story of Andromeda and Perseus.

In their article, “Mythology and Archetypes: A Damsel in Distress” (2016), the author Dsegal900 writes about the parallels between the representation of the damsel and the story of Andromeda and *King Kong*:

> Thousands of years later, another tale of distress and rescue was made into a legend that drew many parallels to Andromeda’s story. A beautiful woman named Ann Darrow is threatened by a giant gorilla and then saved by a man. The story of *King Kong* sounds extremely familiar after reviewing the details of the ancient Greek myth Andromeda, even though the two stories were written centuries apart. After comparing two images that represent these stories, Rembrandt’s Andromeda and a movie poster of *King Kong*, we can see a lot of similarities. Both women are representations of beauty in their time. While the woman in the movie poster isn’t nude, she is dressed in all white, which does make her seem somewhat more helpless. Both women are threatened, and in a state of extreme danger. Andromeda is about to be eaten by a sea monster and Ann Darrow is cowering as a giant ape looms over her (Dsegal900, 2016).

King Kong was a major success for its time, making around $2 million worldwide, when it was first released. It was one of the first successful pop culture films that contained the damsel in distress, while only slightly changing the plot and character of the damsel. Many forms of media today, including video games, still reference this film and use the trope of the damsel as a narrative crutch. Throughout this dissertation, multiple video games that range from the 1980s to 2020 will be referenced, analyzed, and deconstructed in terms of the damsel and the space that she occupies.

1.3 An Introduction to The Case Studies

This dissertation will focus on the core case study of *Donkey Kong* (1981) which was developed by Nintendo and initially released in America and Japan in the form of an arcade-machine game. *Donkey Kong* was a platformer game, which means that the player, embodied as the character Jumpman, needs to move, climb and jump across platforms in order to reach the damsel, Pauline. The goal of the game is to save Pauline from the monster, Donkey Kong, a giant ape that kidnapped the damsel. This dissertation focuses on this case study because it was one of the first commercially successful games to feature the damsel as a narrative trope in video games. In addition

to this, *Donkey Kong*, in many ways, set the precedent for the way in which the damsel has since been portrayed in video games.

This dissertation will look at other examples of the damsel in video games in order to extract parallels and similarities of the damsel. The case studies that will be examined include *Dragon's Lair* (1983), the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986-2020) franchise. These case studies all contain the character of the damsel, but how her story is told, and how she is presented to the player, may vary. It is important to deconstruct these case studies as they will show how the damsel's trope is continually used from the 1980s until 2020.

When analyzing ways in which the damsel's trope can be subverted, four case studies will be used. Each case study suggests a way that the three modes of space can subvert the damsel's trope as opposed to perpetuating its use. The first case study includes a 'modded' version of *Donkey Kong* that was created by the game designer, Mike Mika. This case study displays methods in which the screen mode of space can be subverted to challenge the damsel's trope. The second and third case studies show ways that the phenomenological mode of space can be subverted. The second case study refers to an article entitled "Gendered Spaces And Cultures In Video Games: A Personal Study Of Breath Of The Wild" (2019) by the transgender game critic and player, Ronny Ford. Ford suggests that if a player were to 'queerly' play through a video game, this can subvert its gender roles and stereotypes. The third case study is that of the *Rainbow Arcade* (2018-2019), which was a an exhibition in Germany that showcased 'queer' video games. This case study is important because it demonstrates ways in which the arcade space can be subverted in relation to the damsel. The fourth and final case study, that this dissertation will deconstruct, is the video game *Braid* (2008) which was developed by the game designer, Jonathan Blow. *Braid* is an important case study because it subverts the damsel's trope through the diegetic mode of space. *Braid* alludes to other video games that contain the damsel and aims to actively disrupt the power dynamics of the characters in the video game's narrative world.

1.4 An Introduction to Gendered Spaces

In this dissertation, there is a focus on how spaces actively work together to perpetuate the damsel's trope in video games. I argue that all spaces are gendered, and because of this, all spaces have certain expectations in terms of how people behave in spaces – both public and private. Public spaces refer to spaces that are typically shared with other people and are normally owned by the government – these spaces could include shopping malls, public bathrooms, universities etc. Private spaces are spaces that are

isolated from the public and are privately owned, as opposed to being owned by a larger political, cultural or social institute. The way in which gendered spaces function may vary slightly when it comes to public and private spaces, but both are still composed by, controlled by, and are rooted in patriarchy. This means that space is typically controlled by, and catered towards, male-bodies. In her article, “Women as Space/Women in Space: Relocating our Bodies and Rewriting Gender in Space” (2015), feminist and spatial theorist, Jana Nakhal suggests the following:

> Spaces are ‘gendered’. As much as a place is a product of our culture, it is in space that we project our innermost needs, but also our conscious and unconscious ideologies. Martina Lōw asserts that ‘[g]ender and space alike are a provisional result of an – invariably temporal – process of attribution and arrangement that both forms and reproduces structures.’ Both gender and space are similar in reflecting social norms into the lived experience of the everyday (Nakhal, 2015).

Within gendered spaces, people are expected to behave in a particular way according to the gender that they appear as. This gendered behaviour is also known as gender roles, in which men, women and people outside of the gendered binary, act differently according to the space that they are in. Studying how spatial practices and gendered roles are performed within the three modes of space, as mentioned in subchapter 1.1, is an important factor within this dissertation because gendered spaces perpetuate the damsel’s trope. If the gendered roles and spatial practices can be defined in each mode of space, then it will be possible to create potential ways in which space, and therefore the damsel’s trope, can be challenged and subverted.

An investigation into how these three modes of space construct social and gendered conventions is needed in order to determine specific characteristics of the damsel’s space within video games. It is vital, whilst each mode of space is being investigated and analyzed, that it is done through a gendered lens. Analyzing how every mode of space in *Donkey Kong* is dictated by gender is important because it reiterates the gender roles that exist within the damsel’s trope. It perpetuates and allows for the archetypes that are present within the narrative. This dissertation will explore ways in which subverting and ‘queering’ the three modes of space will experiment with gender, and therefore, subvert the damsel’s trope.

To investigate the production of each mode of space, one needs to revise the work of Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991). A focus will be put onto the three frameworks that Lefebvre uses throughout his work to describe the production of spaces. These three elements of the production of space include the ‘conceived space’,

the ‘perceived space’ and the ‘lived space’ (Lefebvre, 1991). By using Lefebvre’s theories of space to determine how meaning is produced within space, it is possible to further investigate how gendered spaces are filled with gendered meaning – this will be explored further later on in this dissertation.

1.5 Power Dynamics in Gendered Spaces

A gendered space comes with numerous expectations in terms of what spatial practices can and cannot be performed. These spatial practices are generally dictated by specific gender roles that are expected of male and female presenting people and, typically, excludes those who do not fall into the binary of gender. The spatial practices within a gendered space tell people what they can and cannot do and, in many cases, this creates certain power dynamics between men, women and nonbinary or gender fluid people. These power dynamics are often unbalanced and, because gendered roles are rooted within patriarchy, are often in favour of men. In her book, *Women and The City* (2000), feminist Sarah Deutsch talks about the way in which space produces power dynamics: “Space does not have an independent agency. Its meaning or power is determined by the way groups of people organize their social, political, economic, and other interactions” (Deutsch, 2000, p. 5). Deutsch references the idea that space does not have meaning unless people give it meaning through the way in which they behave or act within it. This reflects on the spatial practices that Henri Lefebvre speaks about in his book *The Production of Space*. The power dynamics are present within a gendered space due to the gendered behaviour that is carried out by people, often because it is expected of them to do so within a patriarchal society. Once it is understood how the three modes of space, mentioned above, are gendered spaces and what kinds of spatial practices and behaviours are present within them, one can start to understand how power dynamics function in those spaces. This will determine the way in which the damsel’s space contains power dynamics that are unbalanced – how the damsel’s character is seen as weaker than the male counterpart. The power dynamics of the damsel’s character are an important element to define and study within this dissertation as they will set the way forward in terms of how the damsel’s trope and her space should be subverted. If the damsel’s space is subverted but the power dynamics stay the same, then that would not be a successful challenge to the damsel in distress as a narrative trope.

1.6 Subversion in Video Games: Subverting the Damsel in Distress as a Narrative Trope

Subversion is a process in which key properties and values within a system are contradicted, reversed, reorganised or, most importantly, experimented with in order to

challenge the system's political, social, or cultural structures. In this dissertation, subversion will be looked at in terms of 'queerness' within video games. Specifically, subversion will be used as a tool to challenge the patriarchal gender roles that arise from the damsel's space and the power dynamics between characters within the trope. A key property of subversion that this dissertation will focus on is 'experimental queering' of the space of the damsel. In their article, "Video Games and the Fine Art of Subversion" (2014), player and game critic, The Geek Empress, defines subversion in relation to video games:

> The subversion I'm talking about is very different than a plot twist. While they too are twists in the story, the difference is that we facilitate these twists. It is our hand and our actions that not bring about the revelation, but the result. And as such they make some of the most interesting kinds of games as different kinds of subversion have different results and different meanings (The Geek Empress, 2014).

As this author suggests, subversion in video games has an added layer of complexity because it is not only created by a game developer, but it is also executed by the player. Players need to have contextual knowledge as to what a subverted video game is contradicting, reversing, or reorganizing. The player's interpretive agency is a key component for them to understand the meaning within the subversion of a video game.

Throughout this dissertation subversion in video games, in relation to the damsel, will be looked at in three different ways. The first way that subversion can take place is through a process that is known as 'modding'. In his article, "Computer Game Mods, Modders, Modding, and the Mod Scene" (2010), modder and game developer, Walt Scacchi, explains the process of modding:

> Computer game mods are a leading form of user-led innovation in game design and game play experience. But modded games are not stand-alone systems, as they require the user to have an originally acquired or authorized copy of the unmodded game. Thus, there are questions of not only who creates what and who owns such modified games, but also whether or how the practice of game modding is controlled or governed by external parties to ultimately exploit the efforts of game modders (Scacchi, 2010).

As Scacchi suggests, modded games require a person (who can be a game designer, a player or both) to have access to an original game and its content. A user is able to mod a game through a number of ways, but most often, modded games often redesign a game in terms of its art assets (sprites, animations, sounds etc.), through its mechanics

(how the game is played) or through the way that the game tells the story to the player. Modding can be related back to the second mode of space that is proposed – the screen space and what is presented to the player.

The second way in which subversion will be looked at in this dissertation is through the player's experience and how it can 'queer' the phenomenological mode of space. A player's interpretation of a video game, based on their cultural, social, and political background, can change the meaning of a video game and the narrative that comes with it. This form of subversion also refers to ways in which an arcade space can be 'queered' in terms of its content and the social behaviours within it. The phenomenological space is not only the physical space where the player plays the game but also the player's experience of the game when they are playing. In their article, "Playing and Gaming: Reflections and Classifications" (2003) game studies academic, Bo Kampmann Walther, suggests that "Games are confined areas that challenge the interpretation and optimizing of rules and tactics – not to mention time and space" (Walther, 2003). Here, Walther speaks about a player's capability to clarify the rules of a game, the strategies or tactics whilst playing a game, the time occurs whilst playing and the space in which the game takes place in. One important factor that Walther left out of their definition of a game is that of the narrative component – the story that takes place in the game and how the player interprets it. All of these components of playing a game require interpretational skills from a player in order to construct meaning from a game. This meaning, therefore, can differ from one player to another, and this is where the potential for subversion lies. If a game is intended to mean one thing by a developer, it may mean a completely different thing to the player once they have interpreted it in relation to their personal background.

The third and final way that this dissertation will look at subversion is through the concept of diegetic subversion and a narrative rearrangement or contradiction of previously existing video games. This kind of subversion speaks to the third mode of space that is mentioned above, the diegetic mode of space, or the world in which a story takes place. It aims to try and change the player's expectations when playing through a game that contains the damsel. Changing the player's expectations in the narrative of a game will not only show the player the issues that come with the damsel's trope, but also create an interesting and unique narrative experience. Game designer and critic, Pete Ellis, says in his article: "Subverting Player Expectations" (2016): "Subverting the player's expectation has potential for making an impactful story beat or communicating the emotional feel and narrative to the player. Its use makes a game less predictable and more engaging" (Ellis, 2016). Throughout this dissertation, these

three methods of subversion will be focused on, and will relate back to the damsel's trope, as well as the three modes of space.

1.7 The Outline and Structure of This Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion. The first chapter, the introduction, has defined the four major concepts that this dissertation will explain further. These concepts include a definition, and history of, the damsel in distress in other forms of media; a definition of gendered spaces in relation to the production of the three modes of space, as well as the damsel's narrative trope; the functionality and initial explanation of power dynamics that arise in space, particularly gendered spaces. Finally, the introductory chapter has created exposition for how this dissertation will use the concept of subversion to challenge the damsel's narrative trope in video games. The first chapter has introduced the case studies which will be deconstructed in relation to theories of spatiality and gender.

The second chapter of this dissertation will explore the different theories of spatiality, which will be used as tools to aid in deconstructing and subverting the damsel's space. In this second chapter, there are four critical concepts of spatiality. The first is Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre's theories on spatiality will be used to define how the three modes of space are produced. Chapter two will focus on the 'conceptual triad' that Lefebvre posited, which includes 'conceived space', 'perceived space' and 'lived space'. The second concept that this dissertation deconstructs in chapter two is Eden Kinkaid's defintion of 'queering' and 'queer spaces'. Kinkaid's concept of 'queering' speaks to ways in which Lefebvre's spatial theories can be experimented or played with in order to produce new kinds of spaces, or 'queer spaces', that stray from hetronormative exclusion. The third concept that chapter two will expand is the concept of 'cyberspace' from Espen Aarseth. Cyberspace is a tool that this dissertation will use to understand the relationship between the player and their influence in the screen mode of space. Finally, this dissertation will expand more on gendered spaces in relation to Henri Lefebvre's 'conceptual triad' in the *The Production of Space*. The concept of 'gendered spaces' will be used as a tool to determine ways in which the three modes of space are gendered and, in turn, how they perpetuate the damsel's narrative trope in video games.

The third chapter of this dissertation will focus on the core case study of *Donkey Kong* in relation to the three modes of space that this dissertation has posited. Each mode of space, in relation to *Donkey Kong*, will be deconstructed in terms of 'conceived space', 'perceived space' and 'lived space'. This will demonstrate how each space is produced and, in turn, how each space produces gendered spatial practices that perpetuate the

damsel. This chapter will also look at other examples of the damsel in video games and will aim to distinguish the spatial properties that they share in parallel to one another. This chapter will introduce a brief description of South African arcades between 1980 to 2020.

The fourth chapter will expand on the notion of subversion in video games and will argue how each mode of space can be ‘queered’ in order to challenge and subvert the damsel’s trope in video games. The three different case studies, as mentioned above, will be deconstructed in relation to the ‘differential space’ that they produce in order to bring about a form of subversion. The three methods of subversion that will be expanded on include modding, ‘queering’, and rewriting the damsel’s space.

Finally, this dissertation’s conclusion will synthesize the three modes of space, the conceptual tools defined in Chapter Two, as well as the damsel’s role within video games. This chapter will summarize the core findings achieved during this research

Chapter Two: Producing Space – ‘Queer Space’, Cyberspace and Gendered Space

2.1 Producing Space

To really understand how the damsel’s space is created and how it functions, before trying to find ways to subvert it, it’s helpful to look at Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* as a tool to navigate how spaces are constructed. *The Production of Space* proves to be a vital piece of literature within this dissertation, as it forms the basis for how space will be defined and understood.

Lefebvre argues that space is not simply an empty room or a vacant area; space is created and it takes on many kinds of forms, both physical and conceptual. One of the spaces Lefebvre mentions is quantitative space, defined by mathematicians as something that can be measured and calculated:

> They invented spaces – an 'indefinity', so to speak, of spaces: non-Euclidean spaces, curved spaces, x-dimensional spaces (even spaces with an infinity of dimensions), spaces of configuration, abstract spaces, spaces defined by deformation or transformation, by a topology, and so on (1991, p. 2).

Lefebvre goes on to explore ‘qualitative space’, which he calls ‘mental space’:

> No limits at all have been set on the generalization of the concept of mental space: no clear account of it is ever given and, depending on the author one happens to be reading, it may connote logical coherence, practical consistency, self-regulation and the relations of the parts to the whole, the engendering of like by like in a set of places, the logic of container versus contents, and so on (1991, p. 3).

Space is ever-changing and can be perceived differently depending on the experiences and worldviews of those who analyze it, as seen above in the contrasting definitions of mathematicians and philosophers.

Space is not a container in which matter or meaning finds itself, but rather, space *is* matter that is meaningful and is actively produced by a group of people (i.e. a society or community). Lefebvre states that “(Social) space is a (social) product” (1991, p. 26), meaning that the definition of space is created through spatial practices, which is influenced by standards of society. These social standards dictate what practices people can and cannot do, which in turn, affect the meaning and function of a space.

These behaviours do not only create the meaning of a space, but also perpetuate that meaning if they are repeated and unchallenged.

Lefebvre defines these interactions, actions and even thought processes as ‘spatial practices’:

> Everyone knows what is meant when we speak of a ‘room’ in an apartment, the ‘corner’ of the street, a ‘marketplace’, a shopping or cultural ‘centre’, a public ‘place’, and so on. These terms of everyday discourse serve to distinguish, but not to isolate, panicular spaces, and in general describe a social space. They correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute (1991, p. 16).

Space is not something that is ready made, nor is it complete to begin with. Space and its meaning are historically produced – the function and meaning of a space is influenced by its previous state. Historical interactions of people in a space create a precedent for the future interpretation of that space, subject to adaptation along the way: “[Space is] redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history – in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people” (1991, p. 41).

Space is not something that has no influence – space’s functionality, as stated above, is created by social behaviour. This social behaviour, particularly in the West, is controlled by a capitalist system. Lefebvre suggests that space can be used as a tool to control, to possess power and to dominate over a group of people:

> The more so in view of the further claim that the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power [...] The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely; the very agency that has forced spatial reality towards a sort of uncontrollable autonomy now strives to run it into the ground, then shackle and enslave it (1991, p. 26).

In contrast, as Lefebvre suggests above, people can also use space as a tool to rebel against a system and create their own agency within it. This will be discussed further on when exploring ways to create ‘differential space’ to subvert the damsel’s space. Lefebvre suggests that there is a ‘conceptual triad’ involved in the production of space. Each element within this triad works together to construct the meaning and functionality of a space. The first element, which has already been introduced, being ‘spatial

practice': "which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (1991, p. 33). This speaks to social behaviours performed by people within a specific space. This is also known as 'perceived space', which relates to how people are conscious of a space and behave accordingly.

The next element is that of 'representations of space': "which are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations" (1991, p. 33). 'Representations of space' refer to the way in which spaces are planned, organized and eventually actualized. It is also referred to as the 'conceived space' by Lefebvre. Lefebvre mentions that this kind of planning is in relation to experts within certain fields, such as architects, engineers and scientists. 'Representations of space' speaks to the way in which spaces are planned in terms of how they look, how they should be used and how they will impact on other spaces around them. An example could be a blueprint of a shopping center that an architect has drawn up prior to the building being constructed. The third and final element of the 'conceptual triad' is that of 'representational space':

> … embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces) (1991, p. 33).

This is also known as the 'lived space' according to Lefebvre. This 'lived space' is where the non-experts or the inhabitants of the space experience the space from their own perspectives. The 'lived space' often produces objects that relate to art, culture and various forms of signs that are coded with metaphorical meanings. The 'lived space' is qualitative and it is unique from individual to individual. It is alive, fluid and dynamic, depending on a person's experience of it. This element of the 'conceptual triad' refers to how the inhabitants *actually* use a space, which often strays from its intended plan. The 'lived space' can act as a rebellion of the 'conceived space'.

In my own words, space is not an empty container or a void with nothing inside of it. Rather, it is a conceptual tool that is influenced by three major elements that Lefebvre posits. The first is the way in which people behave and act – these spatial practices create meaning within a space, in that it is influenced by social, cultural and political stances that dictate how to act and behave. Physical attributes of a space prompt certain spatial practices – how people use and react to tangible objects will influence

how a space is used. These physical attributes also influence the purpose of a space, or give reasons as to why people make use of one space over another.

The second element is the way in which space is planned – both structurally and functionally. Professionals of space, such as architects and engineers, plan for space to look and be used in a specific way. However, how a space is planned is not always how people will use it. This leads to the third element which Lefebvre calls 'lived space'. This is the way in which people actually use the space – particularly in reference to their rebellion against the planners of the space through irregular use or actions. Space changes according to spatial practices. Throughout this dissertation, spatial practices will be a key focus when analyzing the damsel's space. Within each case study, it will be important to see how the damsel performs within her space – to take note of the actions that she can and cannot do, in contrast to the other characters within the video game. The spatial practices of the player in the phenomenological mode of space will have an influence over the damsel's character. Understanding what that influence is, and how it perpetuates the narrative trope of the damsel, will be important because it dictates how the damsel's space functions and what social, cultural or political aspects affect her space. Determining how the damsel's space was planned by the professionals of space, game developers in the case of video games, will be another crucial element when deconstructing her space. The game design choices made by the game developers, such as how they were able to artistically design the sprites of the video game and code the mechanics and interactions for the player, may have influenced the way in which they portrayed the damsel to the player. As mentioned above, spatial practices are influenced by the physical, and so, one of the important aspects to look at would be how the phenomenological mode of space, or the physical space of the player, was produced. Understanding game developers intentions and influences when they planned and produced a game will be essential to understand the functionality, meaning and genderedness of the damsel's space. Finally, investigating the 'lived space' of the damsel will be important to understand how a mode of space can be experimented with, despite what the professionals of space have planned for. The 'lived space' opens up ways in which the damsel's character is interacted with, stretched or twisted in ways that the professionals of space did not plan for. The 'lived space' holds the potential methods in which the narrative trope of the damsel can be subverted and challenged.

