Mario's Meta-Cap

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Mario’s Meta-Cap

A Critical Analysis of Selections from the Mario Videogame Franchise

By Daniel Trock
Abstract

The purpose of this project, *Mario's Meta-Cap*, is to take a critical look at the various genres Mario has had a hand in as well as to analyze the characters, themes, and impacts of the franchise. This project will feature a series of reviews on various Mario games in chronological order, with captioned screenshots and Fun Facts about the franchise included throughout. Brief analytical pieces on characters and themes will also be featured. The intent of these reviews is to critique the games in a vacuum to see how well they hold up to modern standards as well as to analyze the rippling impacts they had on the franchise and the industry at large over the years. This project, if sold as a book, would be an asset to those interested in gaming history as well as game design conventions, specifically good and bad ones. It is also intended to be a fun reminiscence for both the readers and the writers of a long lineage of games that has touched many lives.
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Introduction: World 1-1

The very earliest memory that has steadfastly remained in my head appears to me thusly: I’m very small, barely up to my parents’ waists. In a room I don’t quite recognize, possibly a hotel room, I see a CRT TV with a gray box sitting underneath. On the screen, I see a moving image of a small man dressed in red jumping around on a grassy plain, his antics accompanied by upbeat steel drum music. I’m not controlling this image, merely watching, but I am utterly enraptured.

I still don’t know where that room was, but I do know now that that image was actually someone playing *Super Mario Bros.*, specifically the version included in *Super Mario All-Stars* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System.

I’m not much for belief in fate, but I do have to wonder if this first exposure was a sign of some sort. Since my childhood, I have dedicated myself to the art of videogames, owning multiple systems and spending my weekends cross-legged on the ground in front of them, all manner of controllers grasped in my growing hands. Whenever I had friends over, the first
activity was videogames; everything else was secondary (which may be the explanation for my complete lack of a social life, but that’s another story).

Throughout this decades-long journey, one man has always been by my side. Sometimes he is in the foreground; sometimes he is in the background. Sometimes I love him; sometimes I hate him. His is a face that all can recognize, even those who have never touched a controller in their lives. His name is Mario, Mario Mario to his friends, Super Mario to his enemies.

Mario has either starred or appeared in more games than I care to take an accurate tally of. He’s the guy your grandma thinks is in every videogame if it isn’t clearly Pac-Man. Slap a red or green hat on a guy, and people will say, “Hey, he’s Mario/Luigi!” No, really, I went to a convention once, and there was a guy wearing just a Luigi hat along with his casual outfit in a cosplay competition, and he got waaaaay further than he should’ve. But the takeaway here is that the Mario image might just be one of the most recognizable and iconic brands in marketing history. When Nintendo needed a mascot to launch their company to the stardom that they maintain today, they didn’t use any anthropomorphic animals or buff dudes. Just one stocky Italian plumber was all they needed.

A wise man once said, “A plumber is the most multi-talented man in the world and can accomplish anything he sets his mind to.” Okay, that’s a lie. Nobody ever said that, though I have come to believe the statement from my affinity for and years engaging with Mario. After all, he’s more than just a plumber. He’s an adventurer, an archeologist, a doctor, a race car driver, an athlete, a custodian, a cereal mascot, and a piece of paper! With the exception of maybe Mickey Mouse, no other mascot character has occupied as many professions and genres as Mario.
I’ve always been drawn to Mario’s numerous ventures, not just the platformers, but the role-playing games, the party games, the sports games, the racing games, and the list goes on. In today’s world of backward compatibility, it’s easier than ever for new players to indulge in legacy software, and the whole Mario universe, formerly lost to the digital sea, is gradually resurfacing.

As a long-time gamer and fan of Mario, I consider it a moral obligation to explore these games to the best of my ability, to give the world a glimpse into years gone by at the many experiences that shaped the Mario we know and the many hats he wore along the way. It’s gonna be a weird journey, and by the end of it, we may uncover something we wish we hadn’t. But if it’s for my main man Mario, my oldest friend, I think it’s a journey worth undertaking.
Amusingly enough, the very first game in which Mario appeared didn’t even have “Mario” in the title: the 1981 arcade classic, *Donkey Kong*. In fact, when the game first came out, “Mario” wasn’t even the player character’s name; the little Italian was known simply as “Jumpman.” The name was changed to Mario in the home ports after the landlord for Nintendo of America, Mario Segale, interrupted a meeting to demand rent, and the character’s name was changed as a joke. For this review, I’m gonna keep calling him Jumpman, because it sounds funny.

Donkey Kong\(^1\) is a big, oddly pigmented gorilla from a local zoo. One day, being a cranky sort, he breaks out of his pen and kidnaps an innocent lady (named Pauline in the home version), dragging her to a nearby construction site to take refuge. Jumpman, a carpenter, spots the beast and takes it upon himself to rescue the poor damsel, armed with only his boots and his trusty hammer.

\(^{1}\) Fun Fact: The Donkey Kong we see starring in his own series these days is actually *this* Donkey Kong’s grandson. This one goes by Cranky Kong now.
Why would there be this many barrels at a construction site, anyway?

Donkey Kong stands at the top of the screen, hurling objects at Jumpman to impede his progress. You can’t stop the things Donkey Kong throws; you can only jump over them, with each safe jump netting you some points. The objects vary based on the stage but usually boil down to rolling wooden barrels and oil barrels that can create fire enemies that track you. Touching anything besides the floor and ladders will instantly kill Jumpman and start him back at the bottom of the screen. Later stages mix things up with elements like elevators, retractable ladders, conveyor belts, and pegs that need to be pulled out of the ground. There are hammers Jumpman can pick up to swat away enemies and barrels, but grabbing a hammer is a bit of a Catch 22: you can destroy any obstacle that comes toward you, but as long as you’re swinging the hammer, you can’t jump or climb ladders, so you can’t actually progress until the hammer expires. The only real reason to pick up a hammer is for some extra points.

