“I Always Preferred the Bottom Bunk”: Masculinity and Class in *Luigi’s Mansion*

By Rebecca Hutchison

The *Mario* franchise is one of the most well-known and recognizable group of video games in the Western world. Beginning with Mario’s first appearance as Jumpman in the 1981 arcade game *Donkey Kong*, he has become the symbol of Nintendo and the hero of many different genres of games based on his adventures. Since Mario’s first solo game, *Mario Bros.*, in 1985, he has also often been accompanied by a sidekick: his younger brother Luigi. Though Luigi started out as a palette swap of Mario, in order to provide an option for a second player, he has since developed a personality of his own. In most Mario role-playing games (RPGs), Luigi is also present and works to add to the comedic relief. Whereas Mario is brave and strong, his brother is usually characterized as less intelligent and incapable of adventuring on his own. Luigi himself admits that he “always preferred the bottom bunk,” classifying himself as the lesser brother (*Luigi’s Mansion*). However, in 2001 with Nintendo’s release of the GameCube, Luigi was finally given his own starring role in *Luigi’s Mansion*.

The release of *Luigi’s Mansion* was the first time a major Nintendo console had been launched without a simultaneous introduction of a Mario-centered game. The game itself, though directed at children, contains survival horror and gothic themes and features Luigi as the protagonist. This combination alone makes the game a divergence from more classic *Mario* titles. Additionally, though the game was aimed at a younger audience—reviewers say that “[e]ven casual game players should complete [Luigi’s Mansion] within a few hours”—it also involved a much more detailed and realistic look at a *Mario* enemy that had not been explored in much detail previously: the Boos (Howson). Throughout the *Mario* franchise, the Boos have been depicted as nondescript, spherical creatures, only vaguely resembling the traditional idea of a
ghost. These enemies, once childish or cute in appearance, are now human-looking in *Luigi’s Mansion* and are often seen acting with everyday human behaviors. This closer look at the Boos, combined with the unconventional protagonist and theme of *Luigi’s Mansion*, illustrates a deeper, underlining social criticism on traditional masculinity and the aristocracy in the game not seen in its precursors.

The Boos play a key role in the game’s critique. At the start of *Luigi’s Mansion*, Luigi wins a mansion in a contest he has not actually entered and calls Mario to come with him to explore it. By the time Luigi reaches the mansion within the game’s introductory cut scene, Mario is noticeably absent, and Luigi soon finds out that he went into the mansion without him. Though the mansion appears very spooky, Luigi quickly decides to enter in order to find his brother. Inside, Luigi is attacked by ghosts and saved by Professor E. Gadd, who tells Luigi that the Boos created the mansion and sent Luigi the letter to lure Mario there, seeking revenge for his actions in previous games. Luigi takes it upon himself to save his brother from the inhabitants of the mansion. In addition to the classic Boos, the game features the added difficulty of new types of Boos with different powers, some based in the elements of fire and water. Most dangerous of all are the portrait ghosts. They have been released from their portraits that contained them and are now causing havoc throughout the house. Luigi must solve a series of increasingly difficult puzzles in order to get the portrait ghosts to reveal their heart and thereby their weakness to his weapon: the Poltergust. At the end of the game, Luigi discovers that King Boo is behind Mario’s capture and fights him as he controls the puppet-like body of a previously defeated enemy named Bowser. Bowser, a large fire breathing turtle called King of the smaller turtles known as Koopas, is the archenemy of Mario in other games in the franchise and makes a return in *Luigi’s Mansion* as a tool of King Boo.

In addition to producing an adventure game without the titular character, Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto manages to create a truly unique American Gothic experience for young gamers with *Luigi’s Mansion*. The game contains many gothic features, from the setting and supernatural antagonists, to the means by which Luigi is represented as a hero and Mario is punished. Placing an already well-established world of characters into a new genre of game, the creators use classic features to demonstrate new messages and critiques. The Gothic, for instance, often challenges contemporary definitions of masculinity (Anthony 113). By facing his fears and coming to terms with his own identity, Luigi represents a softer, less physical masculinity that is
usually absent from other varieties of literature and art in the modern time period. However, the
gothic video game supports Luigi as a viable, masculine protagonist and even hero. *Luigi’s Mansion* elevates Luigi, usually merely the second player, to the role of hero, offering an alternate option of masculinity for the younger siblings who have played as him in past *Mario* games.