2.2 'Queer Space' as Experimental Space

It is important, particularly for this dissertation, to understand ways that Lefebvre's spatial theories can be stretched and developed further so that they are inclusive of 'queer' and virtual spaces within video games. Eden Kinkaid's attempts to extend

Lefebvre's theories around space, using 'queerness' as a tool, to produce 'differential spaces' that defy hegemonically dominated spaces. They do this through three main perspectives or lenses whilst dealing with spatial theories: The first is that of 'queer space', or the idea of 'queer thought' as a tool to analyze space, which produces a kind of 'differential space':

> Here, I argue that the possibility of a different space and set of social relations, be it 'differential' or expressly 'queer', relies on an alternative mode of visuality: a way of seeing that challenges dominant modes of representation, relationality, and meaning making in space (Kinkaid, 2018, p. 438).

This idea of 'queer space' challenges various social and political supremacies within a space, and therefore, creates a new kind space in which those elements are subverted or confronted. The second perspective is through the study of phenomenology, particularly that of 'queer' phenomenology, which focuses on embodiment and experiences. In Kinkaid's article, this relates to how a gendered body is organized when engaging with the physical in a space that is dominated by hegemonic modalities. Kinkaid argues that this is something that Lefebvre left out within the *The Production of Space*:

> Although Lefebvre castigated vision as a hegemonic modality, and left the counterhegemonic potential of vision rather underdeveloped, a turn toward (queer) phenomenology can supplement Lefebvre's politics of the visual and suggest pathways to a new vision for space, subjectivity, and the social (2018, p. 438).

The last lens that Kinkaid uses when dealing with Lefebvre's spatial theory is visuality. In Kinkaid's article, this refers to the way in which space is perceived and how it is experienced. They suggest that in order to produce 'queer space', or a space that challenges the presiding social and political influences over space, one must look at, and through, space with 'queer visuality': "Queer visuality, then, is an experiment, a test of interpretation, an embodied counterreading of space, subjects, and bodies, one that might rewrite the tangle of relations and meanings we call space" (Kinkaid, 2018, p. 439).

In this dissertation, there will be a focus on how Kinkaid uses 'queer thought' and 'queer' theory when analyzing space. There will not be a focus on how Kinkaid defines and works with phenomenology and visuality, as this is out of the scope for this dissertation. Kinkaid defines 'queerness', not as the 'antinormative' (Kinkaid, 2018, p.

440), that which opposes what is seen to be natural or upheld general standards in a society, but rather, as something that is experimental:

> ‘Queerness’ as experimentalism is not antinormative then, but tests the boundaries of the norm, of representation, not to reclaim preconceived taboos and territories, but to test the potentials of the present; to imagine how one might learn to see differently; to sense new hypotheses that make new answers, a new kind of answer, possible (Kinkaid, 2018, p. 441).

‘Queerness’ as experimentalism is a concept that will be deployed later on in this dissertation. Kinkaid suggests that ‘queerness’ as experimentalism “tests the boundaries of the norm” (Kinkaid, 2018, p. 441) and so it is important to determine what would be considered as the ‘norm’ when analyzing the gendered space that the damsel occupies within a video game. This has already been briefly mentioned in Chapter One, when defining the damsel in distress – one of the foundational properties of the ‘norm’ of the damsel are the gendered roles that come with the patriarchy, for example. Once the ‘norm’ has been defined for the damsel’s space, one can start to imagine how the damsel’s space would have to change in order to subvert the gendered roles using Kinkaid’s approach to ‘queerness’. How would the professionals of space in the ‘conceived space’, or the game developers in this case, have to plan for the damsel’s space so that it challenges the genderedness of the damsel’s space? Is it possible for the ‘lived space’ to challenge the gendered space of the damsel based on how players embody the space? By asking more of these questions, and analyzing ‘queer’ takes on the damsel’s space, one can start to hear or see a new kind of space where the meaning of the damsel’s space changes.

Kinkaid proves to be a provocative resource for reading Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* queerly, as their definition of ‘queer space’ is essentially a form of subversion of patriarchal and hegemonically dominated spaces. This is especially true of the narrative trope of the damsel in distress, as well as the space that she embodies within video games. The damsel’s space, both in how it was produced and how it is engaged with, is gendered in favour of male-bodies. Kinkaid’s definition of ‘queer spaces’, aids in creating different modes of space that rebel against oppressive social and political perspectives. In the third chapter of this dissertation, subversion of the damsel’s space will be discussed and how ‘queer spaces’ can be used to challenge the damsel and her trope.

This subchapter has dealt with Kinkaid’s approach to ‘queerness’ and ‘queer spaces’, their reading of Lefebvre, and how these can act as tools to deconstruct and potentially subvert the genderedness of the damsel’s space. The next section will look at how

spatiality works within video games. A deconstruction and analysis of Espen Aaseth's "Allegories Of Space: The Question of Spatiality in Computer Games" (2007) will aid in understanding how the spatiality of the damsel functions within video games.

2.3 The Cyberspace of the Damsel

Espen Aarseth offers two main concepts that are useful tools when deconstructing the damsel's space in the case studies to follow. The first concept he offers is the notion that video games are composed of three distinctly different spaces in relation to how the player interacts with the game, or the kind of control that the player has over the game's cyberspace. The second concept that he addresses is cyberspace itself. He does this in relation to Lefebvre's theories of spatiality, arguing that cyberspace, or virtual space, is a place in video games where the player is able to influence, progress and change the video game's content. This subchapter will explore these two important concepts in relation to Lefebvre's theories on spatility, as they prove to be useful tools in understanding the construction and functionality of the damsel's space in video games.

Aarseth suggests that video games are an underestimated form of media in terms of the social and cultural influence that they have (Aarseth, 2007, p. 153). He argues that spatiality is one of the major elements that make up a video game: "The defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation, and therefore a classification of computer games can be based on how they represent – or, perhaps, implement – space" (2007, p. 154). Aaseth reiterates the fact that space is not an empty void, but rather a tool that is used by video games to convey playful, interactive meaning to the player.

Aarseth claims that, "most of the early games might be described as 'man against the environment' approaches, with a personal perspective on the gameworld" (2007, p. 159). Aarseth addresses the relationship between the player and the space of the video game. He suggests that there are three kinds of distinctions when looking at space in video games, whilst acknowledging that there may be some exceptions. The first two distinctions are as follows:

> The open landscape, found mostly in the 'simulation-oriented' games, and the closed labyrinths found in the adventure and action games. We might call this the 'indoor' vs. the 'outdoors' distinction, or simply distinguish between games that use doors to control movement vs. games that do not. This distinction parallels closely the one mentioned earlier between player-character uniqueness (e.g. in

> Adventure) and player-representation integrated in the gameworld (e.g. in *MS Flight Simulator*) (2007, p. 159).

Here, Aarseth is talking about the difference between video games that allow the player to explore a kind of 'open world' that feels as though there is not much limitation of the player's movement, versus video games that control how and where the player should move within the game's virtual space. Aarseth suggests that there is a third type of video game space:

> A third distinction could be the player's level of influence on the game world, where some simulation games, such as *SimCity* or *Warcraft*, let the player change the world, whereas in other types, such as the adventure games or most 3D action games, the player has no constructive influence and the world is completely static (2007, p. 159).

In this third kind of video game space, Aarseth suggests there are video games that allow the player to change or manipulate the 'physical' of the virtual space. The player is able to create, build, and control characters within a space that they have made. This space, whilst feeling as though the player can build anything, is limited to certain properties. For example, if the player decides to build a structure, it must have the properties, functionalities and styles that the game developers have set in the code and adhere to the artistic design specific to that video game.

I will show that the three kinds of video game spatialities are useful tools for deconstructing the damsel's space. Defining which of the three kinds of space the damsel inhabits, according to Aarseth, will help determine what kind of relationship that the player has with the damsel's space. This relationship will inevitably influence the damsel and the rest of the characters that are present within her space. Determining what this influence is, and how it affects gendered roles within the space, will provide insight as to whether or not the space perpetuates the gender roles of the damsel, and consequently, the narrative trope.

Aarseth defines the term cyberspace as a *place* within video games, which is conceptually different to space, as this dissertation has defined it. Whilst the theoretical debate about the difference between space and place is not within scope for this dissertation, it is important to mention when trying to understand cyberspace, as this is where the interactions, and the feedback of those interactions, are created for the player. Aarseth questions the relationship between space and place, suggesting that the two are different, and that a place is dependent on space:

> To regard space as an object is a common trope in media aesthetics. The use of the concept of 'spaces' in the media, instead of 'places', 'rooms', 'regions', 'zones' etc. is fashionable, but what does it refer to? What is 'a space', and what is its relationship to *space*? (2007, p. 162; emphasis in original).

Aarseth suggests that cyberspace is the place in which players are able to influence, manipulate and, to some extent, control from the phenomenological mode of space. It is a digitally generated space, which cannot exist outside of a machine, like a console or a computer. Cyberspace is made up of symbols and actions that reflect the phenomenological space, according to Aarseth. Cyberspace is dependent on the space of the real world, and because of this, players are able to perceive and understand it. The way in which Aarseth defines and speaks about cyberspace, he is suggesting that cyberspace is a type of 'lived space', as Lefebvre would define it:

> By being generated, cyberplaces are 'regions in space', and cannot exist as parallels of real, three-dimensional space. This is an important point. 'Cyberspace' and other such phenomena (e.g. computer games) are constituted of signs and are therefore already dependent on our bodily experience in, and of, real space to be 'hallucinated' as space (2007, p. 162).

Aarseth relates the 'conceptual triad' of Lefebvre to video games, but warns that this might be a risky task to do as they are, after all, a type of spatial representation that Lefebvre did not anticipate. However, that being said, Lefebvre offers the triadic notion of social space as a tool to help understand how various different kinds of spaces work and how they are influenced by spatial practices, which also influence the spaces and places within video games. Aarseth suggests that "as spatial practice, computer games are both representations of space (a formal system of relations) and representational spaces (symbolic imagery with a primarily aesthetic purpose)" (2007, p. 163). He argues that the result of this combination is "too open to be of any real use" (2007, p. 163), but this seems to overstate the limitations.

After deconstructing Lefebvre's 'conceptual triad' at the beginning of Chapter Two in this dissertation, it is understood that 'representations of space', also known as 'conceived space' is the space of planning. As stated before, this is where the game developers are responsible for planning the spaces of a video game. Whilst each video game may have its own methods and processes of planning (depending on the type of game, its mechanics and complexity) this space allows for video games to undergo a process of conceptualization, production, and marketing. The representational space, also known as the 'lived space' is the space in which a player plays through or changes a video game, despite what the game developers in the 'conceived space' have planned. This

means that video games are influenced by the players, and this influence can sometimes be out of the hands of the game developers.

Aarseth suggests that spatial representation in video games is not the same as the space that people experience in phenomenological mode of space. Rather, space within video games is representational – it is meaningful to players because it is reflective of 'real life' space, as opposed to cyberspace. Players can perform within the space because of the coding structures, artistic design and other developmental processes that game developers and designers go through to produce a video game (2007, p. 163). When deconstructing *Donkey Kong* in this dissertation, it will be important to understand the ways that the video game's space relates to Aarseth's idea of 'real life'. Understanding the social and political ordinance during the time of each case study's release date will help to get a sense of what was being reflected in each case study.

Within the analysis of each case study, it will be important to understand how the representational space of the video game can be interacted with by the player. To understand how this representational space functions, it will be important to understand the intentions that the game developers had whilst creating each case study. This means that the production and development of *Donkey Kong* will need to be understood, as well as how it produces game play.

Through the use of Aarseth's definition of cyberspace, in parallel with the three distinctions of space that he defines, one can begin to understand the kind of influence that the player has over a space within a video game. Defining and unpacking this influence will help to understand the ways in which the player may have influence over the character of the damsel in *Donkey Kong*. The influence of the player may prove to be an element that perpetuates the properties that define the damsel and her trope. However, the influence of the player may also be something that can be used to subvert the game play of a video game. The subversion of the players' influence, and therefore the game play of a video game, will be discussed later in this dissertation when looking at ways to subvert the narrative trope of the damsel in distress.

This subchapter has looked at how cyberspace can relate back to how space is created in relation to video games, as well as the space of the damsel. The following subchapter will provide a working definition of gendered spaces in relation to the damsel in each case study. This next subchapter will work with Daphne Spain's theories on gendered spaces, in relation to Lefebvre's theories around spatiality, in order to define the gendered space of the damsel in distress.

2.4 The Production of Gendered Spaces

As mentioned before, the damsel's space in video games is a gendered space. That is to say, the spaces in which the damsel is present, produce spatial practices that are influenced by social and cultural ordinances of gender. These gendered spatial practices perpetuate the narrative trope of the damsel. They do this by reinforcing the problematic stereotypes that come with gender roles, and therefore, often misrepresent female bodies in video games. It is important to understand the ways in which gendered spaces are produced, and how they operate, because these spaces are what perpetuate the damsel. The gendered space of the damsel must be subverted in order to challenge the trope in video games.

This subchapter will look at defining and analyzing the production of gendered spaces in relation to Daphne Spain's book, *Gendered Spaces* (1992). Spain, whilst never explicitly referring to Henri Lefebvre's theories regarding spatiality, speaks about the production of gendered spaces in a similar framework to Lefebvre's *The Production of Space.* Spain's research focuses more on the symbolic and physical barriers that create inequalities between male and female bodies within different kinds of spaces (such as the workplace and the home, rather than video game spaces). However, her theories about the influence of space on gender are pertinent to this dissertation, because one of the key arguments proposed, is that if a space is changed or subverted, then the discourse and meaning of that space could change too:

> Our understanding of the tenacity of gender inequalities, however, can be improved by considering the architectural and geographic spatial contexts within which they occur. Spatial arrangements between the sexes are socially created, and when they provide access to valued knowledge for men while reducing access to that knowledge for women, the organization of space may perpetuate status differences (Spain, 1992, p. 3).

Spain's conceptions of gender and space can be mapped onto the damsel's space. Spain addresses the "architectural and geographic spatial contexts" which can be applied to the cyberspace contexts that are created by game developers. Cyberspaces, as Aarseth has suggested, are spaces that are planned, generated and produced within a certain societal and cultural framework – much like architectural and geographic spaces in Spain's research. When Spain addresses the concept of 'valued knowledge', the power that comes with the ability to access knowledge, as a form of inequality between male and female bodies, this holds true for the damsel's space as well, but the damsel's space is not limited to only this form of inequality. These inequalities and the

‘spatial arrangements’ that Spain describes will be discussed in more detail in this dissertation during the analysis of the case studies.

Much like Lefebvre, Spain suggests that space is something that is created. Spaces, Spain argues, are historically influenced and created by society in terms of the cultural and societal modals of a specific time:

> Yet it is also true that once spatial forms are created, they tend to become institutionalized and in some ways influence future social processes. Although space is constructed by social behavior at a particular point in time, its legacy may persist (seemingly as an absolute) to shape the behavior of future generations (1992, p. 6).

The historical influence of space must then influence the way that gender is represented within a space, as well as how it is performed. In the same vein, the space of the damsel is historically influenced by the social and cultural practices of a certain time, which in turn, affects the performance and functions of gender in that space. The narrative trope of the damsel, as it is discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, is influenced by ancient mythologies and stories, each with their own social and cultural elements. Whilst the damsel has been adapted to suit the media of a video game, the core fundamentals of the genderedness of the damsel’s trope rely on these properties that were created so long ago. The specific properties of the damsel’s space will be discussed in more detail in this dissertation during the analysis *Donkey Kong*.

The ‘conceptual triad’ that Lefebvre proposes can be mapped onto the theories that Spain argues for in regards to gendered spaces. Spain argues that the planning of a space, depending on the society and culture, is expected to have certain impacts on the way in which people behave inside of that society. This speaks to the idea of the ‘conceived space’ or the ‘representation of space’ that Lefebvre establishes. The planners of a space design it with specific qualities and functionalities, and expect people to behave in certain ways inside that space. Spain uses American society and culture as examples when discussing how space influences gender and vice versa. She states that the “strong American belief in the power of architecture to shape lives cannot be underestimated. Order within the household was expected to create order in society” (1992, p. 123). The ‘order’ that Spain refers to is the gendered rules within a society – the fact that men should have libraries and offices within their home, and women should be confined to the domesticated spaces in the house, such as the kitchen or scullery (1992, pp. 122-123).

This ‘conceived space’ that Spain indirectly refers to can be mapped to the damsel’s space, as it has been mentioned in subchapter 2.1 in Lefebvrian terms. Additionally, it is important to understand how the ‘conceived space’ of the damsel is produced in relation to its genderedness. Much like how Spain refers to the American society’s planners and their intentions for structurally planning a space so that it suits the expected gender roles at the time, game developers, in the mentioned case studies, have done something similar when they planned the space for the damsel in video games. The space of the damsel in each video game is planned around the character’s gender. This gendered space means that the characters, as well as the players of the video games, will act in specific ways that influence the damsel’s character (her actions, or lack thereof, influence herself as a narrative trope). In the later analyses of the case studies, the influence of space planning on characters and players will be explored in greater depth.

Lefebvre’s ‘lived space’ is defined by the rebellion of its inhabitants against the planners of space, through behaving in ways which oppose the planners’ designed intentions. Spain acknowledges this by frequently referencing examples where space is produced with a certain kind of gender role to be performed, but is later rebelled against by women. Spain speaks about the status of women in America during the nineteenth century. She explains that women in the nineteenth century would often rebel against patriarchal spaces and systems to overcome the inequalities and mistreatment: “Women sometimes resorted to subversion to avoid legal responsibilities to their husbands” (1992, p. 134). The ‘lived space’ is something that is dynamic in nature – evolving in tandem with people’s emotional reactions to the ‘conceived space’. Spain suggests that women modified their behaviour to protect themselves in an oppressive space. In a similar way, developers and players can defy the ‘conceived spaces’ of video games and behave in ways that subvert it through the ‘lived space’. Through modding, ‘queering’, and rewriting the space of the damsel, developers, players, and modders can challenge the genderness of a video game’s spatiality. This will be discussed in more detail later on in this dissertation.

The last element in the ‘conceptual triad’ that Lefebfvre established is that of spatial practice, or ‘perceived space’. This refers to the way in which people perform and behave, on a daily basis, according to the societal expectations that have been created for them in a particular space. ‘Perceived space’ encompasses behaviour where people engage with the physical attributes of the space in a manner conforming to it’s designed intentions. Spain acknowledges this when discussing the production of gendered spaces, referring to “British Precedents” during the Industrial Revolution, suggesting that spaces were created in order to reinforce gendered spatial practices and behaviour

of the time: “The design [of spaces are] tailored to reinforce appropriate gender role behavior” (1992, p. 115). Analyzing the case studies’ spatial practices through a gendered lens will be useful in determining if, and how, the actions and behaviours of characters in a video game may be gendered. Spatial practices, in the damsel’s space, will be specifically addressed in the subsequent analysis of the case studies.

There are two different distinctions of space that need to be clarified: private and public space, both of which are gendered. Private spaces refer to homes, or a space that is not open for public events and interactions, unless otherwise stipulated by its owner. Spain suggests that the private space is where the female-bodied person is expected to perform her gender roles. Public space is the opposite of the private space – it is the space that is typically created and controlled by the state or the government and is open for most people to be in. Public space, Spain suggests, is where the male-bodied person must perform his gender roles – it is the space for business, negotiations, and status:

> The opposition between the house and the rest of the world: the female, intimate sphere opposed to the masculine sphere of public life. Part of the fabric of feminine and masculine gender role behavior revolves around the relationship to the house. Men are expected to leave the home at daybreak and keep the company of other men in public. Women almost never leave the home and are hidden within its walls (1992, p. 41).

The way in which Spain has defined public and private spaces speaks to one of the properties of the damsel in distress, as defined in subchapter 1.2 of this dissertation. Note the strong parallel between the female-bodied person that Spain describes in the above quote to the damsel, both being confined to a space where they are trapped with limited agency. Conversely, the male-bodied character is able to explore, adventure and experience new, and potentially dangerous, spaces. Distinguishing between public and private space, when analysing the phenomenological mode of space, is critical in determining the impact of social and cultural elements derived from the phenomenological mode of space. It will be important to determine whether the phenomenological mode of space, in relation to *Donkey Kong*, is public or private because each comes with their own gender roles.

This subchapter has explored the concept of gendered spaces, with Daphne Spain’s *Gendered Spaces* as a core reading, in relation to Lefebvre’s *The Production Of Space.* Gendered spaces are produced in the same way that Lefebvre suggests all spaces are produced, the difference is that gender plays a major social and cultural role in all spaces. Examining the way in which the damsel’s space is gendered will aid in

determining the narrative trope's persistent appearance in video games. However, it may also offer ways in which to subvert and challenge the damsel's space and the gender roles therein. The next section of this dissertation, Chapter Three, will include a description, analysis and deconstruction of the main case study of this dissertation, *Donkey Kong* (1981). Chapter Three will deconstruct the case study in relation to the three modes of space introduced in Chapter One. Furthermore, power dynamics within the *Donkey Kong* will be highlighted to show how the defined gender roles perpetuate the narrative trope of the damsel in video games.

Chapter Three: Producing the Damsel's Space – An Analysis of *Donkey Kong*

3.1 A Description of the Arcade Game *Donkey Kong* (1981)

Donkey Kong was an arcade-based video game that was created by Nintendo in 1981 – arguably the peak of the arcade era in video games, before home-based consoles and computers became popular entertainment systems to play games on. The lead game designer of *Donkey Kong*, Shigeru Miyamoto, came up with the concept of the game when Nintendo realized that a previous video game that they had developed called *Radarscope* was commercially unsuccessful: "Miyamoto had to create *Donkey Kong* under intense time pressure. Nintendo of America was sitting on many unsold cabinets of a failed arcade game called *Radarscope*, and it needed a replacement game immediately" (Kohler, 2016). After *Donkey Kong* was released, it became one of the most popular arcade games in the market. It introduced some significant characters that, in twenty years time, would become icons for Nintendo.



Figure 1.1, Photo of *Donkey Kong* Arcade Machine, AceAmusements.us, no date.

Before describing the gameplay of *Donkey Kong*, it's important to understand the physicality of the machine that the player would interact with in order to control said game play. Refer to figure 1.1 to view an image of the *Donkey Kong* arcade box that was released in 1981. This image will reflect the description of the arcade box throughout this subchapter. As mentioned before, *Donkey Kong* was played on an arcade machine, typically built from wood, plastic, and metal. Initially, the game and the arcade box were not sold separately. If someone wanted to play the game, they would need to play it on the arcade-machine. This changed later on when the game was ported to various consoles that were produced by Nintendo. On these consoles, the player was able to play *Donkey Kong* in their own homes. The *Donkey Kong* arcade box was

approximately 170cm tall, 60cm in width and weighed around 82 kilograms (AceAmusements.us, no date).

On the facade of the arcade machine, there was decorative art that showcased the characters and objects from the fictional world of the game. The exterior of the *Donkey Kong* arcade box was either a bright blue or a red colour, depending on the model. On either side of the box, there was an image of Donkey Kong (the character) holding up Pauline (another character within the game) in the air and running. Behind them, the character Jumpman is seen chasing after Donkey Kong, whilst dodging barrels that are hurled at him.

I have identified three key properties depicted on the front of the *Donkey Kong* arcade machine. The first is the screen where the game can be viewed from by the player. Above the screen, there is a placard of sorts that states the game's name, containing artwork of the characters, in a similar fashion to the sides of the arcade box. Below the screen is the second key element, the control panel. This is where the player interacts with the game and controls the gameplay. As seen in figure 1.2, the control panel has artwork in theme with the placard at the top, and the artwork on either side of the box. The left-hand side of the control panel depicts instructions on how to play the game and interact with the machine and its controls. The remainder of the control panel contains the controls for the game, namely one joystick and five buttons, depending on the model. The functionality of the joystick and the buttons will be discussed when looking at the gameplay of *Donkey Kong*. Below the control panel is a speaker where sound is produced from the game. The third key property, of the front of the arcade box, is the coin slot for the player to insert an American Quarter (25 USD cents) in order to play the game. The back of the *Donkey Kong* arcade box was void of artwork, but still painted a bright blue colour. Arcade boxes are typically placed against the wall or the back of another arcade box, so



Figure 1.2, The Control Panel of the *Donkey Kong* Arcade Box, AceAmusements.us, no date.

the player cannot see the back of it. The back of the arcade box is generally where the internal components of the arcade box can be accessed.

Internally, the arcade box was made up of various electronics that work together to create the functionality of *Donkey Kong*. Whilst the details of these electronics will not be thoroughly explored in this dissertation, it is still contextually important to explore what they are. I highlight four components inside the arcade box essential to the functionality of the game. The first is the circuit board / panel where the video game was stored. This small computer was responsible for picking up player interaction, displaying the video game on the screen and storing the data of the game inside of its memory. The second component is the screen itself, where the player could see how their actions influence the video game. The third component, the speaker, would produce the sounds of the game as the player interacted with the game's system. The wiring, being the fourth internal component, was what linked all the other components together, allowing them to communicate and respond to one another.

The gameplay of *Donkey Kong* falls into the genre of a 'platformer', where the player needs to dodge obstacles and move carefully through the game's environment in order to reach the winning destination: "A platformer, also known as a platform game, is a video game in which a central challenge is navigating a character across a series of disconnected platforms, usually by jumping" (Computer Hope, 2019). In *Donkey Kong*, the player is in control of the character, Jumpman. Using the joystick on the control panel, Jumpman can be maneuvered up and down ladders or left and right across beams and platforms. The jump button on the control panel, enables Jumpman to jump over or across objects. The goal is to reach the top of the games's environment while navigating Jumpman through various obstacles along the way. The levels in the game include obstacles like rolling barrels thrown by Donkey Kong, mobile fireballs and firefoxes, bouncing springs as well as moving cement pies. All of these obstacles will instantly make Jumpman faint if he touches them, removing one life point from the player. The player begins with three life points, if the player loses all three life points, the game is over.

The main goal of the game is to reach the top of each level and reach the character Pauline at the highest platform of the level. In addition, the player will receive points for when they successfully maneuver Jumpman over obstacles (100 points) or collect additional items that Pauline dropped around the level. These items include her purse, hat, and parasol and when the player makes Jumpman walk over one of them, they will receive 300 points. Finally, the player will also receive points when they collect the hammer and destroy an obstacle with it. This hammer is scattered around the level, and when the player makes Jumpman walk over it, he picks it up and begins waving it over

his head. When Jumpman comes into contact with an obstacle, instead of losing a life point, Jumpman destroys the object and the player gains 300 points. Another goal of the game is, therefore, to gain a high score with the points that are received as the player plays the game. The score of the player is saved to the memory of the computer inside of the arcade box, and if they have a score that is within the top five highest scores, it will be displayed on one of the game's menus along with their name.

Within *Donkey Kong*, there are four levels that the player can play through. Each level has a specific time limit that the player has to complete the level in. Once they have completed the four levels, the game will start again at the first level, but the time that the player has to complete each level will be shortened. At the start of each level, the player is able to see the layout of the platforms: "Pauline is [always] at the top of the level, pacing back and forth and Donkey Kong always remains close by her side. Jumpman will always start the level at the furthest point south, near the left of the screen" (Arcade Classics, no date). In the first level, the player will see Donkey Kong climbing up the blue ladder that disappears as he moves. Donkey Kong moves past the red platforms with Pauline under his arm. Once he gets to the top, Pauline appears on the highest platform and Donkey Kong begins to jump across to the left hand side of the screen. As he jumps, the platforms become slanted (see figure 1.3). The player is then met with a screen that asks them "How high can you get?". Immediately after this, the game begins, and now the level has ladders that the player can climb. The player needs to reach the top of the level by climbing these ladders and dodging barrels that are thrown by Donkey Kong. Once the player reaches the top of the screen, a pink heart appears between Jumpman and Pauline. Donkey Kong then grabs Pauline again and climbs to the ladders, to what is presumed as the next level. The heart between Jumpman and Pauline breaks and the player is taken to the same screen that asks them "How high can you get?". After this screen is shown, the second level begins – this happens at the end of all four levels in the game.

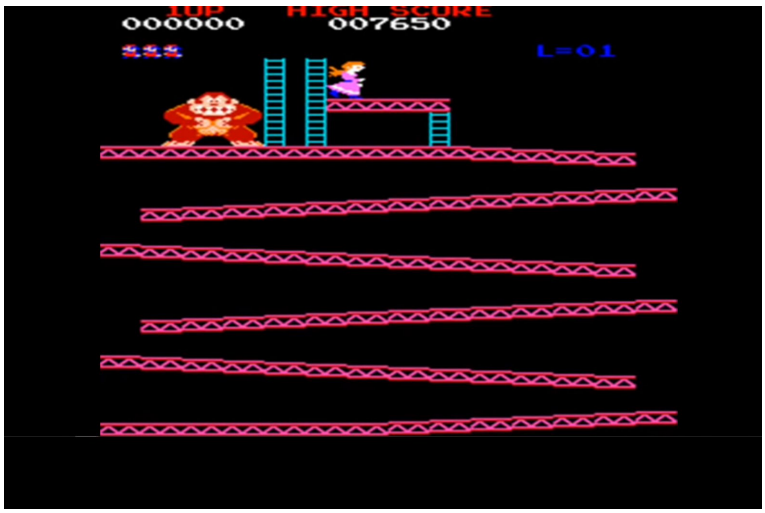


Figure 1.3, Screenshot of *Donkey Kong*, Carls493, 2011

The second level is structured in a similar way to the first, but in this level, some of the platforms are moving conveyor belts. These conveyor belts move to the left or the right and move obstacles along the level, such as the fireballs and cement pies, around the level. These conveyor platforms are white and yellow, with turning grey, red and blue end points on either side to show the player which direction the conveyor belt is moving in. The player can tell the difference between the conveyor belt platform and a non-moving platform by the shape of the bars inside of it. If the platform has straight, vertical lines then it is a conveyor belt. If the platform has bars that are triangular in their shape, then they are not a conveyor belt and will not move the player horizontally across the screen.

The third level has a different layout than the first and second levels. In this level, the player can see that the blue ladders and red platforms reappear, but this time the platforms are a lot smaller. There are two elevators in this level that are on the left hand side and in the middle of the screen. These elevators bring platforms up and down a red line between two yellow end points, allowing the player to jump across the level if they get the timing right. Again, the player must jump over or avoid obstacles, but the difference is that this is the level in which the spring obstacles are introduced. The springs bounce across the level from the top left hand side of the screen where Donkey Kong is. They fall down the screen when they reach the right hand side. The springs are grey in colour with a red interior which squashes and stretches as they bounce across the screen.

The fourth level's layout is structured differently to the previous three. In this level, the platforms are blue and the ladders are yellow. There are no moving platforms, but rather specific points on the platforms that Jumpman must jump over. These points are a light blue and yellow, different to the ladders and the platforms. When the player makes Jumpman jump over these points, they disappear. Once the Jumpman has jumped over all eight of these points, the platform that Donkey Kong is standing on disappears. Donkey Kong then falls to the bottom of the level, landing on his head. His face appears to be in a daze – his mouth opens, his eyes spin around and stars appear over his head. This indicates that Donkey Kong has been defeated. Jumpman climbs to the top of the level, and the pink heart between him and Pauline appears. This time, the pink heart does not break and it appears that the game is won.

However, after completing level four, the game begins again and the player must complete all four levels whilst increasing the points they collect. When the player has played through the four levels, this is considered to be one round completed. After the player has played 22 rounds, there is a bonus level:

> After you have cycled through 22 rounds, you will be able to get to the bonus level. This stage is solely meant for earning bonus points, which can be especially helpful if you are running low on [life]. The [level] starts off with an animation of Donkey Kong carrying Pauline up an elevator. The stage appears to be a duplicate of the [third] level, but the elevators will be dismantled into several smaller ladders, and the platforms will fall into a horizontally sloped pattern (Arcade Classics, no date).

In this level, the player cannot reach Pauline – it is simply a level designed for the player to earn more points to reach a high score. After this bonus level, the game is officially over, unless the player inserts more coins into the arcade box to start the game again from the beginning with zero points.

On the console of the *Donkey Kong* arcade box, there are two buttons that have not yet been described – these buttons are the 1-player and 2-player buttons. The 1-player button should be pressed if the player is playing the game alone. The 2-player button should be pressed when the player is playing with a friend. Note that this does not make the game multiplayer – the players do not control their own playable character on the screen in one instance of the game. Instead, the 2-player button means that the players must insert another coin in the arcade box and, instead of having two controllable characters on the screen, the players can take turns to play if the other player runs out of lives in the game. Essentially, the two players will play the game individually as it is described above, all the while trying to beat the other player's score. In some models of the *Donkey Kong* arcade box, there will be five buttons on the console instead of three, with two extra yellow buttons. These two extra buttons, that are next to the jump button, do not have any functionality in the game. Instead, these buttons could be repurposed for functionality if another game were to be placed in the computer inside of the arcade box.

This subchapter has described the physicality of the exterior and interior of the *Donkey Kong* arcade box in regards to how the player interacts with the box when playing the game. The gameplay of *Donkey Kong* has been described in order to give contextual knowledge when analyzing the video game and the characters involved within the game. The next subchapter will begin the analysis of *Donkey Kong* in relation to the spatial theories that were defined in Chapter Two of this dissertation. Specifically, the next subchapter will deal with Lefebvre's 'conceptual triad' to understand how phenomenological mode of space is produced. Daphne Spain's theories around gendered spaces will be applied to this mode of space to understand how its genderedness is defined and how it functions.

3.2 Analyzing *Donkey Kong* in the Phenomenological Mode of Space – The 'Conceived Space' in Arcades

The phenomenological mode of space, as introduced in the first chapter of this dissertation, refers to the physical space where the player interacts with a video game. The mode of space also refers to the player's interpretation and emotional response to a video game. In the case of *Donkey Kong*, the player would typically play the game inside of an arcade during the early 1980s. These arcades housed various games and machines for people to play on. As long as a person had money, they could interact with as many games as they wanted to. Typically, arcade spaces were dimly light and quite noisy places to be in, as Dan Lipscombe would describe in his experiences of playing video games in arcades during the 1980s:

> Nothing beats some of the memories I have of dimly lit arcades [...]. The noise would be a cacophony created by an electronic orchestra; plastic reels driven by unseen cogs or belts; melodic chiming blaring from within flashing cabinets and the clatter of coins that added a percussion [...]. The smell of vinegar mixed in with burnt sugar flooded inwards from the street. The machines around us would have smoothed patches in the facades from the many fingers that drum or thump across buttons. Burns in the plastic lingered from forgotten [cigarette] ends; the smoker distracted by a jackpot or a trip to the counter for change. We'd pick idly at notches in the plastic or the flaking stickers, as we wait our turns [to play on the arcade machines] (Lipscombe, 2018).

These arcades were extremely popular in America during the 1980s and generated a revenue of about $5 billion. This time period is known as the golden age of arcade video games: "The late 1970s and early 1980s saw an explosion of video games, so that by 1981 arcades had become a $5-billion fixture of American urban and suburban life" (Whittaker, 2004, p. 122). The arcade spaces in America became a part of the popular culture during the time. Whilst most arcades spaces have now closed down because of the growth of home-based entertainment systems, there are still some that are open for nostalgic purposes.

Analyzing the arcade space, in relation to the case study *Donkey Kong* and theories around spatiality, is important for two main reasons. The first is that arcades were one of the first spaces where people were able to play video games. These video games, whilst now seeming quite old-school, actually set the way forward for the development of video games on home-based entertainment systems. Many of the games that are developed today still have their foundations in the basic interactions that the arcade video games allowed for. For example, many of the Nintendo video games that are

developed now still refer to the narratives and gameplay that were established in *Donkey Kong* during the 1980s. The second reason why the arcade space is important, particularly for this dissertation, is because it sets the precedent for *who* these video games were made for and played by. This will be a focus when analyzing the phenomenological mode of space, especially when examining the ways in which it introduces power dynamics to that characters in *Donkey Kong*.

To understand the functionality of the arcade spaces, one must return to Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, particularly his 'conceptual triad' that works together to produce a space. The first concept within the triad, examined through the lense of the phenomenological mode of space, or an arcade space, is that of the 'representations of space' – also known as the 'conceived space'. As mentioned in subchapter 2.1, the 'conceived space' is that which is designed and constructed by the planners of a space (this includes blueprints, maps etc.). Understanding the planning behind the creation of the arcade space, as it is described in Lipscombe's work, is important because it may reveal the intentions that the planners and owners had for the customers / players of the arcade. Whilst this may prove to be a difficult task, as many of those arcade spaces do not exist anymore, this dissertation will try to retroactively engage with the general layout plans for the space. When describing the plans for the arcade space in the 1980s, two elements will be looked at. The first is how the space may have been set up (the lighting, the floor plan etc). The second is the marketing that went into the video games that were housed there. This was a part of the appeal to draw players to the arcade space. The marketing of the video games inside of the arcade, as well as their narratives and gameplay, are what made the space of the arcade gendered.

When describing how arcade spaces may have been laid out, a useful article to look at is the "Top 10 Fec & Arcade Game Room Layout Tips*"* (LAI Games, 2017). This website describes various methods that an arcade owner can use in order to optimize their customer intake, and therefore their revenue, when planning the layout of the space. It is important to note that only the points within this article that would be relevant to an arcade in the 1980s will be discussed, as deconstructing arcades that exist in 2020 is not within scope for this dissertation. The first important point that the article refers to is the entrance of an arcade:

> Make the entrance of your arcade space large and inviting. Position new and exciting pieces near the entry that encourage customers to step inside for a closer look. Make sure there is plenty of visibility into the rest of the game room and your other attractions (LAI Games, 2017).

Typically arcades in the 1980s had large, neon signs outside of their entrances, enticing gamers to enter the space. Inside the arcade, just after a client has walked into the entrance, there would be new games or arcade machines that had just entered the market. This would be a form of advertising to encourage regular gamers to try new games that they may not have played before. These games would have bright, flashing lights and make energetic noises to gain attraction (LAI Games, 2017).

It is suggested that the arcade space has an “open, free flow floor plan” (LAI Games, 2017). This means that, in the 1980s arcade spaces, the machines would not block the line of sight for players. The space would be open so that a player was able to see most of the games as they entered the arcade space. This would make the player want to explore all the options for games within the arcade. Most of the taller machines were placed around the perimeter of the arcade space, with smaller islands of machines that had similar dimensions in the middle of the space (LAI Games, 2017). It was very important that players had space to move around the arcade – a lot of players would create a line and wait their turn on a machine, or they would crowd around a machine to watch their friends play through a game (LAI Games, 2017).

A positive ambience for the player would be essential for making them stay longer, and play more games, with lighting being a key factor:

> Lighting is key for your environment. Try to use indirect bounced lighting to minimize glare so customers stay longer. If you do have overhead lights, make sure to diffuse them. Bridgette Stone from Be Media also suggests adding gobo lights with designs to keep the guest’s eye on the prize(s), using catchy words such as ‘WINNERS’ or a customized logo. Gobo lights create dramatic effects on walls, walkways and more (LAI Games, 2017).

Lipscombe describes the arcade he was in as being “dimly lit” (Lipscombe, 2018). This was probably intentional by the planner of that arcade space. The dim light was to create a specific atmosphere inside of the arcade – one that would make players stay longer and want to come back to the space.

After analyzing how the arcade space may be planned out in terms of its physical attributes, it is clear that the space isn’t necessarily gendered as a direct result. Instead, what made the arcade space gendered, was the content of the video games that were presented to the players in the space. In “A Space for the Boys: Considering the Gendered Quality of Arcade Culture”, Christopher Williams suggests that the arcade space was gendered in a way that favoured solely male-bodied people. The arcades during the 1980s “were places to drop boys off at or for boys to wander into while

mothers and daughters shopped" (Williams, 2013). The arcade space was not an inviting space for female-bodied people, and more often than not, if a female-bodied person entered the space, it was seen as a rarity:

> I would like to suggest some sort of ratio of young boys to young girls occupying the arcade, something like 10 to 1 or 20 to 1, but honestly, most often when I was there (and I was there for hours at a time), the place was populated exclusively by boys. A sister might show up to tell her brother to meet mom and dad at the car, but they were rarely there to play. Very occasionally one might run into a couple of girls playing *Galaga* or *Centipede* (the 'older' games) somewhere near the back, but still, even that was an infrequent occurrence at best (Williams, 2013).

The sparse population of female-bodied people in arcades, or just playing video games in general during that time, was significantly lower than the male-bodied counterpart. The important issue to explore here is the reason why this was the social norm of the time. Many suggest that this was because a lot of the content of video games during the 1980s was catered towards male representation and, either completely lacked female representation, or portrayed the female body as weak, vulnerable, and powerless. In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (2000) Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell speak about a study that was done which included 100 arcade games spanning from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. In this study of arcade games, 92% of the games had no female roles whatsoever. Of the remaining 8%, 6% were damsels in distress and the other 2% were female characters that had active roles that were controlled by the player. However, these active roles were majority not human (such as Ms. Pacman and Mama Kangaroo) (Jenkins and Cassell, 2000, p. 10). The reason for the lack of representation of female-bodied people in video games during the arcade era, according to Jenkins and Cassell, is due to video game companies focusing their marketing efforts on male-bodied people. This created a societal stereotype, suggesting that male-bodied people are more likely, willing, and able to play video games than female-bodied people are.

Jenkins and Cassell suggest that there are two main reasons for this target market approach within the game development industry. The first is that, particularly during that time in history, male-bodied people were encouraged to interact with new forms of technology, and so had easier access to it than female-bodied people (Jenkins and Cassell, 2000, p. 11). They suggest that video games allow a person to start interacting with technology in a fun and immersive way; commencing a vicious cycle, where male-bodied people with more access to video games developed higher rates of computer literacy the more they played. This cycle entrenched male-bodied people as

the dominant target market for video games and their content (1998, p. 11). The need to maintain the booming growth of the gaming industry was the second reason why male-bodied people became the primary target market for content development and sales. The authors suggest that: “As long as the boy’s market [in video games sales] was sufficient enough to fuel the growth of the game industry, corporate executives felt little motivation to market to girls” (Jenkins and Cassell, 2000, p. 15). The marketing of video games towards male-bodied people meant that the arcade spaces during the 1980s housed games that were made for boys, by men. It isn’t unusual then, that women would feel ostracized by the space and the people inside of it. If a female-bodied person were to enter the space, it would be seen as an act that was outside of the social norm at the time.

When deconstructing *Donkey Kong*, in relation to the phenomenological mode of space and the ‘conceived space’, it is clear that the content target market of the game catered towards male bodies, as many video games did during the time. *Donkey Kong* would have been one of the video games that were housed in the arcade spaces during the 1980s – its content conforming to the social expectation that video games were made for male-bodied people. The character Pauline, also known as Lady, who would later evolve into the renown Princess Peach, was the only form of female representation within the video game. Within *Donkey Kong,* the player plays as or embodies Jumpman, who would also evolve into the character of Mario, which Nintendo is so well known for. It is up to Jumpman to rescue Pauline, the damsel of the video game, who has been kidnapped by the character, Donkey Kong. The player can never play as or interact with Pauline. Instead, she acts as a goal or objective for the player to win the game. Pauline, like many video games at the time, was presented as powerless and weak. This is something that probably wouldn’t have interested many female-bodied people at the time. Most people wouldn’t be interested in a game where they could not identify with the characters or the narrative, or even felt that they were misrepresented entirely. In her book, *Gender Inclusive Game Design*, video game academic, Sheri Graner Ray, explains that the game development industry had two main ways to represent female-bodied people. The first was as sexual objects, with scantily clad apparel. In most cases, her physical characteristics being overly exaggerated (Ray, 2004, p. 29). The second way was:

> To depict the female as an object to be retrieved or rescued. Of course, this isn’t limited to the game industry, by any means. Entertainment has been filled with ‘rescue the princess’ imagery ever since the first story was told. Unfortunately, in the case of computer games, the repetition of this theme may have had an off-putting effect on female players (Ray, 2004, p. 29).