Additionally, the fact that Luigis’s quest takes place in an unearned place of prosperity suggests a negative opinion of the undeservingly wealthy and powerful, a criticism common to gothic literature (Anthony 115). Mario’s treatment of the other inhabitants of the Mushroom Kingdom during his past games in the franchise is chastised and rejected. Mario is representative of a negative view of imperialism, and Luigi is punished for Mario’s exploits and greed at the expense of others. In its horror-themed game for children, Nintendo incorporates American Gothic tropes in order to make progressive and inclusive commentary on the theme of masculinity while belittling and denying the inherent power of the aristocracy.

"Now That's Just Not My Style": Luigi’s Role as the Masculine Hero

The gothic genre creates distinctive opportunities for heroes to act outside the usual considerations of masculinity. The gothic protagonist faces unique—often supernatural—enemies in situations of terror. In contrast to dangerous enemies who inflict physical instead of psychological harm, the gothic incorporates a different kind of fear. Whereas the threat to the physical being relies on horror, a threat to the psyche is more closely related to terror. To successfully conquer this alternative type of threat, the gothic oftentimes needs a new type of hero. While Mario exists in an adventure story, Luigi is the hero of the American Gothic; the differences between these genres parallel the diverse masculinities represented by each brother.

The gothic setting first emasculates Luigi and then broadens the definition of what a “manly” hero really is. Unlike Mario, who is directly and physically masculine, Luigi is more timid and relies more often on humor as his defining feature. However, although he is not traditionally manly, he also denies the feminine. Throughout the game, if the player observes anything pink or flowery, Luigi vehemently insists it is “just not [his] style” (*Luigi’s Mansion*). This leaves Luigi with a kind of in between masculinity that he works hard to define. Though at the start of the game Luigi is only the younger brother struggling to work independently for the first time, his adventure in the mansion acts as a maturing process and, in the end, he creates his own brand of masculinity.
The protagonist of an American Gothic story is often confined to a mansion or estate, plagued by the supernatural. She is also usually female. In *Luigi’s Mansion*, however, this role is taken over by Luigi. By placing Luigi in this helpless role, he is emasculated, as he has often been in past *Mario* games. From the beginning of the franchise, Luigi is not seen as a masculine figure, especially in contrast to Mario, who is a manifestation of strength. A review in *The Guardian* shortly after the game’s release suggested that Luigi “is one sibling still destined to live in his brother’s shadow” (Howson). This is not the isolated opinion of a single game reviewer, either: Jeff Ryan, in his book *Super Mario: How Nintendo Conquered America*, discusses *Luigi’s Mansion* only briefly and concludes that “the Luigi game was a bad omen that the GameCube wasn’t as comparatively worthy as previous Nintendo Consoles” because the game did not predominantly feature Mario (202). Even Luigi’s own name suggests his derivative identity: it is a pun on the Japanese word “ruiji” meaning “similar” (Ryan 48). Luigi has no strength without his brother, according to the *Mario* community.

In comparison with Mario’s courage and heroic ability, Luigi has often been characterized as weak. In other *Mario* RPGs, Luigi is often portrayed as incapable or bumbling. In *Paper Mario*, the reader discovers Luigi’s diary in his secret room. The diary recounts his feelings while Mario is away on his journey, including his fears, emotions, and wishes. He explains that he saw a ghost in town and pleads, “Come back, Mario! I’m scared!” and later divulges his deepest desire to his diary: “My wish is to sleep in the top bunk bed” (*Paper Mario*). Luigi recognizes that he lives in his brother’s shadow but also acknowledges his dependence on Mario to protect him. In *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door*, Luigi is often accompanied by different sidekicks who relate his embarrassing mishaps. From them, the player learns that during his exploits, Luigi trips and throws his own partner into a volcano, dresses in drag as a bride, crashes an expensive car, and gets cast as the role of grass in a play. These stories compound Luigi’s image as an awkward and clumsy man, and in the end he does not even get the princess he is venturing to save. Even before Mario and Luigi started appearing in RPGs, Luigi knew he was a losing character. In *Mario Kart 64*, he constantly works to validate himself, repeating, “I’m-a Luigi, number one!” during every round. In these roles, Luigi is seen as desperate to be as famous and successful as Mario.

Due to his characterization in past games, Luigi does not have an especially manly background coming into *Luigi’s Mansion*, and this behavior is compounded from the beginning.
The first thing Luigi does upon discovering the ghosts is rely on someone else to save him. Self-reliance is central to American masculinity, and denying Luigi this trait therefore suggests he is not a real man (Rotundo 3). Luigi’s inability to act on his own, even when he finally is given his own game to star in, emasculates him in comparison with his older brother, who has often faced dangerous enemies in foreign lands all by himself. Furthermore, the game is directed toward younger children and is relatively simple in gameplay, yet Luigi—and therefore the player—still needs the assistance of the Professor in order to be successful. Luigi is not as capable of a hero as Mario, and his game relies on more simplistic controls and plotline, making it more suitable for a younger generation of players. The unsophisticated nature of the game suggests that while Mario’s masculinity is well established, Luigi’s is still in progress. His heroism therefore begins with simpler tasks—and a younger generation of players.