The arcade spaces at the time, whilst being some of the only spaces where people were able to play video games, only housed games that were catered towards a positive representation of male-bodied characters. Therefore, the arcade space ostracized potential female-bodied players, as they did not feel included within the arcade games' content. This created a societal ordinance, where people believed that video games, and therefore arcade spaces, were made for and played by males. *Donkey Kong* was not an exception to this – the video game perpetuated the gendereness of the arcade space, and the narrative trope of the damsel in distress in video games. It did this presenting a female character within the narrative of the game that was powerless, helpless and had to rely on the male protagonist to save her from her kidnapper. This misrepresentation of the female body in the video game may have made female players feel excluded, not only from the game, but also in the arcade space of the 1980s.

This subchapter has dealt with the 'conceived space' of the phenomenological mode of space in relation to *Donkey Kong*. The focus being the how targeted marketing to male-bodied people set a precedent for future game development as well as reinforced the exclusion of female-bodied people within arcade spaces. The method of 'conceived space' was used to evaluate how male-bodied people became the target market for the content and sales of video games, often coinciding with misrepresentation of female characters. The next subchapter will look at the social practices of the phenomenological mode of space, showcasing social behaviours as a focal point within arcade spaces during the 1980s, and scrutinizing how they may have been gendered.

3.3 Analyzing *Donkey Kong* in the Phenomenological Mode of Space – The 'Perceived Space' in Arcades

The next concept to deconstruct, in relation to the phenomenological mode of space of *Donkey Kong*, is the 'perceived space'. This is also known as spatial practice – the way in which people behave according to the social and cultural ordinances established within a space. In terms of *Donkey Kong*, the spatial practices refer to the ways in which people would behave and react to the spatial layout of the arcade, where the game would have originally been played. I would suggest that there are four main types of spatial practices within the arcade spaces during the 1980s. The first spatial practice, albeit an obvious one, is that people would play video games. Although the isolated act of playing a video game today would not be considered gendered, during the 1980s, due to male-bodied people being the target market of video games, utilizing arcade space came with a set of ingrained gender roles. The content of the video games in the arcade spaces perpetuate male representation, whilst subjugating the representation of the female character. Many researchers suggest that the male-driven content of video

games, as well as males claiming the space of the arcade, leave the female gamer feeling ostracized from the space: “If young female gamers are playing games where they’re forced to play as a male protagonist, it sends a clear, if subconscious, message: girls don’t game. You’re not here, you’re not represented, you don’t exist in this space, you don’t belong” (Aurora, 2018).

The next spatial practice to examine in the arcade is queuing, or lining up behind a specific machine, in order to have a turn to play a video game. In his article, Lipscombe reminisces about this spatial practice that he performed inside the arcade space: “Most cabinets would often have lines of boys, a few girls, waiting for their turn to play. The kids that had bunked off of school during the week were here to show off the skills they’d honed while others sat in packed classrooms” (Lipscombe, 2018). This quote from Lipscombe is interesting for two reasons. The first is that he mentions that there were “a few girls” with the space of the arcade. I would argue that this is a form of ‘lived space’ in the arcade of the 1980s, which will be dealt with in the next subchapter. The second is that he remembers children skipping school to be at the arcade, to then wait in line in, to eventually have a turn to play a video game in an attempt to beat the high score. Whilst queuing is not necessarily a gendered spatial practice, the competition that the arcade brought about in the male-bodied people at the arcade is a form of gendered spatial practice.

Devices such as leaderboards, showing the names of top scoring players, encouraged competition between male-bodied people within 1980s arcade spaces. Daphne Spain distinguishes competition as a male-orientated practice, in contrast to cooperation, being seen as a female practice: “Hunting, competition, and segregation are associated with masculine origin symbolism, while gathering, cooperation, and integration are associated with feminine origin symbolism” (Spain, 1992, p. 86). Whilst Spain is speaking in relation to the gender division of labour, the same concept can be applied to video games during the 1980s. Male-bodied people would spend hours within an arcade trying to beat high scores that were set by other male-bodied players. Essentially, the boys in an arcade would play *against* one another, in contrast to a girl spending time playing *with* her friends. Jenkin and Cassell suggest that female players prefer games if “they involve cooperation and positive social encounters” (Jenkins and Cassell, 2000, p. 55), however, I would argue that this is not necessarily true. Whilst the debate around the gendereness of competition is not within scope for this dissertation, it is important to note that this was seen as a gendered social practice at the time. The driving competitive forces of *Donkey Kong* included obtaining the highest score and being able to save Pauline from Donkey Kong. The idea that one male player could be better at

saving a damsel than another player reiterates the objectification of the damsel is – she is merely a goal of the game, or the symbol of winning to the players.

The final spatial practice to be discussed within this subchapter is the audience within arcade spaces. In his article, Williams remembers how people would watch over players' shoulders as they played through video games in the arcade: "The arcade was dark and generally otherwise quiet. Few players spoke much as they dropped quarters into machines and occasionally milled about watching other players playing" (Williams, 2013). This spectator behaviour can then be considered gendered in the context of the arcade space. In their article, "The Role of Onlookers in Arcade Gaming: Frame Analysis of Public Behaviours" (2011), Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun suggest that having spectators watch a player play a video game can affect their performance: "Researchers have used social facilitation theory to examine the effects of audience presence / absence on players, noting that audiences can promote positive performances among good players and inhibit them among poor players" (2011, p. 127). This effect of an audience on a player touches on the concept of competitiveness amongst male-bodied people within arcade spaces during the 1980s. If a male-bodied person performed well and set a new high score in a video game, he would be showing off his prowess to his audience, bolstering his masculinity in a space designed for boys. If a player did poorly, he would be seen as inferior or less skilled than others in the arcade and, creating an association of failure or weakness in the male space. In relation to *Donkey Kong*, the player must be seen as a skillful player to his audience if he is to save Pauline from Donkey Kong. If the player is able to acquire the game play skill to save Pauline, he is not only a hero in terms of the narrative of the game, but he would also be seen as a hero to his audience.

This subchapter has dealt with the spatial practices performed within an arcade during the 1980s. Whilst not all of these spatial practices are inherently gendered, the social context of the time made them so. These spatial practices indirectly perpetuate the damsel in distress in the video game *Donkey Kong*, as they reflect the gender roles present within the content of the video game. The next subchapter will propose the concept of 'lived space' as a method for subverting the genderedness of *Donkey Kong* in relation to the arcade space that it was designed to inhabit.

3.4 Analyzing *Donkey Kong* in the Phenomenological Mode of Space – The 'Lived Space' in Arcades

The third and final concept within the triad to discuss when analyzing the phenomenological mode of space in *Donkey Kong* is that of the 'space of representation', or the 'lived space' as Lefebvre established. This is the space for

rebellion against the ‘representations of space’ – the ‘conceived space’. The ‘lived space’ is different to spatial practice in that, instead of conforming to social norms in behaviour as planned for in a space, it acts to resist the ‘conceived space’. The ‘lived space’ is flexible and adaptable, changes according to how people emotionally react to the ‘conceived space’. This dissertation has already established the ‘conceived space’ of the arcade, which is relevant to *Donkey Kong* as it was an arcade video game initially played within these spaces. This dissertation has also explored how the social norms and physical structure of the arcade represent the foundational building blocks of its gendered social practices. This dissertation has established how arcade spaces of the 1980s were gendered space catering to male-bodied people – but were there any incidents of people going against this social norm? Whilst this might be a difficult question to answer, a starting point is to think of ways in which people of the time would have broken social norms and the genderedness of the arcade. A simple example of the ‘lived space’ in relation to *Donkey Kong*, and therefore the arcade itself, would be a female-bodied person participating and playing video games in the space. As mentioned in Spain’s *Gendered Spaces*, public spaces are generally associated with males, whilst private spaces, especially during the 1980s, were designated for women. The arcade space, being a type of public space, would be considered a “space for boys” (Williams, 2013). In contrast, the female-bodied person would be expected to play at home, a private space, with her dolls: “the Barbie doll [is] an object that lends itself particularly well to appropriation, and to a variety of self-identifications and types of gendered behaviours” (Jenkins and Cassell, 2000, p. 28). During the 1980s, when a female-bodied person would play with a doll, such as a Barbie doll, she would essentially be interacting with the gendered roles that would be expected of her. This is because the function of Barbie, along with the house and other domestic miniature toys that the doll would generally come with, would be to introduce domesticated activities to young girls at the time. When a young girl would play with a Barbie doll, it would typically be inside of her own bedroom – a private space where she would engage with the miniature private space of the doll and the dollhouse. On the contrary, if a female-bodied person entered the space of an arcade during the 1980s, and played the video games in the space, this would be seen as a form of ‘lived space’, as she would be defying the ‘conceived space’ of the arcade, which was targeted towards male-bodied people. A good example of this can be seen in the 2016 television series *Stranger Things*.

Stranger Things follows the story of four prepubescent boys as they deal with supernatural events happening in their town. The narrative of the show is set in the early 1980s – the prime age of the arcade era. In season two, episode one of the show, the boys are seen playing in an arcade which matches the description of an arcade in

the 1980s in subchapter 3.2 of this dissertation. During this scene, the boys realize that their high scores on some of the games have been beaten by someone mysterious called “MadMax” (Stranger Things, 2016). Later on in the episode, the boys realize that it may have been a girl who defeated their high scores in the arcade games. In disbelief, one of the boys says “There’s no way that’s MadMax”, to which the other responds, “Yeah. Girls don’t play video games” (Stranger Things, 2016, 00:20:40-00:27:44). Later on in the episode, two of the boys are seen spying on Max as she plays games in the arcade, remarking about her incredible skills as a player – as if it is a rarity for female-bodied gamers to be skilled in playing video games (Stranger Things, 2016). This stereotype is something that female-bodied gamers still face in the gaming industry today: “[Female gamers] endure everything from subtle jabs to full-on death threats, but [they] are not deterred from pursuing their passion for professional gaming” (Helene Schumacher, no date).

Max, as a character in *Stranger Things,* can be viewed as a ‘queer’ character – not to say that she *is* queer, but rather that her gender nonconforming actions defy and stretch social norms for female-bodied persons during the 1980s. She subverts these norms, not only by besting the scores of her male-bodies counterparts, but also by how she interacts with space. She uses a skateboard to move around, frequently interacting with spaces assumed to be for boys, while showing little interest in toys marketed towards females at the time. (Stranger Things, 2016). The ‘queer’ behaviour of Max personifies the ‘lived space’, being explored to subvert genderness in arcades. This exemplifies the ways in which Kinkaid uses ‘queerness’ as a tool to experiment with space and challenge its meaning in society. The use of ‘queerness’ in relation to space will be covered later in chapter four of this dissertation, where subversion of the phenomenological mode of the arcade space, in relation to *Donkey Kong*, will be covered.

This subchapter has dealt with the ‘lived space’ of the arcade as a tool for subversion of the social, gendered norms that come with it. This space doesn’t perpetuate the narrative trope of the damsel in distress in *Donkey Kong*, and proves useful in finding ways to subvert and challenge the trope. The ‘lived space’ proves that if a female-bodied person entered the space of the arcade and engaged with the spatial practices of the time, there would be a kind of tension in the arcade, proving the genderedness of the space. The next subchapter will look at the screen space of *Donkey Kong*, in relation to the ‘conceptual triad’ of Lefebvre, deconstructing how the game is portrayed to the player on the screen. This subchapter will investigate ways in which this space is gendered, and how it may perpetuate the damsel in distress in video games.

3.5 Arcade Spaces in South Africa

Arcade spaces, as they have been defined in relation to the USA above, didn't really exist in South Africa during the 1980s. Instead, South Africa had a number of cafes and shops that had arcade machines for young people to play with, as their parents ate a meal or went shopping. During the 1980s, Apartheid was still in effect in South Africa, and many countries and companies placed sanctions on the country, limiting the number of services and products that South Africans were exposed to, compared to the rest of the world. The gamer, StarBound, reminisces about their experiences of arcade spaces in South Africa at the time:

> I believe we started seeing video games around 1988, I think I saw *Mario Bros* for the first time at Makro [a popular generalist store]. Remember that we were in the Apartheid era so we were sanctioned and had no legal way to support Nintendo or Sega at that time. Most of our stuff came from China and especially the Nintendo stuff came packed with a cartridge that had like 200 games on at a very low price (StarBound, 2015).

In most cases, gamers in South Africa would need to insert a 20 cent coin into an arcade machine to play a video game. Most of the arcade boxes accessible to South Africans included the same games as the arcade spaces hosted in the USA, though they were brought to South African a number of years later. As a child, I never went to any dedicated arcade spaces. Although, during the mid 2000s, I used to go to a gaming cafe called ZAPS with my brother and his friends in Johannesburg, South Africa. ZAPS had a number of computers set up so that gamers could play with one another via LAN (Local Area Network). I was always one of the only young girls to be in this space, which was mostly inhabited by boys.

In the later 2010s, arcade spaces in South Africa are seen as one-night events or exhibitions. An example of this was seen in the *Fak'ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival* in 2019, where the *Fak'ugesi Arcade* exhibition was held in Braamfontein. As one of the curators for this exhibition, I had the responsibility to set up and curate the arcade. The theme of the arcade was 'The Global South' – showcasing work from developers from developing countries like South Africa, Ghana, Brazil and Mexico, to name a few. This arcade space invited people of all races, genders and sexual orientations to participate in a subversive experience of an arcade in the USA in the 1980s.

3.6 Analyzing *Donkey Kong* in the Screen Mode of Space – The 'Conceived Space' of the *Donkey Kong* Screen

The screen mode of space, as mentioned in subchapter 1.1, refers to the space where the player engages with the content of *Donkey Kong*. I would argue that this is the cyberspace of the damsel; the space in which the gameplay occurs. As Aarseth suggests, it is where the player controls and influences the game. In this space, the player engages with the game's content by using the control panel of the arcade machine. Additionally, this is where the player can view the gameplay, and how the layout of the game's environment has been created. Most importantly, this mode of space shows the player how their interactions affect the elements on the screen, particularly the damsel.

The 'conceived space' of the screen mode in a video game refers to how the game's screen, at a certain moment of time in the gameplay, was designed and developed. This subchapter will explore how the screen, in each level of *Donkey Kong,* has been designed in relation to the player's perspective, and consequently, how the 'conceived space' of the screen is gendered. By determining the genderedness of the 'conceived space' of the screen in *Donkey Kong*, this subchapter aims to evaluate how the narrative trope of the damsel is perpetuated in *Donkey Kong*. When analyzing the 'conceived space' in *Donkey Kong*, there are three elements to consider. The first is the layout of structures in the game, referring to the setup of the environmental objects. The second refers to the space of the female-bodied character in the game. The third refers to the three distinctions of a game space that were defined by Aarseth, and deconstructed as a tool for this dissertation. For every level of the game that is deconstructed in this subchapter, it is recommended to consult figure 1.4 which depicts the start of each level in the game play of *Donkey Kong*.

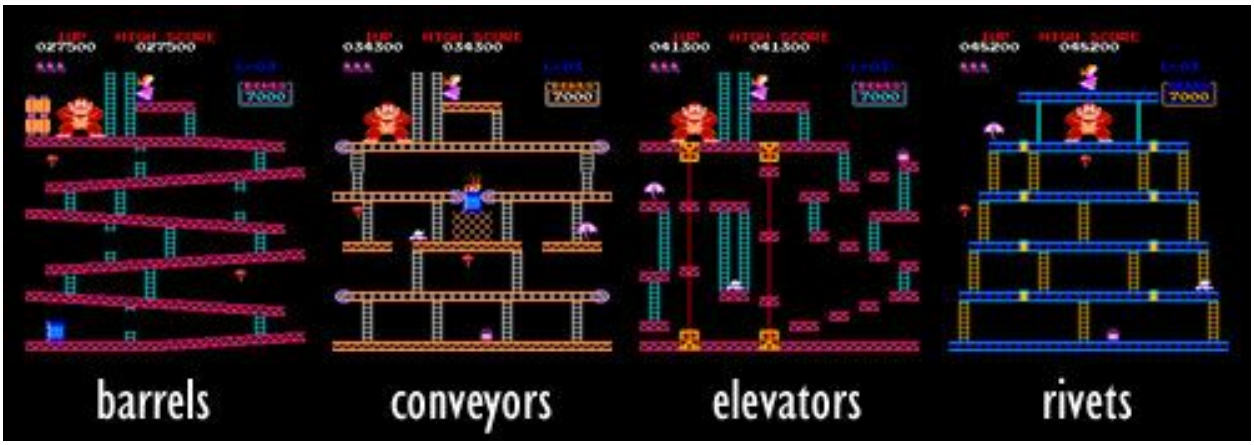


Figure 1.4, Screenshot of the Start of Each Level in *Donkey Kong*, Donkeykongblog, no date.

Within each level of *Donkey Kong*, there is a different layout that the player must learn to master in order to achieve the highest possible score. Each layout consists of different environmental objects. These environmental objects refer to the sprites in the game that represent architecture, plants and other non-interactable objects . This includes objects such as the platforms that Jumpman moves along, or the ladders that he must climb in order to move around the space. An important thing to note about *Donkey Kong* is that, whilst the layout of each level changes, the gameplay and the content of the levels always takes place on a single screen. This is quite different from many contemporary games, which produce a more filmic view and typically include cutscenes and an invisible, digitized camera that follows the player around.

The first level of *Donkey Kong* sets the precedent for the general layout of each level that follows. The player, embodied as Jumpman, always starts in the bottom left hand side of the screen. The goal of each level is to reach the top of the screen, or the same platform where Pauline is. In the first level, there are six red platforms which are slanted diagonally across the screen, with blue ladders dispersed across them. In the top right hand corner of the screen, Donkey Kong is seen throwing barrels towards the player which move down and across the slanted platforms. In the bottom left hand corner, there is a blue oil barrel. If a wooden barrel reaches this oil canister, a fireball will appear on the screen and move around the space. The spatial layout of the level isn't necessarily gendered, until one analyzes the space that the damsel, Pauline, occupies. There are a few points to note about Pauline's space in *Donkey Kong*. The first is that her space is rather confined – she can only ever occupy the top of the screen on a smaller platform. Whilst Pauline is not necessarily locked away or tied up, as in the story of Andromeda, her space in the game is high up and far away from Jumpman, and by implication, the player's starting point. Pauline is always positioned close to Donkey Kong who traps her in this space.

The second and third levels of *Donkey Kong* offer different structures to the game in terms of their layouts. The second level consists of more moving environmental elements, such as the conveyor belts and the cement pies which move across the screen. The third level introduces elevators, which move objects up and down the platforms. The second level introduces Pauline's items, which are scattered across the screen and can be collected for extra points. These items continue to appear in the third level, also scattered across the screen on the platforms. These items are strongly and stereotypically gendered: a pink purse, a pink and white hat as well as a pink and white parasol. All of these items would be considered feminine items, not only because of their colouring, but also because of the commercial marketing around these items. As

Nina Power argues, “we live surrounded by objects gendered against their will. Pink toothbrushes, manly chocolate bars, princess lunch boxes, macho earbuds – there’s nothing that can’t be needlessly feminised or masculinised” (2018). Pauline’s items are purposefully placed around each level in *Donkey Kong*, after the first level in order to allow the player to gain more points, but also to reinforce her gender. By being encouraged to collect these items for Pauline due to the layout of the screen, the player is offered the affordances to be chivalrous, to perform a gallant deed for the damsel in distress.

The fourth level of *Donkey Kong* offers a completely new layout from the previous three. Here, the player can now see that Pauline is on the very top platform, with no ladders beside her. This indicates that this is the highest point, or the last level of the game. Donkey Kong is beneath her on the second platform from the top, this time in the center of the platform. As in the other levels, Jumpman starts at the bottom left hand side of the screen, the furthest point from the damsel. This level alludes to the first level in terms of the environmental objects and the gameplay – the platforms do not move and Jumpman needs to avoid obstacles moving around the environment. Whilst the layout alters slightly in this level, the narrative of this level is the same: Jumpman needs to rescue Pauline from Donkey Kong by climbing from the bottom of the screen to the top of the screen.

As mentioned in subchapter 3.2, Aarseth defines three different distinctions of game environments in relation to the player and their interactions within a game. He suggests that each distinction refers to the relationship between the player and the space within the video game, and how their interactions are affected or limited by the space. The first distinction is that of the “open-landscape”, where the cyberspace of the game allows for the player to openly roam the world of the game with the character that they control. This distinction of a game’s space suggests that a player is able to roam a space that doesn’t necessarily have any final destination. This could refer to games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), where the player can spend hours traversing the landscape of the game and completing quests as they travel. In *Skyrim*, the player can complete quests in almost any order and, in most cases, in any amount of time. The second distinction that Aarseth defines is the “closed labyrinth” space, where the player needs to play through a game’s space that limits their movement and interactions with the environmental objects or characters within the game. Typically, these games have a final destination for the player to reach, and the layout or structure of the game’s environment will ultimately lead the player to that destination, with quests and obstacles in their path. This kind of distinction of a game’s space could refer to a game such as *Pac-Man* (1979), where the player needs to speed through a maze with their character,

collecting all the dots present in the level. Whilst not necessarily having a final destination, *Pac-Man* makes the player travel through the entire maze until all the dots are collected, while avoiding the ghosts in the level. Finally, the third distinction that Aarseth defines, is the game space where the player can alter the environmental objects and characters within the game. The player becomes a sort of architect, designing and constructing the landscape and its objects and characters This could refer to a game such as *Warcraft* (1994), where the player needs to build a civilization and an army in order to protect their kingdom and defeat others (2007, p. 159).

Donkey Kong is a video game that would fit into the second distinction that Aarseth describes. Each level of *Donkey Kong* has a final destination for the player to arrive at – this is the highest platform of the level, or the platform where Pauline is. Additionally, the layout of the platforms act as a maze that the player needs to traverse in order to reach the top – all the while avoiding obstacles and collecting Pauline's items along the way. The platforms, whilst hosting obstacles that the player must avoid, are the only way in which the player can reach Pauline, at the top of the screen. I would argue that the second distinction that Aarseth has defined, perpetuates the damsel in distress as a narrative trope in *Donkey Kong*. It does this by reinforcing the damsel as a goal for the game, or the final destination of the maze that the player needs to reach. The "closed labyrinth" (2007, p. 159), along with the obstacles in the player's path, emphasize the journey that the male protagonist, Jumpman, must go through in order to save the damsel in distress whilst she stays in the same space in each level, waiting to be rescued by him. *Donkey Kong* creates an unbalanced power dynamic between Jumpman and Pauline. Jumpman, as the male protagonist, has the agency to take up most of the game's space. This will be explored more in the next subchapter, where the screen mode of space will be deconstructed in relation to the 'perceived space'.

The last point that should be mentioned about the design of the screen space is Pauline's character design. Every sprite within the game is created with a specific colour palette that computers inside the arcade machines could render at that time. Each tile is the size of eight-by-eight pixels, "[Jumpman] is made up of four eight-by-eight-pixel tiles [and Pauline] is three tiles tall to [Jumpman's] two" (Mika, 2013). Jumpman's colour palette is dark blue for his hair, moustache and t-shirt, pale orange for his skin and red for his hat and overalls. Pauline's sprite colour palette is dark orange for her hair, bright pink for her dress, blue for her shoes and off-white for her skin. It is interesting to compare the colour palette for each character: Jumpman's sprite is made up from a dark blue and red, whilst Pauline's sprite is made up of a bright pink for her dress (the majority of her sprite) and orange for her hair. The colouring of the sprites in *Donkey Kong* were designed to reinforce the characters' genders. The use of colour was a

gendered spatial practice of the time, particularly in the commercial marketing of products. Jenkins and Cassell support this claim in their book when they speak about game designers trying to sell video games to female-bodied people: “The gendering of games was furthered by the advertising, promotion and packaging of the games in the ubiquitous pink and purple boxes” (Jenkins and Cassell, 2000, p. 48). It would have been clear to the player then, that Pauline represented a female-bodied person and Jumpman represented a male-bodied person.

This subchapter has dealt with the ‘conceived space’ of the screen spatial mode of *Donkey Kong*, analyzed through a gendered lens. The positioning of the character, Pauline, in a high and confined space alludes to the properties of the damsel that were defined in chapter one. Whilst she is not tied up or locked away, her space could be considered dangerous as she is at the furthest peak of each level. Pauline is always watched over, or positioned closely to Donkey Kong, the presumed kidnapper of the damsel. Throughout the game, he is seen trying to inhibit Jumpman from reaching the top of each level, indicating that he is guarding the damsel. From the second level on, Pauline’s items, scattered across the platforms, reinforce her gender, both in terms of their colouring and social functionalities during the 1980s. This subchapter has also dealt with the three distinctions of game spaces, as discussed in subchapter 2.3. *Donkey Kong*’s layout in the game space, in relation to the screen mode of space, perpetuates the narrative trope of the damsel by emphasizing Pauline as the end point for the maze – she is the goal of the game, opposed to a character with agency and personality. Finally, this subchapter has dealt with character design. It is important to recognize that these designs were a part of the planning and development, the ‘conceived space’, of the screen mode of space. The colour palettes used in the character’s design reinforce the genderedness of the screen spatial mode of *Donkey Kong*. The next subchapter will analyze the screen mode of space of *Donkey Kong* in terms of its spatial practices, also known as the ‘perceived space’.

3.7 Analyzing *Donkey Kong* in the Screen Mode of Space – The ‘Perceived Space’ of the *Donkey Kong* Screen

The ‘perceived space’ in Lefebvre’s triad refers to the behaviours and performances of people in relation to how a space was planned, or the ‘conceived space’. The ‘perceived space’, also known as spatial practices, refers to the interactions of the player in relation to the ‘conceived space’ of the screen. This subchapter will deconstruct the players interactions within *Donkey Kong*, according to how the space was designed, as determined in the previous subchapter. This subchapter will deconstruct the cyberspace of *Donkey Kong*, which refers to the ways in which the player can influence the screen space, and therefore the character of the damsel. This subchapter will also deconstruct

the actions of the characters that are present on the screen – what they can and cannot do will aid in finding ways in which the spatial practices of the screen are gendered.

Throughout this subchapter, the power dynamic of each character within *Donkey Kong* will be addressed. The term ‘power’ refers to the agency of the character – what spatial practices these characters can or cannot do: “agency is the degree to which the character's actions, based on the player's decisions and [its effects on the game play], influence the game's progress” (KorvinStarmast, 2015). It is important to note that the concept of agency has three main distinctions: agency in gameplay, agency in story and interpretive agency. Game designer and illustrator, Claire Hosking, defines the following three types of agency:

> [Developers] constantly argue that all kinds of agency are important, including mechanical agency (doing stuff), narrative agency (affecting stories) and interpretative agency (games that invite you to develop a response). However, the Damsel in Distress trope goes against the principle that players learn about the world and characters by interacting with them (Hosking, 2014).

Determining the types of agency, in relation to the spatial practices, of each character within *Donkey Kong*, will aid in defining the power dynamics between the characters. These power dynamics will reveal how the ‘perceived space’, in the screen modality of *Donkey Kong*, are gendered and therefore, perpetuate the narrative trope of the damsel. In the above quote, Hosking suggests that the damsel’s agency within the trope limits the amount of interaction that the player has with her in the screen mode of space. This means that the player never really gets to know more about the damsel’s character, other than the fact that she represents the goal of the video game – to save the damsel means to win the game.

As mentioned in subchapter 3.1, the player’s interactions with *Donkey Kong* include moving Jumpman around the space (either left or right along platforms or up and down the ladders in the level). The player does this by moving the joystick, which is on the left hand side of the control panel of the arcade machine. Additionally, the player can make Jumpman evade obstacles by pressing the jump button, which is located on the right hand side of the arcade box. The player can also make Jumpman collect items in each level by walking over them. These interactions can also be described as the ‘decisions’ (KorvinStarmast, 2015) that the player makes in the game. Throughout *Donkey Kong*, the player’s decisions will determine what the characters’ actions are. In every level, Jumpman is able to move, jump and climb across the entire space, with the goal of reaching the top of the screen, to the platform where Pauline is. Jumpman retains all three types of agency within every level of the game. Jumpman’s mechanical agency, in

relation to Donkey Kong's mechanical agency, is what produces the game play of *Donkey Kong*. The game play is centered around Jumpman's ability to move, climb and jump around the screen space. His narrative agency also remains pertinent – he is the hero of the story. In relation to the damsel's trope, he is the male protagonist that will save the damsel after journeying through four different and dangerous environments. Jumpman's interpretive agency, I argue, refers to the player's reaction whenever they win or lose the game. If Jumpman 'faints' more than three times, the player will lose the game. This can create a negative emotional response within the player, in the same way that winning the game, or achieving a new high score, will make the player respond positively. In comparison, there are two characters, within each level of the game, that take up less screen space than Jumpman – Donkey Kong himself, and the character of the damsel, Pauline.

In the first level of the game, Donkey Kong is seen at the top left hand side of the screen. At the beginning of this level, Donkey Kong is seen climbing up the blue ladders, with Pauline under his arm. This indicates, to the player, that Pauline has been taken against her will – one of the major properties of the damsel in distress. Throughout the level, Donkey Kong throws barrels down the platforms towards Jumpman, in order to keep him at bay. Occasionally, Donkey Kong is seen thumping his chest with his fists. In the second level, Donkey Kong moves left and right across the platform. If Jumpman comes into contact with Donkey Kong, Jumpman will 'faint' and the player will lose a life point. In the third and fourth level, Donkey Kong does not move around the space, but continues to beat his chest and proves to be fatal to Jumpman if he comes into contact with him. In comparison to Jumpman, Donkey Kong does not move much around the screen space in each level. However it is important to note that, in the cyberspace of the game, Donkey Kong retains the three types of agency. In terms of the mechanical agency, Donkey Kong is the main obstacle that Jumpman has to defeat. Donkey Kong produces some, if not all, of the obstacles that Jumpman needs to avoid, as well as being an obstacle himself, in some of the levels. Donkey Kong produces challenges that the player needs to conquer in order to win the game. Donkey Kong also retains a very important narrative agency in the game – he is the villain that needs to be defeated in order to save the damsel in distress. Donkey Kong's interpretive agency, I argue, refers to the way in which he makes the player physically respond to the game. If Donkey Kong produces an obstacle in the game's screen, the player must use the buttons on the console of the arcade to avoid this obstacle.

At the beginning of the first level of *Donkey Kong*, and at the end of the second and third level, Pauline is taken away, under the arm of Donkey Kong, against her will. In terms of Pauline's spatial practices within the screen space, there are few to mention in

comparison to Jumpman and Donkey Kong, clearly characterizing immobility as the cornerstone of her character. Within each level, Pauline is seen at the top of the screen, on the highest platform within the game. In every level, Pauline does not move around the screen space – as mentioned before, her space is confined and limited to the top of the screen. Instead, every six seconds within each level, Pauline is seen shaking her body as if in protest, then the word “Help!” appears above her head and she changes the direction she is facing (she either turns to the left or to the right). The spatial practices that Pauline performs are extremely limited and have no real impact on the game play of *Donkey Kong*. In terms of Pauline’s mechanical agency, the only influence that Pauline’s character has over the game play is to show the player where they need to go – again, reiterating that she has been objectified as a goal for the player to win over. Pauline can never be controlled by the player and, in fact, the player never actually interacts with her in the cyberspace. The only time where Jumpman and Pauline interact is when Jumpman reaches the top of each level, and a heart forms between them. Whilst Pauline does not have much gameplay or mechanical agency, her narrative agency in the game is quite important to the storyline of the game because it relies on the trope of the damsel in distress. Pauline is the call to action for the protagonist of the story, Jumpman. She is the reason that Jumpman needs to go on this journey to defeat Donkey Kong to begin with. Pauline’s character, and her kidnapping, is the catalyst for the story. She is also the resolution at the end of the narrative, when Jumpman saves her from Donkey Kong. Without Pauline’s character, and her lack of power within the narrative of the game, there would be no story in *Donkey Kong*. Finally, Pauline’s interpretive agency would refer to the emotional response that the player has when they witness her spatial practices on the screen. When Pauline cries for help, or shakes her body in protest, this may be interpreted by the player that Pauline is scared and in danger. This interpretation could produce an anxious or determined feeling in the player – the player may feel worried about or driven to save the scared damsel from Donkey Kong.

After analyzing the spatial practices of the screen modality of space in *Donkey Kong*, in relation to each type of agency that the characters within the screen retain, it is clear that there is an unbalanced power dynamic between the male protagonist and the damsel in distress. The male protagonist is the character with most of the power in the screen space – he is the character that does most of the action on the screen, whereas the damsel only performs three spatial practices in the space. Donkey Kong falls in between Jumpman and the damsel in terms of power. In some levels, he can move around the space and actively oppose Jumpman’s actions on the screen. In comparison to the damsel, Donkey Kong retains more power than her character. In fact, I would

argue that Donkey Kong's power directly influences the damsel in the screen modality of space, in that he guards her in the confined space at the top of the screen.

This subchapter has dealt with the spatial practices of the screen spatial mode of *Donkey Kong.* Each characters' spatial practices have been defined in relation to the 'conceived space', as well as the three distinctions of agency within a video game. These three distinctions of agency refer to the power that the character retains within the screen space of *Donkey Kong*. Pauline's character, in comparison with Donkey Kong and Jumpman, has the least agency and therefore, the least power within each level of the game. These power dynamics perpetuate the damsel, reiterating that she is an object or goal for the player to achieve – she is powerless and actionless compared to the male counterparts in the screen space. The next subchapter will analyze the screen mode of space within *Donkey Kong,* in terms of the 'lived space'. This subchapter will focus on ways in which the screen mode of space within *Donkey Kong* can be challenged in terms of its 'conceived space' and the spatial practices that are performed by the characters.

3.8 Analyzing *Donkey Kong* in the Screen Mode of Space – The 'Lived Space' of the *Donkey Kong* Screen

The 'lived space', as Lefebvre has established, incorporates the rebellious social and physical behaviours of people within a space. The 'lived space' differs from spatial practices because it opposes the 'conceived space', or the planning of the space. Typically, Lefebvre spoke about real-life examples in which the 'lived space' would stretch or expand social behaviours and activities in relation to the 'conceived space'. However, this subchapter will focus on how the 'lived space' can be applied to the characters within the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. I argue that this 'lived space' in the screen mode is where the narrative trope of the damsel can be subverted, and therefore, challenge the power dynamics between the characters as mentioned in the previous subchapter. Whilst the subversion of the screen mode in *Donkey Kong* will be discussed in more detail in chapter four, this subchapter will aim to establish methods for subversion within the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*.

The main focus for subverting the screen mode of space within *Donkey Kong* is through the concept of 'modding'. As established in the first chapter of this dissertation, modding refers to modifying or changing various elements within a game. Modding is normally done by players and fans of video games. I suggest that there are three different ways to go about modding a video game. The first method would be changing the game play, or the spatial practices which the characters can perform. This includes decisions that the player can make in terms of their interactions with the content of the screen mode of

space: “mods can offer enhanced graphics, bug fixes, fresh quests, you name it. The best PC mods can change games completely and sometimes kickstart whole new genres of their own” (Casper, 2017).

Modifying the game play of *Donkey Kong* could potentially change the agency of each character. In turn, this can lead to a disruption in the power dynamics between the characters – potentially subverting the role of the damsel in distress within the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. An example of this could be changing the actions that Jumpman can do in the cyberspace – instead of jumping, maybe Jumpman could shoot the enemies, for example. However, modding the game play of *Donkey Kong* can also relate to changing the spatial practices of the characters in the screen mode of space. Whilst not necessarily changing the interactions or decisions that the player can make directly, one could mod the other characters’ actions within the space, indirectly influencing the player’s interactions and decisions. For example, in relation to interpretive agency, what would it mean to the player if Pauline was seen moving around the cyberspace of the game, as Jumpman was moving through the space to save her? More specifically, what if Pauline had the agency to climb down the ladders within each level and save herself, despite the player manipulating Jumpman to save her? Modding both the player’s interactions, and the characters’ spatial practices, would disrupt the trope of the damsel because Pauline would become a character that has some kind of power in the screen mode of space. As mentioned before, one of the key properties of the damsel is that she is powerless and helpless in her situation. The production of the space perpetuates the fact that she has very limited spatial practices in the screen mode of space. The ‘lived space’ would defy Pauline’s agency, and therefore, her lack of power within the original game of *Donkey Kong* – introducing new ways for Pauline to perform and move through the screen mode of space. An example of a modified version of *Donkey Kong* will be explored in the next chapter of this dissertation, where Pauline is the controllable character in *Donkey Kong*, instead of Jumpman.

The second method of modding would refer to changing the design or addition of new characters within a video game. This means that the 2D sprites or the 3D models of objects and characters within a video game would be adjusted by the modifier, or the modder: “Some [modders] might be modding to create more feminine characters, or to simply get characters looking more as they wish they would; others are just looking to infuse games with more variety overall” (Pangburn, 2016). As mentioned in subchapter 3.2, the characters on the screen mode of space of *Donkey Kong* are created with 2D sprites, which are composed of 8 by 8 pixel blocks or tiles on the screen. By changing the sprites of the characters within *Donkey Kong*, it is possible that the narrative trope of

the damsel can be challenged, or completely removed from the narrative of the game, without disrupting the actual game play. One of the possibilities, for example, would be to change that sprites within *Donkey Kong* so that they do not represent gender at all. One of the key properties of the trope of the damsel is that the character of the damsel is a female-bodied person – which is an attempt to reinforce the gender roles that are attached to that gender. I would argue that if the sprites within *Donkey Kong* were not gendered, the trope of the damsel would dissolve, and the gender representation within the game would become neutral or fluid. The interpretive agency of the characters' genders would then be left up to the player's imagination. If the player interpreted the non-gendered representation of Jumpman as female, gender-fluid or any other gender, then they could do so. This would make the game a lot more inclusive for players of all genders:

> So. Games for everyone. What do I mean by that? Well, the gist is that I think developers should be making more gender-neutral games, rather than just trying to 'balance out' the many male-targeted games with female-targeted ones. If there are more games that boys and girls alike can enjoy, then we can raise a new generation of kids who are brought together by games, not driven apart along gender lines (Sauder, 2014).

By removing the gender representation from the characters within the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*, players are able to interact with and view characters that do not come with any designated gender roles. Without these gender roles present in the game, the narrative of the damsel loses one of its foundational elements: the female-bodied person is powerless and weak compared to the powerful and strong male protagonist. The game's narrative, if the gender presentation was not present, would change according to the player's interpretation, which would differ from player to player. It is acknowledged that to some players during the 1980s, particularly because of the patriarchal space of arcade, the trope of the damsel in *Donkey Kong* may still persist. However, if the gender representation in arcade video games was not so misogynistic in the first place, the arcade space would never be exclusive towards female-bodied people. By modifying the design of the characters in the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong* to be gender-neutral, the game would cease to exclude, not only female-identifying players, but also those players who do not conform to the gender binary at all.

The third and final method of modding would be to adapt or change the narrative of a video game. This third method refers specifically to modders adapting and editing the story of a video game. The past two methods that have been mentioned would change the narrative of a video game inherently, because if a modder changed the way a

character looked, or the game play of a video game, this would have some influence over its narrative. However, it is possible for a modder to simply change the way in which the story is told to the player, which does not necessarily include changing the game play or altering the design of the characters within the video game. The way in which stories are told within video games is a vast and ever-changing process, and because of the scope of this dissertation, it will not be addressed in full, but rather in relation to the idea of modding. It is important to note, however, that video games tell stories differently in comparison to other forms of media:

> In the world of video games, [the story telling] process is experiencing a revolution; producing entirely new vehicles for immersive storytelling and narrative techniques. Rather than simply being told the story through the words of an author, or observing a story through the lens of a film director, in video games, the player becomes the story (Healy, 2017).

In *Donkey Kong*, the story of the video game is linear and follows the pattern of a typical narrative arch. This will be discussed more in the following subchapter, in relation to the spatial practices of the diegetic space of *Donkey Kong*. However, one of the ways that the story may be modified, without changing the design of the sprites or the game play itself, would be through the damsel herself. In terms of her spatial practices of the screen mode of space, which were defined in the previous chapter, one of them provides a tool to change the narrative. Pauline is seen shouting the word “Help!” every six seconds on the screen of the arcade box. By simply changing this word from “Help!” to something more provocative, the trope of the damsel can be subverted. If Pauline was seen shouting, “Leave me alone!” or “Don’t come up here!” it would be changing the character’s interpretive agency. Instead of being concerned for the damsel, the play may feel as though she does not want to be saved. This, in turn, would be subverting the narrative trope of the damsel in distress because it is always assumed that the damsel wants to be saved from her dire situation. Notice that changing this spatial practice that was planned for in the ‘conceived space’, is being defied and challenged within this ‘lived space’, or the space for modding. It changes one element of the story of the video game without influencing the game play that has been developed, or the design of the characters, within each level of *Donkey Kong*.

This subchapter has defined the ‘lived space’, in relation to the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. The ‘conceived space’ has been challenged through the use of modding as a tool to subvert the damsel’s narrative trope. Modding is the tool that is used in order to create the ‘lived space’ within the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. It has been posited that there are three kinds of modding. The first being modding the gameplay, and thus the power dynamics within *Donkey Kong*. This refers to the

technical ability to develop and code in different or additional ways of playing through a video game. The second modding method is that of redesigning / editing the appearance of characters by changing the 2D or 3D sprites of the video game. In *Donkey Kong*, if the 2D sprites were edited to create gender neutral characters, it is possible that the damsel; would cease to exist – rather the player would project gendered meaning onto the characters in the screen mode of space. Lastly, the third element of modding suggests that the story of a video game can be adjusted in such a way that it does not affect the gameplay or the design of the objects and characters within the game. In *Donkey Kong*, the simple act of changing one of the spatial practices of Pauline would alter the story of the game, and challenge the notion that the damsel always wants to be rescued from her kidnapper or the villain of the story. The next subchpater will look at the diegetic space of *Donkey Kong* in relation to Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* and the 'conceptual triad' that he has established. This last mode of space will be analyzed through a gendered lens in order to understand how the narrative trope of the damsel is perpetuated in the video game, *Donkey Kong.*

3.9 Analyzing *Donkey Kong* in the Diegetic Mode of Space – The 'Conceived Space', 'Perceived Space' and 'Lived Space' of the *Donkey Kong* World

The diegetic mode of space in *Donkey Kong* refers to the narrative world in which the story of the video game takes place. This space considers the rules or the social and cultural elements within the narrative world of *Donkey Kong*. The narrative world of the game contains its own gender roles and behaviours, which are reflective of the time in which the narrative was created. In order for the diegetic mode of space to be analyzed, one must refer back to how the space was produced, in relation to Lefebvre's 'conceptual triad' that he established within *The Production of Space*. 'Conceived space' will be the first concept of Lefebvre's triad to be discussed in relation to the diegetic mode of space.

In the case of *Donkey Kong*, the 'conceived space' refers to the way the narrative world was conceptualized by game developers. The first element is the name of the game *Donkey Kong*. In the article, "Miyamoto Spills *Donkey Kong'*s Darkest Secrets, 35 Years Later" (2016) the lead developer of the game, Shigeru Miyamoto, discusses his experiences developing the video game. Miyamoto states that one of the main influences when developing the video game was the concept of 'globalism' and developing video games that would be relevant and successful 'worldwide' (Kohler, 2016). In relation to the game's title, Miyamoto wanted to emphasize the character of

Donkey Kong as being an annoyance and a fool of a character, indicating to the player that he was the antihero of the story of the game:

> For example, for the game's title, I was trying to convey the idea of ‘stupid monkey’, he said. ‘Donkey’ of course referred to the animal, but the dictionary I used said that it had a secondary meaning of ‘idiot’. Nintendo of America said that this was not the case, and ‘donkey’ didn't mean ‘idiot’ (Kohler, 2016).

The word ‘Kong’ in the video game’s title was in reference to the movie *King Kong*: “*King Kong* was so popular it inspired several Japanese films with the character and helped inspire the character of Godzilla. Naturally, when it came to finding enemies for the video game Jumpman, a big angry gorilla was employed, being inspired by King Kong” (Prus, 2018). The narrative of the video game *Donkey Kong* also refers to the narrative plot of the movie *King Kong*, as discussed in subchapter 1.2: a beautiful woman is kidnapped, against her will, by a giant monkey. He takes her to the top of a building and fends off airplanes. Whilst there are no airplanes in *Donkey Kong*, Donkey Kong does have to fend off the character Jumpman from trying to rescue the damsel in distress, Pauline.