This shift in focus from Mario’s established physical masculinity to Luigi’s developing maturity coincides also with the popular culture of the time. Before 2001 and the release of Luigi’s Mansion, the 1990s had started a trend of child protagonists in heroic roles that allowed the audience to witness their burgeoning maturity. The most notable of these, perhaps, is Star Wars: The Phantom Menace, released in 1999. Though a long-anticipated addition to one of the most popular movie franchises of all time, adult audiences “felt it was far more of a children’s film” (Trice 177). Younger viewers, however, were very attracted to the film, perhaps because “for the first time, a child was a central character in the film” (Trice 177). Though Anakin, the child protagonist, does not end up being a character the children would want to emulate, the fact that children were becoming accepted as the stars of action and adventure films was significant. In the same manner that Anakin’s childhood innocence and strength are seen alongside the more masculine and classic character of Obi Wan Kenobi, the physical nature of Mario’s heroism is replaced in Luigi’s Mansion with Luigi. Luigi has traditionally been a symbolic representation of younger generations and, as he takes the main stage, he empowers that generation of adolescents. It is not only Luigi wandering through the mansion, gaining focus and strength on every floor; it is a whole era of young gamers maturing with him. During a time when pop culture was making heroic nature more available to younger children, Luigi became the personification of a younger brother defining himself as a masculine protagonist.

Throughout the game, the gothic setting allows Luigi to discover himself as a different type of masculine figure. According to Anna Jackson, in children’s gothic literature, ghosts are
often seen as uncanny creatures, and there is an “alignment of canniness with maturity, with
growing up” (163). Luigi’s experiences in the mansion therefore aid his maturity. By being
surrounded by the ghosts, Luigi is “compel[ed] . . . to reconsider issues of identity—to grow up”
(Jackson 160). Working his way through the mansion, facing his fears, Luigi declares his maturity
as a man. More importantly, the player experiences this growth with him. This development has
particular relevance to the younger siblings. As the second-player character, younger siblings
have been stuck playing as Luigi since Super Mario Bros. was first released on the Nintendo
Entertainment System. Now, however, Luigi’s Mansion makes Luigi not only the first player, but
the only playable character in the game. Just as Luigi is given his opportunity to prove himself, so
is the younger sibling, symbolically. The gothic, then, is an opportunity for growth in children’s
texts, and in Luigi’s Mansion it allows for younger brothers and sisters to feel growth and maturity
alongside Luigi.

Eventually, then, Luigi becomes a model of a hero, quite unlike his brother. His final
characterization as a protagonist is influenced heavily by being a part of the American gothic
genre. Rather than face the physical enemies Mario usually does, Luigi’s enemies are ghosts, or
more psychologically horrific opponents. As a result, Luigi’s assets are often more intellectual or
emotional. Traditionally, Mario has never been able to harm the Boos. His only defense against
them has been to face them directly because they only attack when his back is turned. This is not
true for Luigi, who must encounter them head on and discover his own methods for fighting
them. For instance, he uses technology—a vacuum cleaner that captures Boos—in order to
defeat them, rather than his own strength. Though Luigi’s role in the gothic may seem feminine
since he occupies a role usually reserved for women, he uses this opportunity to assert a different
type of masculinity. Relying on his own intelligence, Luigi tricks each of the portrait ghosts into
revealing their weakness, specifically their heart, in order for him to capture them. Luigi relies on
a different skillset than Mario, but he able to accomplish heroic actions just the same, thereby
creating an acceptance of alternate but equally viable masculinities.

In addition to affirming a masculinity that does not rely on physical strength, Luigi also
represents a hero who grows psychologically. Mario, who continuously spends each game trying
to save the same princess from the same villain, embarks on a new journey in every game. Mario,
by this definition is a classic hero, a knight figure. Ryan describes the Mario franchise, in its
disjointed nature, to being similar to the “various unrelated legends” and “core character” of the
King Arthur mythos (67). Luigi’s masculine nature, however, hangs in opposition to Mario’s as an achievement via emotional means. Fred Pfeil, in *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*, explains that in remakes of classic stories, the protagonists are often “steeld into heroic mold . . . even as they are schooled in a softening compassion all the while” (51). Take *Luigi’s Mansion* as a reimagining of the classic *Mario* games, and the same observation may be made. Rather than journeys and acts of knightly magnitude, Luigi instead develops psychologically. Within the gothic construct, where masculine ideals are more fluid, Luigi expresses a need for men to be masculine in emotion as well as in physical ability. As a message to children, this demonstrates that all types of masculinity are equally important. At the end of *Luigi’s Mansion*, the most important outcome is that Luigi, and in conjunction the player, recognizes himself as a credible hero with a valid form of masculinity. Though Luigi may not have been what the audience expected for a *Mario* protagonist, he is able to overcome the gothic supernatural and thus mature, implying that Mario’s brute force is not the only trait a hero can have.