Many players who have played through *Donkey Kong*, as well as other video games within the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise, were led to believe that Jumpman (who later become known as Mario) was older than he was actually planned to be:

> ‘I didn't think he was an old man,’ Miyamoto said. ‘I thought he was more like 24 to 26 years old. When you think of the story – [Jumpman] kept Donkey Kong locked up, so he escaped with his girlfriend – he was a young guy, a bachelor. But of course, now there are people who think he's around 40 years old’ (Kohler, 2016).

It is interesting to note that Miyamoto adds a very important piece to the diegesis of *Donkey Kong* in the above statement. He mentions that Donkey Kong was kept imprisoned by Jumpman. When Donkey Kong escaped his captivity, he kidnapped Jumpman’s girlfriend, the damsel, Pauline. Besides the narrative that is portrayed to the player within the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*, as well as how the game's story takes influence from the narrative of the film *King Kong*, most of the world building that took place in the development of *Donkey Kong* is unknown. What is notable to mention is that *Donkey Kong*’s narrative set the precedent for the rest of the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise, in which multiple characters have adapted (such as Jumpman evolving into the character of Mario and Pauline influencing the character Princess Peach). Throughout the *Mario* franchise, Princess Peach plays the role of the damsel in

distress, instead of Pauline. These video games, and the world building thereof, have become extremely detailed and complex. Most of the stories within each video game of the *Mario* franchise take place in the Mushroom Kingdom, where Princess Peach is the ruler, and Mario has to save her from the villain Bowser. Whilst it is not in the scope for this dissertation to deconstruct the diegetic mode of space of each video game within the franchise, it is important to acknowledge how *Donkey Kong* influenced these video games in the franchise, and continues to do so in 2020.

In this subchapter the 'conceived space', 'perceived space' and 'lived space' has been combined. This is because the 'perceived space' and the 'lived space' of *Donkey Kong*, in the diegetic mode of space, are similar to that of the screen mode of space. This will be described when looking at these two concepts in relation to the diegetic mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. The 'perceived space', or the spatial practices, within the diegetic mode of space are difficult to confirm because most of the development of the narrative of the game, or the 'conceived space', is kept a secret by the developers of *Donkey Kong*. It is difficult then, to suggest ways in which the spatial practices within the diegetic mode of space differ from that of the screen mode of space. I would argue that the spatial practices, that are displayed to the player inside of the screen mode of space, are the same as the spatial practices within the diegetic mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. However, instead of focusing on these spatial practices in relation to the game play of *Donkey Kong*, these spatial practices should be focused in relation to the story of the video game.

As mentioned before, the way that *Donkey Kong* tells the story, in conjunction with the narrative trope of the damsel in distress, is linear. Each level has a beginning: Pauline is kidnapped and taken to the top of the tower: Jumpman traverses the environment of each level, and an end: Jumpman reaches the top of the screen where Pauline is situated. Whilst the levels do repeat themselves, the story always remains the same. That is, the damsel needs to be saved from the kidnapper by the male protagonist. Each spatial practice, as defined in subchapter 3.6, aid in telling the story of the video game. Therefore, the spatial practices within the diegetic mode of space are the same as the screen mode of space, with a focus on the narrative instead of the game play. It is possible that there are other spatial practices within the diegetic mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. As mentioned before, Miyamoto described a piece of the story that the player doesn't necessarily see if they are only playing the video game, which would include additional spatial practices inside of the narrative world of *Donkey Kong*. However, without interviewing the developer, Miyamoto, one can only assume what these spatial practices may have been.

The ‘lived space’ of the diegetic mode of space within *Donkey Kong* refers to the ways in which the ‘conceived space’ and the spatial practices can be challenged or subverted. I would argue that the ‘lived space’ of the diegetic mode of space, would reflect the ‘lived space’, in the screen mode of space, that is mentioned in chapter 3.7. However, the ‘lived space’ for the diegesis of *Donkey Kong* would focus on ways in which a developer can allude to and subvert the plot of the story, in relation to the trope of the damsel, throughout the development of another video game. An example of this will be discussed further in chapter four of this dissertation. However, it is important to note that the ‘lived space’ of the diegetic mode of space in *Donkey Kong* refers to various methods of subversion that focus on the narrative world, the plot line of the damsel’s trope, as well as the ‘conceived’ and ‘perceived spaces’ in the game.

This subchapter has focused on the diegetic mode of space within *Donkey Kong*, in relation to the ‘conceptual triad’ that Lefebvre established in *The Production of Space*. It is important to note that the ‘conceived space’, of the diegesis mode in *Donkey Kong*, differs from the other specified modes of space that this dissertation has defined. However, the spatial practices would be reflective of the screen mode of space. This is because most of the diegesis that the player is able to discern comes from the screen mode of space. Other spatial practices within the diegetic mode of space would need to be defined by speaking with the developers of *Donkey Kong*. The ‘lived space’ within the diegetic mode of space would reflect that of the screen mode, with a focus on how the plot line of *Donkey Kong*, as well as the narrative structure of the damsel’s trope, is alluded to and subverted in other video games. The next subchapter will focus on examples of the constraints of the damsel’s spatial practices in other video games.

3.10 Other Examples of the Damsel in Distress in Video Games

This dissertation has focused on the case study of *Donkey Kong* because it was one of the first commercially successful video games to feature the damsel in distress as a narrative trope. In many ways, *Donkey Kong* set the precedent for the trope to reoccur in video games. However, this dissertation acknowledges that *Donkey Kong* is not the first or the only video game to contain the damsel in distress. This dissertation also acknowledges that not all video games misrepresent women and that not all video games contain or rely on the narrative trope of the damsel in distress. However, the damsel’s trope is one that has recurred in many commercially successful video games, particularly from the company Nintendo who created *Donkey Kong*. This subchapter will explore alternative examples of the damsel in video games and will include the following: *Dragon’s Lair* (1983), the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986-2020) franchise. These video games will be analyzed in relation to the

spatial practices that the damsel is able to perform within the screen mode of space in which she is present.

The first video game to be discussed is that of *Dragon's Lair*, in which the character of Princess Daphne is portrayed as the damsel in distress. *Dragon's Lair* was released in 1983 as an arcade game and was extremely successful: "When Dragon's Lair came out in 1983, it took arcades by storm. It was expensive, at 50 cents a play, but it generated $48 million in revenue and was the top arcade game of 1983 (de Rochefort, 2017). *Dragon's Lair* has been chosen for analysis because it is another video game from the arcade time period that was also extremely commercially successful and popular to play among arcade goers. The gameplay of *Dragon's Lair* was based on quick time events where the player would need to respond quickly to an event that happened on the screen. The player would respond by either tapping on the sword button or by moving the joystick in the correct direction on the arcade's console. The player takes control of the character, Dirk the Daring, and ventures through an evil dungeon in order to get to the dragon's lair and save Princess Daphne from an evil dragon. Refer to figure 1.5 as the spatial practices of Princess Daphne are deconstructed in relation to the screen mode of space.

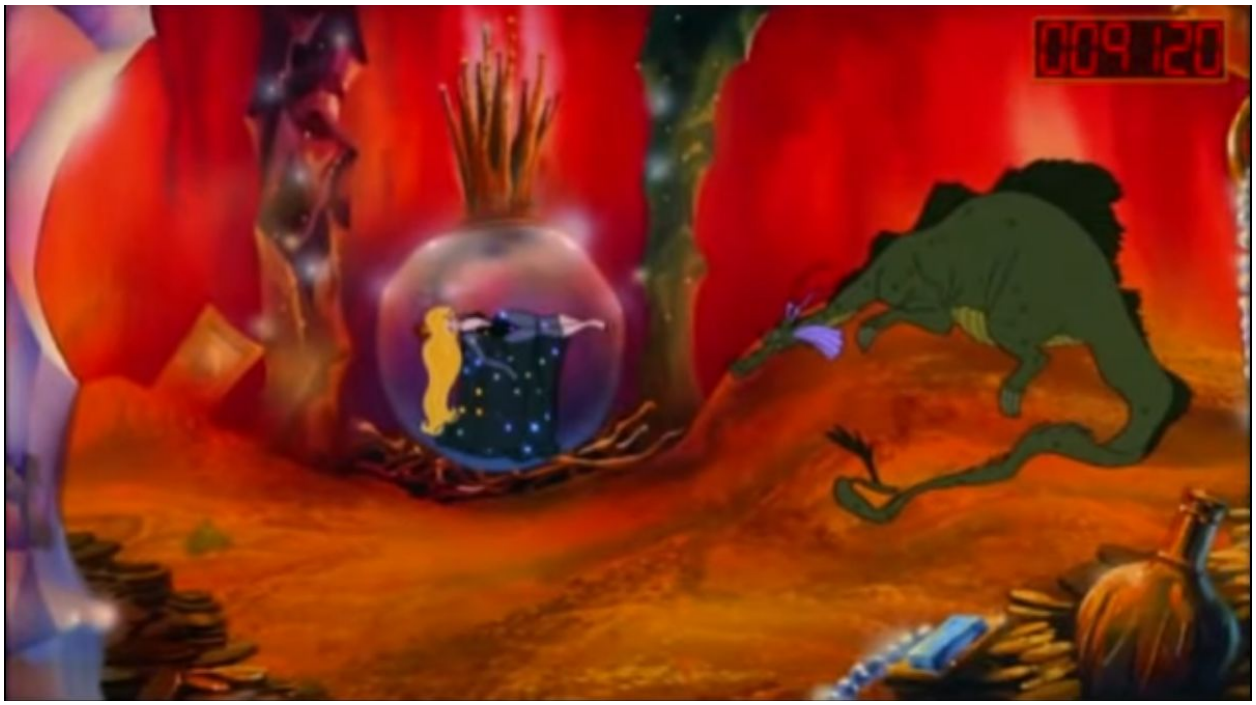


Figure 1.5, Screenshot of Daphne and Dragon, DJ Tommy, 2013.

When Princess Daphne is first shown to the player on the screen, she is trapped inside a glass bubble with a crown on top of it. She is watched over by the evil dragon who kidnapped her and took her as a hostage in his lair. Daphne and the dragon are in a room that is filled with gold and jewels, presumably hoarded by the dragon. Princess Daphne has the following spatial practices in common with Pauline from *Donkey Kong*: the space that she occupies is confined. Princess Daphne is trapped inside of a glass bubble and cannot leave the space. There is a monster / fictitious animal watching over her in order to guard her from the male protagonist. The space that Daphne occupies is far from the male protagonist's starting point in the narrative – he needs to actively journey through dangerous terrain in order to save her. Finally, Princess Daphne hardly moves within the space that she occupies. Her actions are limited to floating in the glass bubble and speaking to Dirk the Daring,. It is also important to note that, like Pauline in *Donkey Kong*, there is a way for Daphne to take power of the situation and escape from the dragon. She could simply break the glass and try to escape, which is similar to how Pauline could simply climb down the ladders and platforms and run away.

Although Princess Daphne and Pauline typically adhere to the key properties found in the damsel's trope, there is one key difference between Princess Daphne and Pauline: the physical representation of Princess Daphne is extremely sexualized. Daphne is seen wearing a black leotard that hardly covers her chest, and a cape of sorts that is transparent which covers her arms and her legs. Representing Princess Daphne in this sexualized manner emphasizes the idea that she is an object for the player. She is objectified in two ways: she is the goal for the player to reach, as well as a sexualized object for the male-bodied player. Like Pauline, Daphne adds no real influence in the game play of *Dragon's Lair* and is simply the sexy object for the player to earn.

The next example of the damsel being featured in video games is through the *Mario* franchise. After the success of *Donkey Kong*, Nintendo developed and released a new video game that featured the character of Jumpman, now known as Mario, as well as the damsel character, now known as Princess Peach or Princess Toadstool. The game was called *Super Mario Bros* and was released to Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in 1985. *Super Mario Bros* was a platformer game where the player needed to jump across platforms and over or onto enemies to progress through the levels. Unlike *Donkey Kong*, the screen of the game was horizontal and would display more of itself to the player as Mario proceeded to the left-hand side of the screen. The goal of the game was to reach the end level, where Mario would face the villain Bowser and rescue Princess Toadstool from her captivity. In the YouTube series "Tropes vs Women in Video Games", Anita Sarkeesian speaks about the role of Princess Peach throughout the *Mario* franchise: "Princess Peach is, in many ways, the quintessential stock

character version of the damsel in distress. The ill-fated princess appears in fourteen of the core *Super Mario Bros* platformer games and she is kidnapped in thirteen of them" (Damsel in Distress: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games, 2013, 00:07:40-00:07:53). These fourteen games that Sarkeesian mentions were developed and released from the early 1980s to 2013. However, Nintendo has relied on the trope in video game releases since 2013 – the newest game featuring the damsel trope in the *Mario* franchise being *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017). In *Super Mario Odyssey,* Princess Peach is kidnapped by Bowser and must be saved by Mario. Additionally, this video game makes use of another character called Cappy – who is Mario's magic hat that gives him special abilities. Cappy is represented as a male character and is set with the task to save his sister, Tiara who was also taken by Bowser and his cronies. It is hard to describe the spatial practices of Princess Peach in both *Super Mario Bros* and *Super Mario Odyssey* because, unlike *Donkey Kong*, Princess Peach hardly makes an appearance throughout the video game. It is only at the end of these games that Princess Peach is seen being saved by Mario from Bowser. I would argue that the absence of representation on the screen space is another form of spatial practice from the damsel. The important element to observe from these examples is that the trope of the damsel is preserved and recycled in most of the games in the *Mario* franchise.

The last example of the damsel in distress in video games is that of *The Legend of Zelda* franchise also developed by Nintendo. In all of the video games within this franchise, the character of Princess Zelda is set as the damsel. Princess Zelda needs to be rescued by the protagonist and the playable character, Link. In many of the games, Princess Zelda is not simply kidnapped, as Sarkeesian mentions: "Over the course of more than a dozen games, spanning a quarter century, all of the incarnations of Princess Zelda have been kidnapped, cursed, possessed, turn to stone or otherwise disempowered at some point" (Damsel in Distress: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games, 2013, 00:13:58-00:14:10). The first game of the franchise, *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), was released on the Nintendo Entertainment Platform (NES). The gameplay of *Legend of Zelda* consisted of the player controlling Link by moving him around the cyberspace with the D-pad on the NES controller, using swords against enemies with one of the buttons on the controller. The story of the game consisted of Princess Zelda being kidnapped by the villain Ganon – leaving it up to the brave hero, Link, to save her and their kingdom from certain doom. Throughout this game, Princess Zelda isn't seen until the end of the game and when the player does see her, it is clear that her space shares the same properties as Princess Daphne and Pauline (See figure 1.6).



Figure 1.6, Screenshot of the Final Scene in *The Legend of Zelda*, RetroGame.Steam, 2014.

In the final scene of the game, Princess Zelda is seen confined to the middle of the screen, surrounded by fire and brick walls. Princess Zelda is being watched over by the evil Ganon, who is in the previous room. Princess Zelda's prison is far from the starting point of Link, who must travel through eight dungeons in order to find her. Princess Zelda does not move in the space until she is saved by Link. The big difference between Pauline, Princess Daphne and Princess Zelda is that Princess Zelda is a spellcaster. In many versions of the franchise, Princess Zelda is shown to possess immensely powerful magic. The frustrating thing about the damsel's trope in this video game is that Princess Zelda can definitely save herself from Ganon, and in a way, there is no need for Link's character in the story. In fact, in other games in the *The Legend of Zelda* (1986-2020) franchise, Princess Zelda is seen as a sidekick to link:

> Once in a while [Princess Zelda] might be given the opportunity to have a slightly more active role in facilitating the hero's quest – typically by opening doors, giving hints, power-ups and other helpful items. On rare occasions she might even offer a last minute helping hand to the hero after all is said and done at the end of the journey. I call this variant on the theme 'The Helpful Damsel' (Damsel in Distress: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games, 2013, 00:15:04-00:15:19).

However, once Princess Zelda has fulfilled her role in being the sidekick or “The Helpful Damsel”, she is typically kidnapped or taken back into the position of the damsel. In the latest video game of the *The Legend of Zelda* franchise, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), Princess Zelda is not positioned as a damsel, but rather a powerful ruler that is in need of Link’s help:

> She then goes to hold off Ganon all by herself, for 100 years. She did not have to be there, she was not trapped by Ganon, she was in no way a damsel, in fact, she chose to be there, as her power was the only thing keeping Ganon from destroying Hyrule (Turner, 2018).

However, it is important to note that, whilst this is a refreshing role for Princess Zelda, there are moments in the video game where she returns to being a helpless character, in need of saving from Link. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter of this dissertation.

This subchapter has looked at examples of the narrative trope of the damsel in other video games besides *Donkey Kong*. After analyzing the damsels within each mentioned video game, there are clear similarities in spatial practices throughout. The damsel is always kidnapped or taken against her will and held in a confined space. She moves very little in the space, if at all, and is always being watched or guarded by the villain of the story. Her space of captivity is always the furthest point of the game, far from the starting point of the male protagonist. Finally, there is always a way for the damsel to potentially try and save herself, but she is always unable to do so. In some cases, the damsel is never seen during the game play, and is only revealed at the end of the game. The next chapter of this dissertation will focus on the ways in which the damsel’s trope can be subverted in relation to the ‘conceptual triad’, established by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*.

Chapter Four: Subverting the Damsel in Video Games within the Three Modes of Space

Using ‘queerness’ as a form of experimentalism in video games offers a method for subversion. As established in subchapter 2.2 of this dissertation, Kinkaid defines the notion of a ‘queer space’, in relation to Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, as a way of testing “the boundaries of the norm, of representation, not to reclaim preconceived taboos and territories, but to test the potentials of the present; to imagine how one might learn to see differently” (Kinkaid, 2018, p. 441). It is important to note that by ‘queering’ each mode of space, experimentation occurs. This does not necessarily mean that the space or the player need to be a part of the LGBTQ+ spectrum, but rather, the space is changed in a meaningful way that produces new outcomes. Experimenting with all three modes of space produces methods in which three forms of subversion can occur.

4.1 Modding the Screen Space of the Damsel

Modding refers to the methods in which players or fans of video games go about adding or editing their content in order to change the game play, the narrative, or the player’s agency within video games. Mods are a useful tool when looking at subverting the damsel, as mentioned in subchapter 3.7, because they can alter the meaning of the damsel’s space within *Donkey Kong*. In her article, “Playful (Counter) Publics: Game Mods as Rhetorical Forms of Active and Subversive Player Participation” (2019), Nicole Kurashige defines the functionality of mods in video games:

> Mods, which are [sometimes] collaboratively developed in such online forums by players for players, are digital compositions that can alter the code of a game in various ways, thereby opening up more possibility spaces for players without having to wait for developer intervention. Players, thus, challenge, resist, and subvert the procedural rhetoric encoded in a game by exhibiting their agency through the creation, distribution, and use of these mods (Kurashige, 2019).

When a video game is modified, the modifier may have to “hack” the system of the video game in order to change its system. This system refers to elements that create functionality and artistic assets of a video game, such as its 2D sprites, 3D models and the programming or pieces of code that create interaction for the player.

In his article, “Why I Hacked Donkey Kong for My Daughter” (2013), Mike Mika speaks about the process that he went through in order to modify the content of *Donkey Kong*. Mika’s daughter was the inspiration behind modifying the content of *Donkey Kong*:

> She's not very good at it, but insists on playing it over and over again until she finally hands me the joystick in total frustration. Finally, one day after work, she asked to play *Donkey Kong*, only this time she raised a pretty innocent and simple question: 'How can I play as the girl? I want to save Mario!' (Mika, 2013).

Mika used two of the three methods defined in subchapter 3.7 to modify *Donkey Kong*: Mika changed the spatial practices of the characters within the screen mode of space by modifying the 2D sprites of the characters. This subchapter will discuss the process of his modifications and how they subvert or challenge the narrative trope of the damsel in *Donkey Kong*. Refer to figure 1.7, a screenshot of each level in Mika's modified *Donkey Kong* video game, to view the mods within the video game.

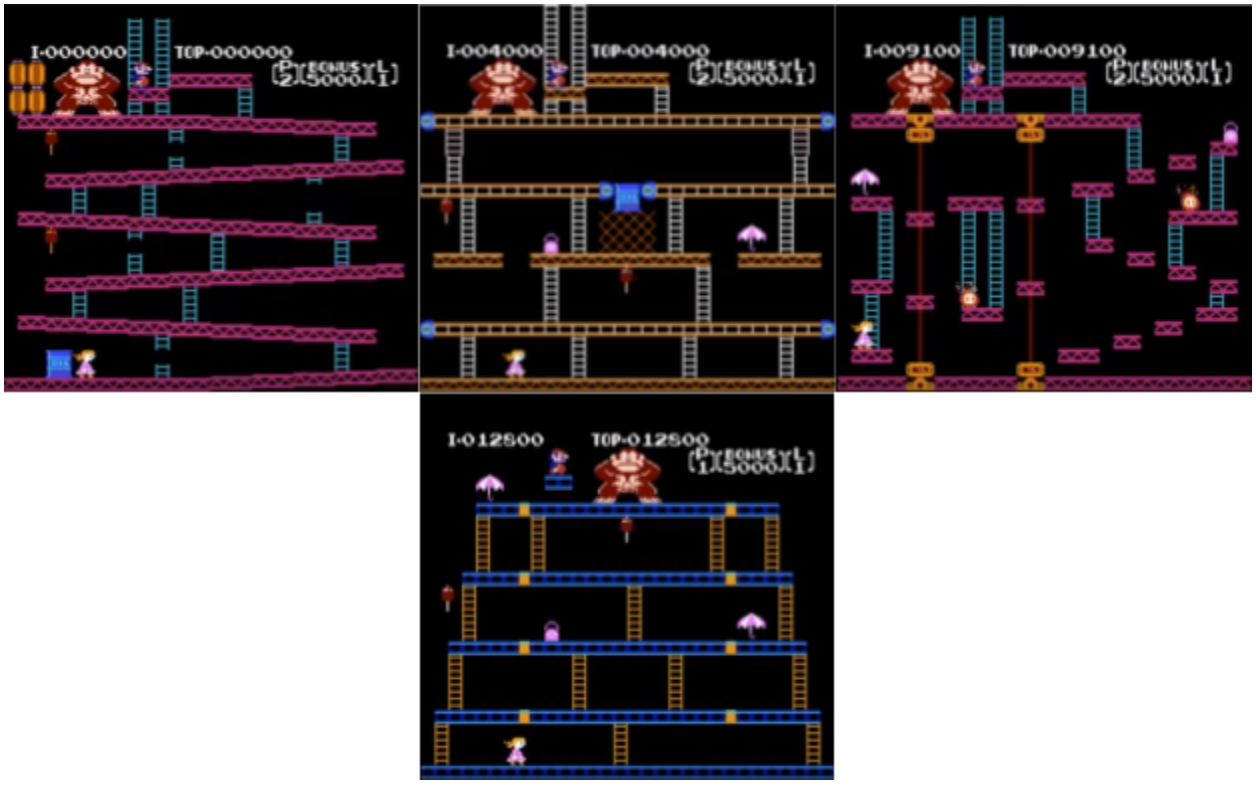


Figure 1.7, Screenshots of Each Level in the Modded Version of *Donkey Kong*, Mike Mika, 2013.