“*That House Appeared Here Just a Few Days Ago*”: A Condemnation of Aristocracy

Defining features of the European Gothic, such as the corruption of the aristocracy, are typically absent in American Gothic literature because of the absence of an aristocracy in American society. However, *Luigi’s Mansion* as an adapted gothic form is able to incorporate this common theme. The game works as a straightforward translation of gothic tropes from European to American settings. The mansion takes the place of the castle and the brothers replace the aristocracy. The placement of the game within the haunted mansion and Mario’s punishment by the supernatural inhabitants within both work to condemn him as a member of the undeservingly wealthy and to promote Luigi’s reliance on a more American ideal of self-made prosperity.

The Gothic traditionally displays anxieties toward aristocracy by using the supernatural to punish or demean its members, and American Gothic is especially disapproving of illegitimate wealth. This trend has been especially prominent in the American Gothic since the rise of credit and a lost reliance of the gold standard due to a society of the rich who have “unprecedentedly unstable and volatile forms of personality” (Anthony 112). Reflective of the mythical formation of America as a nation, citizens are expected to gain power and privilege through their own hard work, and people who have it handed to them are not seen as heroes, especially in the gothic.
Mario, for instance, is obsessed with obtaining Princess Peach rather than working as a respectful laborer. This fixation on saving the princess—a symbol of the aristocracy—is illustrated through his willingness to fight his way through eight increasingly difficult worlds in *Super Mario Bros.* just to be told each time, “Thank you, Mario. But our Princess is in another castle” (Sherman 4). Just as classic figures such as Ichabod Crane in Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” are punished for pursuing women in order to undeservingly obtain her family’s wealth and status, so, too, is Mario (Anthony 113). Choosing Luigi as the hero of a gothic text both uplifts the common man and simultaneously condemns Mario’s obsession with wealth through his absence and incarceration throughout the game. Luigi, on the other hand, only wishes to save his brother. In all the *Super Mario Bros.* games, Luigi is the second player, only leaving the bounds of his normal job to help his brother. If Mario is characteristic of the illegitimately wealthy aristocracy, Luigi is his antithesis. As the second player, he represents the “shadow figure or the negative” of Mario’s hero (Sherman 3). In *Luigi’s Mansion*, Luigi works to counteract his brother’s attitudes toward affluence and—fittingly enough—risks his own life to save help him. By punishing Mario alone, the game condemns the aristocracy through the gothic mode.

The very setting of the text also acknowledges the condemnation of the unworthily wealthy. After all, the mansion is false. King Boo creates the haunted mansion as a representation of the money Mario desires so strongly, and it is ultimately becomes a confinement for Mario. The method of winning the mansion in a contest also asserts the way Mario is eager to arrive to claim possession over something he put no effort into obtaining. *Luigi’s Mansion* thus teaches the value of working hard through metaphor. As Luigi proceeds through each room, he has the option of spending time checking the furniture and decorations for money. The more work he puts into his tasks, the more compensation he receives. Eventually, he is able to use his gainings to build himself a real mansion after winning the game. The game therefore symbolizes the promise of the American Dream: that if someone works hard enough, anything is possible for him.

Luigi’s adventure through the haunted mansion not only redeems Mario’s yearning for the aristocracy but also his misuse of his power over those he views as lesser. As explained by Alan Lloyd-Smith in his introduction to *American Gothic Fiction*, imperialism is condemned by the gothic as it addresses “suppressions of past traumas and guilt, anxieties concerning class and gender, fear of revolution, . . . and an increasing suspicion that empire and colonial experience
might bring home an unwanted legacy” (6-7). The gothic plays an active role in identifying the outrages of the ancestry, and for the American Gothic these often concern racial violence. Rather than shy away from the atrocities of America’s actions “concerning both slavery and the Native Americans,” the American gothic “is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied” and it works to punish someone for that past (Lloyd-Smith 4, 1). In the case of Mario, the gothic punishes him for his imperialistic invasion of the Mushroom Kingdom and its people.