In order to change the elements of the video game, Mika needed to hack into the ROM of the video game. ROM is an acronym for Read-Only Memory, and as the name suggests, is where the data for a video game is stored. Getting the data inside of the ROM is quite challenging, but there are a lot of online tools created by other modifiers to assist in changing the content of a video game. The tool that Mika used is known as Tile Layer Pro (2001), which allows the modifier to change the 2D sprites within a video

game. Tile Layer Pro sorts the sprites into tiles that can be edited in their shapes and colours. Mika edited the sprites of Pauline and Jumpman inside the ROM of *Donkey Kong*:

> It was 12 a.m. when I started, and I was so in the zone that I had replaced most of the game's sprites by morning. When I woke up, I finished off the sprites, then swapped the palettes. Only when I played the game, the colors of other objects were all messed up. It appeared that the colors used by [Jumpman] were shared with ladders and the pop-up scores. So I found every instance of those sprites and replaced them with the Pauline 'white' color. Finally, I replaced the 'M' next to the bonus indicator with a 'P' for Pauline (Mika, 2013).

Essentially, Mika was able to swap the 2D sprites of Jumpman and Pauline, allowing the player to control Pauline who is set with the task of saving Jumpman from his kidnapper, Donkey Kong. By simply editing and swapping the 2D sprites of the Jumpman and Pauline, Mika was able to change the spatial practices of the characters in the screen mode of space. Pauline now takes the spatial practices of Jumpman, allowing her to move, climb and jump across the screen – whilst Jumpman now has the limited spatial practices of the damsel. I would argue that this is an example of the 'lived space' within the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*, because it defies the 'conceived space' that was initially developed by Miyamoto and the developers at Nintendo. Through the modding of *Donkey Kong*, Mika was able to allow Pauline to subvert her own spatial practices, giving her more agency, and therefore, more power within the video game.

The public response that Mika got from modding *Donkey Kong* were quite mixed, whilst there were responses that were positive, complimenting him for empowering the character of Pauline, many people responded negatively:

> The comments under the YouTube video can, at times, be just as horrific as they are encouraging. While some of the things people have said about my daughter are almost comically inappropriate, they are still downright disturbing. One person wished her 'dead' because 'it would do the world a favor and be one less feminist in our future' (Mika, 2013).

These death threats and other negative comments on Mika's modded version of *Donkey Kong* are a reflection of the misogynistic social behaviours that still exist in the video game industry today, just as they did in the early 1980s when *Donkey Kong* was released. I would argue that they stem from the 1980s, when female-bodied people

were excluded from arcade spaces and video games were catered towards male-bodied people.

Mika's modded version of *Donkey Kong* subverts the power dynamics of the damsel and the other characters within the video game. It is definitely a good step forward to erasing or the trope from the narratives of video games, and publicly acknowledging the negative connotations that come with the trope. However, I would argue that this form of subversion, whilst a positive way forward, is still somewhat limited in its portrayal of gender. The modded version of *Donkey Kong* still works within the binary of gender, which may exclude players who do not identify or relate to this limitation. A more complex and inclusive way to subvert the narrative trope, which will be discussed in the next subchapter, would be through the use of intersectionality, or 'queerness' as a form of experimentalism, in relation to the 'lived space' of the damsel.

This chapter has focused on the subversion of the damsel's narrative trope in the screen mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. The process of changing a video game's content in order to edit or add new elements to a video game, or modding, was discussed as a method of subversion. By modding the 2D sprites within *Donkey Kong*, Mika was able to subvert the spatial practices of the damsel and defy the game's 'conceived space' as it was established by Nintendo. The next subchapter will look at Kinkaid's theories of 'queer space', and 'queerness' as a tool for experimental practices, which subvert the phenomenological mode of space in relation to the damsel.

4.2 'Queering' the Phenomenological Mode of Space in Relation to the Damsel

This subchapter will look at 'queerness' as a form of experimentalism in the phenomenological mode of space in relation to the damsel in video games. Whilst these case studies may not directly refer to *Donkey Kong*, they offer ways in which the trope of the damsel can be queered in future production of video games. This subchapter will have a focus on the phenomenology of the player as they play through a video game, offering ways in which the arcade space can be subverted to include all genders.

'Queerness' within video games is not a new phenomenon – it is something that many developers and players have been experimenting with since the 1980s. In a video game called *Caper in the Castro* (1989), the game play allows:

> The players [to] take on the role of a lesbian detective, Tracker McDyke, searching for their friend and drag queen, Tessy LaFemme, who has gone missing from the Castro. [The game] was originally released as 'Charity Ware';

> meaning anyone who downloaded it was asked to donate funds to an AIDS organization of their choosing (LGBTQ Video Game Archive, no date).

During the 1980s, HIV and AIDS activism reached a peaking moment in LGBTQ+ history. Queer people were not only fighting for their human rights, but they were fighting the battle against HIV and AIDS. *Caper in the Castro* is a video game that was created by queer people, for queer people and aimed to raise awarness of LGBTQ+ lives. 'Queerness' within games allow players to reimagine the stereotypical content that comes with most video games, particularly during the 1980s. One of the ways that this dissertation will analyze 'queerness' in video games, is through the player, playing a video game, 'queerly'. That is to say, the interpretive agency of the game allows for the player to project queer meaning onto the video game, where it would not necessarily come across as queer to other players.

In the article "Gendered Spaces And Cultures In Video Games: A Personal Study Of Breath Of The Wild" (2019) Ronny Ford describes his experience when playing *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) queerly. As mentioned before, Princess Zelda does not take on the role of the damsel as traditionally as the video games mentioned in subchapter 3.9. However, there are moments within the video game where she is positioned in the role of the damsel. An example of this can be seen during a cutscene in the video game, where Link experiences a flashback from the past. Princess Zelda is seen running away from three enemies. Eventually, she falls to the ground surrounded by her enemies. Before they can strike, Link appears and defeats the enemies in melee combat, saving the Princess from her dire situation. Despite this, there are moments in the video game where Princess Zelda is shown to be fully capable in combat, including the last scene of the video game, where she delivers the final blow to the villain of the game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017).

Throughout the game play of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the player is able to change the appearance of the character Link – allowing the player to dress Link in various different outfits and armour, including outfits that may be seen as being more feminine. In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, there is a quest that asks the player to enter the city of Gerudo, a city that does not allow male-bodied people to enter. It is important to note that Link is represented as a male-bodied person, and so by taking on this quest, the player may be violating the city's laws, depending on how they interpret Link's gender. Ford describes this further:

> Refusing to acknowledge the customs of the Gerudo people for the sake of entering the city certainly reads as a violation of a safe space when we only take into consideration Link's canon gender. However, I also firmly believe, as

> someone who identifies as a transgender man and has spent much of his life exploring the intricacies of identity, that there is a potential for it not to be a violation depending on how the player views and conceptualizes Link (Ford, 2019).

Ford suggests that how the player defines their identity, particularly their gender identity, could affect the interpretive agency of the video game in the screen mode of space. In this example, the 'conceived space' of the diegetic mode, and the 'lived space' of the phenomenological mode intersect. The player defies the 'conceived space' of the diegetic mode, which the developers of the game defined (i.e. Link's gender is created as a cisgendered male), through their own interpretation of Link's gender in the 'lived space' of the phenomenological mode. Ford suggests that if a player identifies as anything other than a cisgendered male, the quest to venture into the city of Gerudo may not be a violation: "Bringing back the identity of the player, perhaps for transgender women or certain nonbinary individuals, this questline would feel much less troubling, as wearing an outfit made for a woman is potentially gender affirming" (Ford, 2019). Ford suggests that there was no consideration for this interpretative agency from the player during the development of the game – or in the 'conceived space' of the screen mode in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. There is no way to avoid doing this quest if the player wants to proceed in the game's story. The player has to dress Link as femininely as possible in order to enter the city and complete the quest: "There is no workaround for this questline. You either do it or you don't; there's no creative solution that would allow for you to defeat Thunderblight Ganon, the final boss of the Gerudo questline" (Ford, 2019). This means that the only way to proceed in the narrative of the game is to either violate the safe space of the city of Gerudo, or play this quest in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* queerly.

By playing video games queerly, the player exposes themselves to various ways in which the three different spatial modes of a video game can be interpreted. In many cases, this would stretch the meaning of a video game's content – the player can bend the narrative, the characters and the meaning of a video game's spaces. By queerly playing a video game that contains the damsel's trope, the damsel's character can be subverted by the interpretive agency of the player inside the game's spaces. In later video games that were released by Nintendo, such as the *Super Smash Bros Series* (1999), many queer folk were seen choosing to play as the damseled character, Princess Peach. Some of these queer folk could relate to Princess Peach in terms of her feminine gender identity, but also through the underdog mentality that surrounds her character: "Some enjoy the aesthetic options (the rose pink go-kart? Werk!) and feminine desirability. Because there are nearly no gay protagonists to choose from in

the gaming space, many LGBTQ [folk] opt for the female because, like queer individuals, she's often underestimated and her skillsets trivialized" (Box, 2019). In addition, the damsel's gender doesn't have to be positioned within the binary, if the player doesn't want it to be. The gendered spatial practices in each mode of space can be subverted by experimenting with the damsel's gender in the player's interpretation of the video game.

Similarly, game designers and developers can allow their audience to play with gender and sexuality in the video games that they create. These video games are known as queer games, which not only experiment with gender and sexuality, but also create innovative and unique game play, storylines and art work. Many examples of queer games were seen in the exhibition *Rainbow Arcade* (2018-2019) that opened for a few months in the Schwules Museum in Berlin, Germany. The *Rainbow Arcade* is an expansion of the 'lived space' in the phenomenological mode of space, in relation to *Donkey Kong*, because it experimented with the social dynamics and the video games' content of a typical arcade space in the 1980s. The *Rainbow Arcade* subverted the arcade space of the 1980s because of its intentions. It did not seek to gain commercial success or financial wealth, instead, the *Rainbow Arcade*'s main intention was to show the history and progress of the LGBTQ community, in both the game industry and the world. This arcade space was an exhibition that invited people of all genders and sexualities to play through a collection of queer video games:

> Spanning from the 1980s to the present, the exhibit featured both well known mainstream titles that involve queer content, and independent works by queer creators. Items on display included playable games, preserved documentations of online game communities, concept art, and even modifications and 'hacks' by queer fans that seek to adjust or add relevant content to existing games (Fryerwood, 2019).

The *Rainbow Arcade* created an environment that did not exclude anyone because of their gender, sexuality or race. It created spatial practices that encourage diversity, both among the players and the content of the video games that were being exhibited. One of the game developers whose game *Radiator* (2017) was on display in the *Rainbow Arcade* was queer game developer Robert Yang:

> I make what are called 'gay sex' games. Most of the time, museums don't really want to put 'gay sex' games in their exhibitons [...] It's really great when a different museum [or arcade] comes along and has no quarms or no problems

> with talking frankly about gay or queer sexuality (Rainbow Arcade – Testimonial by Robert Yang, 2018, 00:00:11-00:00:36).

The more arcade spaces allow for the inclusion of diverse players and content, the less players will see or want to engage with lazy stereotypes and dangerous narrative tropes. Events such as the *Rainbow Arcade* encourage diversity within video games, not just within their representation, but also through the game play and narratives that come with these queer video games.

This chapter has engaged with 'queerness' as an experimental tool in order to subvert the narrative trope of the damsel in video games. Through playing video games queerly, the player is able to subvert the damsel's trope. They can do this through interpretive agency, which allows the player to project any gender identity onto a character within a video game. This bends and twists the characters and the narrative of a video game, experimenting with the spatial practices of the damsel's space.The *Rainbow Arcade*, as a queer space, subverts the phenomenological spatial mode of *Donkey Kong*, in relation to the arcade space in America during the 1980s. The queer arcade experiments with the social behaviours of the 1980s arcade space, not only through its inclusiveness of LGBTQ+ folk, but also through exhibiting queer content through video games. These queer games typically subvert the stereotypes and tropes that a lot of video games include, both within their narrative and artistic content, as well as in their game play and technical components. Queering the damsel allows the player, as well as the developer, to play with gender and sexuality, in an inclusive and personal way.

4.3 Rewriting the Diegetic Mode of the Damsel

As mentioned in subchapter 3.8, the diegetic mode of space refers to the narrative world in which the story of the damsel takes place. This includes the rules, systems and the daily activities of the narrative world inside of a video game. When developers create a story for a video game, it is typically referred to as lore or world-building:

> Lore/World-building is the concept of fleshing out a setting beyond just the initial concept. It's about building a sense of place that transcends the original concept or plot. Worldbuilding comprises two categories: Character and Setting, and both give weight to the experience. Some of the best stories in any medium use lore to get people invested, and there are several advantages from a writing/storytelling point of view (Bycer, 2018).

Much of the world-building that occurred in the development of *Donkey Kong* is kept a secret by the developers. However, one can see how the story of Pauline and Jumpman

has developed into the story of Mario and Princess Peach over the past thirty nine years. Many of the video games released by Nintendo, which contain Princess Peach as a non-controllable character, still rely on the damsel in distress trope to tell the story to the player. Perhaps this is because of Princess Peach's role in the Mushroom Kingdom – the world in which most of the video games in the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise take place. As the ruler of the Mushroom Kingdom, Princess Peach has some kind of power over the world and the evil villain, Bowser, may want to force her into marriage in order to gain that power. However, it is curious then, why Bowser is invited to the other activities that the characters of Mushroom Kingdom are involved in. Bowser is seen as a playable character in multiple video games in the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise, and can even be seen playing cooperatively with his so-called enemies. Perhaps there is some justification for these seemingly plot holes in the diegetic mode of the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise, but many fans and players of the games seem confused by this (PeregrineZ et al., 2018). There seem to be quite a few secretive / accidental plot holes that the developers have made within the diegetic mode of space in the Mushroom Kingdom. Perhaps the lack of world-building or plot hole justification is what made the developers at Nintendo rely on the narrative trope of the damsel in distress, in order to tell a story to the player. Princess Peach is most often featured as the damsel, but Nintendo has not created this role solely for her, as seen in the character Tiara in *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017), for example.

Many game developers have responded to the *Mario* franchise and its continued use of the damsel's narrative trope since 1981 by creating video games that aim to subvert the trope by alluding to the game play and narrative plot found in games within the *Mario* franchise. In addition, these developers create their own diegetic modes of space, their own lore and build narrative worlds that reflect, but essentially subvert, the trope of the damsel. An example of this is seen through the video game *Braid* (2008). *Braid*'s narrative and game play are reflections of the video games in the series of *Super Mario Bros*. *Braid* is a platformer game in which the player is able to control the character of Tim. Throughout the game, the player must take Tim on a journey to save a princess from an initially unknown villain. The player can make Tim jump and run across the game's environment. These mechanics reflect the way in which the player is able to control Mario in the *Super Mario Bros* video games. However, in addition to these mechanics, Tim has the power to control time: "The game's relationship to time seems, at first, to make the game very easy. Instead of having to start a level over when you die, you simply rewind time and correct your mistakes" (Vaughn, 2014).

Unlike the *Super Mario Bros* series of video games, *Braid* uses Tim's ability to reverse and fast forward time to emphasize the core themes of the narrative in the video game:

“Tim’s narrative is about time, of course, and about regret. It seems easy to wish you could simply go back in time and correct mistakes, but the game seems to be arguing that time and regret and mistakes are more complicated than that” (Vaughn, 2014). After completing each level within *Braid*, the player is exposed to books in the video game’s space that reveal more about the narrative and the character of Tim. However, it is only at the end of the game where the player begins to understand that the narrative of *Braid* is a subversion of the damsel’s trope, as well as the classic platformer genre:

> What made *Braid* so brilliant, and by extension, so subversive, was that the real meaning behind the game was lost unless you played it to full completion [...] On the surface *Braid* appeared to be a [platformer] similar to the earlier mentioned *Mario* games. You rescue a princess by going through several levels, and in the final level discover the princess doesn’t seem to want to be saved. This subverts the classic [platformer] genre already. We're so used to the pattern that we don't stop to think about the princess's side of the story (The Geek Empress, 2014).

Braid has two different endings to its narrative – both of the endings subvert the damsel’s trope but in very different ways. The first ending occurs if the player has not collected the seven stars that are scattered across the game’s levels. During the end scene of the game, the princess is seen running away from a knight in shining armour. He yells the words, “I got you!” as he tries to escape with the princess. When the princess jumps up to a higher platform he shouts, “come down here!”. It is implied that the knight is trying to kidnap the princess. It is important to note that the knight’s speech in the text bubbles are red. The player, controlling Tim, runs with the princess in parallel across the screen – she is on the platform above Tim. Working together, the characters help each other across the level, opening up pathways and removing obstacles from the path. However, once Tim reaches the end of the level where the princess has been kept, there is a flash on the screen. Now the princess is seen sleeping in her bed and Tim is on the same platform as her. The game now plays forwards and the princess is seen running away from Tim in the parallel platform above him. Instead of helping Tim, the princess is seen trying to hinder his progress, leaving him with obstacles to face on his own. At the end of the level, which was once the beginning of the level, the knight appears again. He shouts to the princess “Come down here!” – he catches her when she jumps down. As they climb out of the level on a vine, the knight says, “I’ve got you” – the text in the knight’s speech bubble is now green. Tim can exit the level by entering the door that he first came through – this leads to the epilogue level of the story, which confirms that the princess was running away from Tim. One of the books in the epilogue level states: “His arm weighed upon her shoulders, felt constrictive around her neck. ‘You're burdening me with your ridiculous need’ she said. Or, she said: ‘You're going the

wrong way and you're pulling me with you.' In another time, another place, she said: 'Stop yanking on my arm; you're hurting me!' (Braid, 2008). In this ending of the video game, the damsel runs from the monster of the video game, which in this case, is the male protagonist, Tim. The princess character in *Braid* alludes to some of the principles of the damsel, as mentioned in chapter 3.9. However, she defies these roles through the spatial practices that she performs in the space of the last level. Not only does she run away from Tim, but also actively tries to hinder him from catching her by creating obstacles for him to overcome. Despite the fact that the princess is saved by a knight in shining armour at the end of the level, the narrative of the game experiments with the trope through the mechanic of time. This ending of *Braid* creates a contrasting take on the damsel's trope, as the player sees the princess play a more active role in the game, and have more agency within the game's diegetic and screen modes of space.

The second ending of *Braid* takes on a metaphorical meaning in the narrative, which requires the player to interpret the diegetic mode of space quite thoroughly. If the player collects all seven of the stars in the previous levels, when they enter the final level, they are presented with the same situation as the first ending: the princess escapes and runs away from the knight. As the princess runs away from the knight on the platform above Tim, she collaboratively works with him to get to the end of the level. However, when the characters get to the end of the level, the princess flashes white, and is seen bouncing around the screen. Eventually, the screen flashes completely white and the princess disappears, the non-diegetic music stops and there is now a sense of stillness in the game, compared to the beginning of this level. Tim can now go back to the beginning of the level and exit through the door that he entered. Tim enters the epilogue level and can move to the other end of the level on the far right of the screen. Once he enters the final door at the end of this level, the next scene shows that the world in which the game takes place is destroyed and buildings are on fire. Players and fans of *Braid* have theorized that this second ending is a metaphor for the development of the atomic bomb, which was developed in the USA in 1945:

> Rescuing the princess unleashes a catastrophic explosion of lights and sounds, ended with a quote from Oppenheimer from the Manhattan Project. We learn the princess was actually a metaphor for nuclear power. You pursued her without thought to end with a terrible result, as had the Manhattan Project had with their success in creating the Atom Bomb (The Geek Empress, 2014).

The damsel's narrative trope is subverted in the second ending of *Braid* through the development and creation of this metaphorical ending. The princess' character becomes dangerous as she obliterates the world when she comes into contact with her hero, and male protagonist, Tim. Whilst the damsel's character remains an object or

goal for the player to reach, the player is not rewarded for this. Instead a kiss or a heart appearing as a symbol of love between the characters, the world is destroyed. In a way, the player is punished for their participation in this story and for saving the damsel. The game may make the player feel a sense of regret or urge to go back in time and undo their actions, but the game does not allow them to do so. In this way, the game emphasizes the theme of regret and time, as mentioned above.

The two endings within *Braid* are examples of how developers can subvert, or rewrite the damsel's story, through the development of a video game's diegetic mode of space. Whilst *Braid* still portrays the damsel as an object in the game's story, the meaning of her character changes in both endings of the game. The damsel's character transforms from someone who is weak and powerless to someone who has more active agency in, or someone who is dangerous to the game's narrative world respectively. The diegetic mode of space provides a way for developers to stop relying on the narrative trope of the damsel. In this mode of space, developers like Jonathan Blow, who created *Braid*, can create meaningful video games that question the social and cultural behaviours in the phenomenological mode of space of the player.