When questioned as to why he is holding Mario captive, King Boo says he “remember[s] how much trouble [Mario has] caused [him] in the past” (Luigi’s Mansion). Just as Mario has exerted dominance over the video game franchise, he has also conquered all the other species—or races—in the Mushroom Kingdom. His selfishness and disregard of anyone less important than the very princess of the kingdom is obvious even from the booklet description of the original Super Mario Bros.: “The quiet peace-loving mushroom people were turned into mere stones, bricks and even field horse-hair plants, and the mushroom kingdom fell into ruin” (Sherman 3). In reality, all the objects Mario destroys to gain points used to be innocent citizens. In Luigi’s Mansion, those Mario persecuted punish him, and Luigi must take on the burden of his familial wrongdoings. Luigi’s Mansion includes an added level of realism to Mario’s tyrannical actions; while the Boos have always been characterized as vaguely ghostlike and spherical, the mansion includes twenty-three spirits that look like men, women, babies, and even dogs. The fact that Mario has been killing other people throughout the franchise becomes undeniable. Interestingly, in Luigi’s Mansion, King Boo possesses the body of Bowser in the final battle, whom Mario had earlier killed. Not only is Luigi working to counteract Mario’s past treatment of the other races of the Mushroom Kingdom, but he is literally fighting the ghost of Mario’s past exploits in this scene. Mario has exerted his power over the other species in his world for his own selfish gain, similar to the American history of Native American exploitation and African American slavery. The haunted mansion shows the dangerous effects of Mario’s deeds, and Luigi must work to redeem him.

These past crimes are often paid for in the gothic by holding the responsible party accountable for the same sins they committed against others. Taking this literary trend into account, the mansion is an appropriate setting for the American gothic because it is confining and enfeebling, mirroring the conditions early Americans exacted on the Native Americans and later on slaves, which is a crime deserving punishment. Mario is kidnapped and held in captivity,
echoing the way he abducts the father of a young boy and tries to kill the son when he attempts to save the prisoner in *Donkey Kong, Jr*. This early game in the *Mario* franchise stars Donkey Kong’s son and takes place shortly after the events of the original *Donkey Kong*. The son ventures to save his father from Mario’s clutches while Mario takes on the role of villain and tries to prevent Donkey Kong Jr. from advancing. Additionally, that one of the races Mario persecutes as lesser or “other” is a species of primates offers extra commentary on America’s participation in slave trade through a racist portrayal of African Americans. In order to excuse slavery, Americans often described African slaves as less than human. Referring to blacks as monkeys is still a derogatory term and the inclusion of primates as an enemy draws parallels between Mario’s sins and that of early Americans. Mario has many atrocities to pay for and Luigi—as his only heir—uses his own approved hard work and dedication to overcome his older brother’s misdeeds. Luigi conquers the American Gothic space, is able to protect his brother from his crimes against others, and is rewarded.

Conclusion

Through the fame of the *Super Mario Bros.* games, Luigi has gained increasing notoriety since 1985 as the epitome of the “player two.” Through the American Gothic, however, the sidekick is able to achieve independent prominence from the protagonist and even, in this case, save him. Because *Luigi’s Mansion* relies on the supernatural as the enemy rather than a force that can be dealt with physically, Luigi as a protagonist has to be intellectual rather than strong. Therefore, though Luigi is often feminized through the *Mario* franchise, and even at the beginning of *Luigi’s Mansion*, by the end he had become mature and comfortable in his masculinity, and his is the only way to save his brother from peril. Specifically, in the case of the Boos, Luigi can succeed where Mario was unable because of the type of entity they are up against and the type of masculinity they emblematize.

Luigi also becomes a hero in the gothic whereas Mario cannot because of Mario’s predilection for unearned wealth. Though both brothers are plumbers by trade, Mario strives to achieve greatness in the form of prosperity while Luigi only tries to do his best to help his brother. It is important that Luigi places family above all else whereas Mario prioritizes wealth and the princess because that is what makes Luigi strong enough to face the haunted mansion, make his way to King Boo, and rescue his elder brother. Because of Mario’s obsession with
wealth, Luigi must be the one who puts his own life in danger to brave the mansion and correct his family’s wrongs. Thus, the gothic genre when applied to a Mario game creates an interwoven dialogue between what it means to be a masculine hero and what makes a person a villain. Luigi’s Mansion as an American Gothic text elevates a younger generation to a heroic position and enforces the acceptance of alternate masculinities while simultaneously condemning a growing obsession with greed at the expense of others.
Works Cited