This chapter has shown ways in which the diegetic mode of space can be used as a tool to subvert the damsel's narrative trope. Possibilities arise for developers to create narrative worlds that are concrete and have many layers of meaning to the player. The damsel's character is subverted in the video game *Braid* in both of the endings that the game provides to the player. The first ending shows the damsel moving around the screen mode of space, and performing spatial practices that empower her and give her a sense of agency in the diegetic mode of space. The second ending of *Braid* subverts the damsel by giving her character a metaphorical meaning, which makes her character dangerous in the diegetic mode of space of the game. The damsel's character has the potential to destroy the narrative world of *Braid*, and so her character becomes a lot more powerful than in other iterations of the damsel in previous video games. Whilst the damsel still acts as a goal for the player in both of these endings, the male protagonist becomes the monster that the damsel is running from, or he is punished for saving her, in the two endings of the game respectively. In the next chapter of this dissertation, a conclusion of the findings and the key objectives will be discussed.

Chapter Five: Closing in the Damsel's Space

5.1 The Properties of the Damsel's Space

This dissertation has argued that the damsel's narrative trope is a dangerous misrepresentation of women because it reflects misogynistic views of female-bodied people. Through the analysis of space, this dissertation has defined ways in which the damsel's trope is both perpetuated, as well as subverted, within the realm of video games. Space and spatial theories have been used as a tool to analyze ways in which video games are produced and how they function, in relation to the damsel. Defining gendered spaces has proved to be a fundamental building block for this dissertation, because they reveal the expected social behaviors and gender roles that are produced within society. Typically, these gendered spaces are what enforce the damsel's gender roles in video games. The narrative trope of the damsel objectifies the female character by allowing her to become a passive goal or object for the player to achieve in a video game's space. The damsel's character does not add any meaningful content to a video game's game play, story or visual aesthetics. As the core case study for this dissertation, *Donkey Kong*, reveals the key elements that the damsel is composed of within each spatial mode of the video game.

This dissertation has argued that there are three existing spatial modes that perpetuate the damsel in distress as a narrative trope in video games. The phenomenological mode of space is the first, and it refers to the space that the player occupies or inhabits when they play through a video game. In reference to *Donkey Kong*, the phenomenological mode of space speaks to arcades that existed at the time that the game was released to the public in the USA. The screen mode of space is the second spatial mode that this dissertation has defined, and it refers to the elements on the screen that the player watches as they play a game. In the case of *Donkey Kong*, this would be the screen that is placed inside of the arcade machine. The third and final spatial mode is the diegetic space, which refers to the narrative world of a video game – the characters, the places and the events that take place inside of the story of a video game. These characters, places and events can exist both inside and outside of the video game that the player interacts with. In the case of *Donkey Kong*, this would refer to the evolution of the characters of Jumpman, Donkey Kong and Pauline, as well as the narrative world in the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise.

These three modes of space, and how they have been produced, have been analyzed by using Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre's 'conceptual triad' has been used as a tool to define how each mode of space has been created, as well as the

functionality of the space in relation to the damsel's narrative trope. Within each space, this dissertation has examined how the 'conceived space' and the 'perceived space' perpetuate the damsel's narrative trope. The 'lived space', as argued, holds the potential to subvert the damsel's narrative trope within each mode of space. In addition to Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, each spatial mode has been analyzed through a gendered lens, arguing that each mode of space is a gendered space that contains unbalanced power dynamics between male and female-bodied people. Daphne Spain's *Gendered Spaces* is another tool that this dissertation has used to define how the 'conceived space' and 'perceived space' of each mode of space is gendered. The 'lived space', when analyzed through a gendered lens, is the space that allows for experimentation of the binary – it defies the social traditions that are developed in the 'conceived space' and practiced in the 'perceived space'.

Aarseth's definition of cyberspace, as well as the three distinctions of a video game's world in relation to the player's interactions, is another tool that is used to define the properties of the damsel. This dissertation has deduced that the cyberspace refers to the space within a video game that allows the player to interact with the characters on the screen. This definition of cyberspace has been used as a tool to clarify the interactions that the player is able to perform, as they embody the character of Jumpman, in the screen mode of space of *Donkey Kong*. Aarseth's three distinctions of video game environments have helped to clarify the relationship between the player's interactions, the game play and the damsel in relation to *Donkey Kong*.

In order to subvert the three modes of space, in relation to the damsel, queer theory has been applied to this dissertation. The 'lived space', of each spatial mode, holds the potential for gender to be experimented with, and thus creates a space that allows for fluidity and dynamic spatial practices that defy the 'conceived space' of each mode. This dissertation has made use of Eden Kinkaid's definition of 'queerness' as a tool to subvert the damsel in each mode of space. Kinkaid defines 'queerness' as a form of experimentation that allows developers and players to "test the potentials of the present; to imagine how one might learn to see differently; to sense new hypotheses that make new answers, a new kind of answer, possible" (Kinkaid, 2018, p. 441). This dissertation has argued that each 'lived space' of the three modes of space act as a way for players and developers to play with the concept of expected gendered roles as they are defined in the 'conceived space'. Through 'queerness', or experimentation, the damsel's narrative trope can be challenged and subverted to create more meaningful spaces in video games.

The arcade space, as the phenomenological space of *Donkey Kong*, is argued to be a space that perpetuates the narrative trope of the damsel. The 'conceived space' of the

arcade refers to the way in which it was designed and planned in order to host gamers as they played on the arcade machines. This dissertation argued that, whilst the physicality of the arcade space is not inherently gendered, the content of the arcade machines catered towards male-bodied people and excluded female-bodied people. During the 1980s, there was a shift in the marketing towards female-bodied people in the video game industry. Therefore, a lot of the content of the arcade machine's video games either completely ignored the female character or placed her in the role of the damsel. This led to a social norm that welcomed male-bodied people inside of arcade space and ostracized female-bodied people. The more that male-bodied people consumed video games that did not humanly represent female characters, the more developers created video games that included the damsel's narrative trope and, therefore, perpetuated the trope within video games, including *Donkey Kong*.

The 'perceived space', or the spatial practices, that were performed by male-bodied people in the arcade space were influenced by the 'conceived space' of the arcade. This dissertation argued that the theme of competition could be seen in each of the four main spatial practices inside of the arcade space. These four spatial practices include playing games on the arcade machine, queuing or lining up inside the arcade, competing for high scores in the video games as well as watching other players play the video games on the arcade machines. Typically, these four spatial practices were performed by male-bodied people inside of the arcade, as they were the people that the space was targeted towards. Competition, as a theme in each spatial practice, was seen as a social behaviour that was encouraged in young males at the time. In contrast, young female-bodied people were encouraged to play cooperatively. Each of the four spatial practices or social behaviours were encouraged by society, particularly because the arcade space of the 1980s in America was a public space. This dissertation has argued that public spaces were gendered spaces that catered towards male-bodied people. This was shown in the social behaviours of young people in the 1980s in America. Young male-bodied people went out into public to play video games, whereas young female-bodied people stayed at home, in a private space, to play with dolls such as Barbie. In South Africa, whilst traditional arcade spaces did not exist in exactly the same way as they did in the USA, many arcade machines could be seen in shopping malls or cafes. As in the USA, these arcade machines were mostly populated by white, cisgendered boys.

In contrast to the 'conceived space' and the 'perceived space', the 'lived space' saw to defy the gendered social behaviours of the arcade space. An example of the 'lived space' would be a female-bodied person entering and performing the spatial practices of the arcade space. The female-bodied player would be performing the gendered

spatial practices that were socially designated for male-bodied players, which subverts the gender roles of the arcade space. Additionally, the 'lived space' of the phenomenological space can be subverted in two ways: The first is through the player's interpretive agency, or the player's experience, to change the meaning of the arcade game's content. The second way is through subverting the content of the arcade space or by changing the arcade games' content to include people of all genders. The methods of subversion, or the ways in which the 'lived space' is produced will be summarized in the next subchapter of this conclusion. The arcade space, as the phenomenological space of *Donkey Kong*, perpetuates the damsel's narrative trope in video games because it produces a gendered space that was catered for male-bodied people. It did this through the content of the arcade games, which often had no female character representation or the female character was portrayed as a damsel. This created a space where the male representation was empowered and thus encouraged the inhabitation and participation of male-bodied players. The more that the male-bodied players consumed these games, the more revenue the game developers of the arcade games would attain, and therefore, more video games that contained the damsel's narrative trope were created, including games such as *Donkey Kong*.

The screen mode of space within a video game is the second spatial mode that this dissertation has defined. This is also known as the cyberspace of a video game, where the player can not only see what is on the screen, but also influence the elements on the screen in accordance to the game play. This dissertation has argued that the screen mode of space perpetuates the damsel's narrative trope in video games through its 'conceived space' and 'perceived space'. The 'conceived space' of the screen mode of space refers to the game development behind the video game at a specific moment on the screen, as this is the planning for a video game to be produced. In *Donkey Kong*, this would include the screens of all four of the levels of the game, as well as how the characters and the environmental objects are positioned in relation to one another. As the damsel, Pauline is always situated at the top of the screen, on the highest platform of each level. This is the furthest point from the Jumpman's starting position. In each level, Pauline is always placed next to Donkey Kong, who guards her from escaping the level. In contrast, Jumpman was designed to take up as much of the screen space as possible, as he moves across the platforms and dodges obstacles that come his way. This is one of the factors that makes the screen mode of space gendered: Pauline, as the female character, does not have the agency to move around the space like Jumpman, the male protagonist, and is always trapped in the same space in each level of *Donkey Kong*.

Throughout the second, third and fourth level, the game developers have scattered Pauline's items across the platforms. These items emphasize the genderedness of the screen mode of space because of the way that they reflect Pauline's gender within the game. The dainty, and extremely pink, items are placed around the level for the player to gain more points as Jumpman collects them for the damsel, who cannot move from being trapped by Donkey Kong. In relation to Aarseth's three distinctions of video game spaces, this dissertation has argued that the environment of *Donkey Kong* would conform to the second. This is because the game's cyberspace encourages the player to make Jumpman move, climb and jump across the platforms of each level, in order to reach the final destination, which is Pauline. Although *Donkey Kong* is not a traditional labyrinth, the player still needs to strategize methods in order traverse the game's closed environment with Jumpman. This dissertation has argued that this second distinction of a game's environment, as defined by Aarseth, perpetuates the narrative trope of the damsel. It does this by emphasizing the idea that the damsel is an object for the player to achieve – she is no more than the center of the labyrinth. The last element of the 'conceived space' in the screen mode of space of *Donkey Kong* is the character design of Pauline and Jumpman. Pauline's character sprite is mostly composed of pink, white and orange. In contrast, Jumpman's sprite is mostly composed of blue and red. Each character is composed of these contrasting colours that reinforce their gender, which in turn, emphasizes the screen mode of space as a gendered space.

This dissertation has argued that the 'perceived space' in the screen mode of space of *Donkey Kong* refers to two main elements. The first is the control and influence that the player has over the video game and its characters and environment. The second refers to the spatial practices, or actions, that the characters inside of the screen can or cannot do. The player is able to control Jumpman in each level of *Donkey Kong*, by making him move, jump and climb along the platforms on the screen. The player never interacts with Pauline, and can never embody her as they do with Jumpman. Pauline is never directly influenced by the player's actions, until they are able to get Jumpman to the top of the screen. This reinforces the idea that the screen mode of space is gendered, because Jumpman is given the agency and power to move around the space, whilst Pauline's character remains objectified. In terms of the spatial practices of the characters within *Donkey Kong*, this dissertation has argued that the spatial practices of the damsel are much more limited than that of the male protagonist, or the character that the player embodies. Pauline has four distinct spatial practices, which include shouting for help, changing the direction that she faces, shaking her body in protest, and being carried away by Donkey Kong at the beginning of level one and at the end of each level. These limitations in Pauline's spatial practices emphasize the lack of power,

or agency, that she retains throughout the game. This emphasizes a key trait in the damsel, which defines her character as weak and powerless in her situation.

The ‘lived space’ in the screen mode of space of a video refers to ways that the player’s interactions in the cyberspace and the spatial practices of the characters are changed in such a way that they defy its ‘conceived space’. These changes are created by fans or players of a video game and are known as mods. This dissertation has argued that mods, or modding, refers to the technical ability of a player or fan to change the content of a video game through its game play, its visual aesthetics in relation to the game’s 2D sprites or 3D models, as well as changing the story or narrative plot that the video game tells to the player. Each of the three methods of modding disrupt the power dynamics and agency that the characters have in the original video game. In relation to *Donkey Kong*, this dissertation has argued three ways in which modding would subvert the ‘conceived space’ and the ‘perceived space’, and disrupt the unbalanced power dynamics between Pauline and Jumpman. Modding the game play does not only refer to the cyberspace of a video game, but also the spatial practices that the characters can perform in the screen mode of space. This dissertation has argued that if a modder were to program a way for Pauline to exit the space, or escape from her situation, this would disrupt the narrative plot points of the damsel’s trope. If a modder were to change the way that the 2D sprites looked in the video game, so that they become more gender neutral, the damsel’s trope would be weakened because the player would project their own gender interpretation onto the characters. The video game would cease to rely on stereotypical gender roles to tell the story of *Donkey Kong*. And finally, if a modder were to change the word, “help!”, that Pauline shouts in the video game, to something more provocative or dismissive of the male protagonist, this would impose a new and subversive element to the damsel’s narrative – perhaps implying that she does not want to be saved.

The last mode of space that this dissertation has defined refers to the diegetic mode of space, in relation to the perpetuation of the damsel’s narrative trope. This mode of space considers the social behaviours of the characters as they are in the narrative world of a video game. This dissertation has argued that the diegetic mode of space in *Donkey Kong* should be analyzed through the ‘conceived space’, ‘perceived space’ and the ‘lived space’ in order to understand how this mode of space was produced. The ‘conceived space’ of *Donkey Kong* would refer to the way in which the story was planned and created by the developers of the video game. This dissertation has found that, whilst some of the developmental processes have been shared with the public, a lot of the narrative world of *Donkey Kong* is kept a secret. There are two main points that the research of this dissertation has found in relation to development of the diegetic

mode of space in *Donkey Kong*. The first is the title of the video game itself – Miyamoto stated in an interview that, when he was creating the narrative of the game, he wanted to portray the character of Donkey Kong as a nuisance or a fool to the player. He thought that the word 'donkey' was a synonym for the word 'idiot' (Kohler, 2016). The word 'Kong' refers to the movie *King Kong*, in which Donkey Kong's character, and the narrative of the game, was based on. This leads to the second element of the 'conceived space' in relation to *Donkey Kong*: the story and the characters of the video game were based on the story that occurs in the movie *King Kong* which was released in 1933. Besides these two points, as well as the fact that the game contains the damsel's narrative trope, not much else is publicly known about the 'conceived space' of *Donkey Kong*. Therefore, this dissertation has argued that the 'perceived space' of the diegetic mode of space is reflected in the 'perceived space' of the screen mode of space. The player is able to watch the social behaviours and spatial practices of the diegetic mode happen inside of the screen mode of space. Whilst it is possible there may be other spatial practices that occur outside of the video game's content, one cannot confirm what these would be without talking to the game developers at Nintendo. Finally, the 'lived space' of the diegetic mode of space would refer to the ways in which the narrative world of a video game could be subverted. This dissertation has argued that developers have done this by alluding to the narrative world, game play and the damsels' trope of other video games, but have inserted a twist or revelation in these three elements, which subverts the video game's diegetic mode of space, and therefore, the damsel's narrative trope. The diegetic mode of space in *Donkey Kong* has perpetuated the use of the narrative trope of the damsel by basing its narrative world and story from *King Kong*, which also relied heavily on the damsel's trope to create a sense of excitement for its audience at the expense of the damsel's character.

This dissertation has explored other examples of the damsel's narrative trope in video games other than *Donkey Kong*. These video games included *Dragon's Lair* (1983), the *Mario* (1981-2020) franchise and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986-2020) franchise. After analyzing these video games, this dissertation showed that the damsel's narrative trope is something that has continued to be a crutch in video games' narratives from the 1980s. In addition, this dissertation argued that the damsel's narrative trope existed in more than one video game in the 1980s, which emphasized the idea that video games were not marketed towards female-bodied people. Most importantly, this dissertation argued that the damsel's character, in most video games' screen and diegetic mode of space, has seven key properties: the damsel is always kidnapped or taken against her will; she is always placed in a confined area; she hardly moves around in the confined space; she is always watched, trapped or guarded by a monster or villain; her captivity is always at the furthest point from the start of the game, or where the male protagonist

is introduced; there is always a way for the damsel to save herself, but she never does; and finally, in some cases, the damsel is never actually seen by the player (besides for the start of the game where she is kidnapped) until the end of the game when she is saved. It is important to note that some games do not have all of these properties, and in fact, some games slightly change them. However, a video game that contains the damsel, even if she does have some agency, is still problematic because her character is still objectified.

5.2 Subverting the Damsel's Space

This dissertation has argued that the damsel's narrative trope can be challenged and subverted in all three proposed modes of space by producing the 'lived space'. There are three methods in which the 'lived space' can be produced. The first method is through modding, which relates to the screen mode of space, and editing the content of a video game in order for it to produce new meaning. In the processing of modding, 'queerness' is used as a tool to play with the gender roles assigned to the characters. The second refers to 'queering' the phenomenological space through the player's interpretive agency, as well as through 'queering' the arcade space. This form of subversion specifically looks at LGBTQ+ experiences of players in video games and arcade spaces. The third and final method of subversion is through the development of new video games that alludes to, and experiments with, the diegetic mode of space in relation to the damsel.

The first case study to subvert the trope of the damsel was a hacked version of *Donkey Kong*, which subverted the screen mode of space. Game designer Mike Mika hacked the ROM of the video game *Donkey Kong* in order to experiment with the design of the sprites. Mika essentially swapped the sprites of Jumpman and Pauline, so that the player embodied Pauline, who needs to save the male character, Jumpman. This dissertation argued that by doing this, Mika reversed the spatial practices of the characters in the screen mode of space and challenged the stereotypical gender roles of the two characters. The player now interacts with Pauline as they did before with Jumpman. By reversing the spatial practices of the characters in the screen mode of space, Mika gave the damsel character, Pauline, more agency in the game, and less agency to Jumpman. The power dynamics between the characters are switched, and therefore, the damsel's character becomes more than just an object or goal for the player. However, this dissertation argued that, although the damsel's character is subverted in this case study, it is still a limited form of subversion because it remains within the binary of gender and does not include those who extend beyond gender binarism.

The second method of subverting the damsel's narrative trope looked at 'queering' the player's phenomenological experience of a video game, which included the player's interpretive agency as they played through a game. This dissertation posited two case studies that successfully 'queer' the phenomenological space. The first look at how a player could 'queerly' play through *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Link, the main character of the video game, was originally gendered as male in the 'conceived space' of the diegetic mode of space. Throughout the game, the player can change Links apparel to anything they desire, including the ability to make Link seem more feminine. Game critic Ronny Ford suggests that this allows for the player to reimagine what Link's gender could be. Through their own interpretive agency, the player is allowed to bend and stretch the narrative of *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* in relation to Link's gender. By playing through a game 'queerly', and reinterpreting the gender within a video game, the player is able to subvert the gender roles that came with the damsel's character. The second case study that was examined in this dissertation, in relation to subverting the damsel's trope, is that of the *Rainbow Arcade*. The exhibition of the *Rainbow Arcade* challenged the social stereotype that comes with an arcade: that it is a "space for boys" (Williams, 2013). In this exhibition, people of all genders were welcome to play 'queer' video games, which are known to subvert and challenge stereotypical genders and sexual orientations within video games. In addition, these video games expressed the stories and lives of LGBTQ+ people throughout the past, showcasing the progress that has happened in terms of LGBTQ+ human rights. The *Rainbow Arcade* subverts the phenomenological space of the damsel by challenging the social behaviours and spatial practices that were normalized in the arcade spaces of the 1980s.

The third and final method of subversion, that this dissertation has defined, is through the diegetic mode of space of a video game. By rewriting the space of the damsel, developers are able to subvert the trope by alluding to video games that contain, and rely on, the narrative trope of the damsel. *Braid*, which is the case study that was analyzed in this dissertation, alludes to the *Super Mario Bros* series of video games in terms of its game play – the player can make the male protagonist, Tim, climb, jump and move across the platforms on the screen. However, *Braid* subverts the narrative trope of the damsel in two ways through its diegesis. *Braid* offers the player two different endings to the game, depending on whether or not they have collected all seven stars in the previous levels. If they have not, the ending of *Braid* shows the damsel running away from the male protagonist. The player realizes, at the end of the game, that Tim is the villain of the story. This ending subverts the trope of the damsel because she takes on an active role in the video game. In *Braid*, the damsel's spatial practices become less limited than in the *Super Mario Bros* series of video games – she has more agency

within the game. In addition to this, the trope is subverted through the player's realization that they have embodied the role of the villain. In the second ending of *Braid*, the damsel takes on a metaphorical meaning. When Tim reaches her at the end of the final level, she explodes and the world in which the narrative takes place is destroyed. Players and fans of the video game have theorized that the damsel becomes a metaphor for the atomic bomb. In this ending, the damsel's character is subverted because she becomes a dangerous object to the narrative world of *Braid*. This second ending subverts the trope because the game punishes the player for reaching the damsel, as opposed to awarding them with a kiss. In addition, the damsel's character becomes layered with meaning – her character shifts from being an object to be won by the player, to symbolizing the end of the world. This dissertation has argued that the diegetic mode of space opens room for developers to come up with unique and creative ways to represent characters of all genders in video games. By creating strong characters that do not conform to stereotypical gender roles, developers will make more players feel represented as they play their games.

This dissertation has argued that, through the analysis of spatial modes, the damsel in distress as a narrative trope in video games is perpetuated. It has proved vital to understand the functionalities and the production of spaces, in order to determine the ways that this perpetuation of the damsel has continues to exist in video games, since the early 1980s. However, in the same vein, spatial modes also provide video game developers with ways in which to subvert and challenge the narrative trope of the damsel. By 'queering' the ways in which the three modes of space are produced, the role of gender in video games can be played with, thus confronting the continued use of the damsel's trope as a narrative crutch in video games.

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