I’ll believe the parasol and the purse, but why was the lady carrying a full box of tissues?

Speaking of which, points are what the game’s all about. You only get three lives to start, but you do receive a 1UP with every 10,000 points. Jumping over obstacles,
swatting them away with the hammer, picking up the lady’s miscellaneous lost objects, and of course, clearing a screen all net you points. There’s also a timer in the top right corner that rewards you with a bonus for completing a screen quickly, though if it ticks all the way down, you’ll lose a life. There’s no beating this game; it’s high score or bust.

The construction site is composed of four stages, each named after how high up they are (25M, 50M, etc.). Clearing four stages clears a level, and then the stages cycle with increased difficulty, introducing elements like faster barrels and enemies and direct attacks by Donkey Kong; he’ll normally just roll barrels or throw springs in a straight line, but when the mood strikes him, he’ll lob a barrel right at Jumpman’s current position. This means that, in the later stages, you’ll need to monitor Donkey Kong himself in addition to everything around Jumpman. The game is technically supposed to last as long as the player can, but it ends unofficially at level 22 (stage 117) when the game killscreens.

I guess this is before designers started putting joke names on the high score list.

The construction site is composed of four stages, each named after how high up they are (25M, 50M, etc.). Clearing four stages clears a level, and then the stages cycle with increased difficulty, introducing elements like faster barrels and enemies and direct attacks by Donkey Kong; he’ll normally just roll barrels or throw springs in a straight line, but when the mood strikes him, he’ll lob a barrel right at Jumpman’s current position. This means that, in the later stages, you’ll need to monitor Donkey Kong himself in addition to everything around Jumpman. The game is technically supposed to last as long as the player can, but it ends unofficially at level 22 (stage 117) when the game killscreens.

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2 Fun Fact: A “killscreen” is a phenomenon present in older coin-op arcade games. In simplest terms, when the level counter gets high enough, the game’s processor becomes unable to handle the integer overflow, which can either cause massive glitches or just Game Over the game altogether. To killscreen a game is considered a sizable achievement in arcade gaming circles.
He ain’t too sturdy if he can’t take a barrel to the chest.

This game is mean, and it knows it. Many times, I’m lucky to even get to 50M. You wouldn’t think jumping over barrels would be that difficult, but the kicker in 25M is that barrels will randomly roll down ladders instead of down the slope. Choosing to climb a ladder in the midst of a barrel assault is a dangerous gamble, one for which I was frequently rewarded with a nasty bump on the head. The fire enemies are also a constantly looming threat; even more on the later levels, since they always drift toward your general position, and even try to trick you. Frequently, they’ll stand above a ladder you need to climb and start slowly drifting away, only to suddenly turn back when you start climbing.

Was this construction site built on a cemetery? ‘Cause that’s the only explanation I can come up with for these fire ghosts.

Still, I can’t be mad at a game like this for its difficulty, mainly because it was one of the pioneers of what I like to call “good difficulty.” When a game uses bad difficulty, it’s less difficult and more obtuse, just throwing you to the lions without explaining or otherwise indicating how anything works, something that’s become more of a
problem as games get more intricate. Good difficulty is when you understand a game’s elements well enough that any failure in the game is completely your own fault. And that’s a good thing! When it’s my fault that I die, it makes me want to try harder, to develop my own reflexes and prediction abilities.

*Some first date, huh?*

And that’s *Donkey Kong* in essence. It’s a quarter-muncher, sure, and I do prefer games that actually end without the processor catching fire, but it’s a game of learning, of trial and error. Every quarter teaches you a little more about that ugly gorilla and how he fights. Persistence is a virtue, if I may be overly analytical.
**Mario Bros., 1983, Arcade**

And so Mario has been properly christened, and he even gained a brother to boot! *Mario Bros.* was the first appearance of Mario’s lovable brother, Luigi, in all his green glory, though this was back before Luigi was made taller than his brother for the sake of being distinctive. They were really more like the Mario Twins than the Mario Bros. Actually, if you believe *Super Mario Bros. The Movie*, apparently the reason they are called the “Mario Bros.” is that their last name is also Mario. Mario Mario and Luigi Mario. Someone actually got paid to come up with that, which is mildly unbelievable, but apparently, it made Shigeru Miyamoto laugh, so who am I to judge? Anywho.

*Mario was going through his inverted colors phase.*

Any story we have comes strictly from promotional material, but regardless, here’s what we know: Mario and Luigi are a couple of plumbers living in New York City. Apparently, their plumbing skills are the stuff of legends because, when the sewers are overrun by turtles, crabs, and weird flying things, they’re the first ones called on to deal with the problem. Obviously, being a plumber does not make one privy to many combat skills, but the brothers do know a lot about the sewer systems, utilizing them to fight back against the invasion.
They really ought to file a complaint about these crazy pipes.

Mario (and Luigi if you have a second player) starts at the bottom of the screen, while enemies are gradually cranked out of the pipes at the top. In each “phase,” a set number of baddies pop out of the pipe, and when all of them are dealt with, the phase is cleared. Sadly, the brothers have not developed their signature stomping ability yet, but they can do something close: by jumping up and punching the floating platforms, they can create a small bump in the surface above. If an enemy is walking the spot when it’s punched, they’ll get flipped over and become vulnerable for a few seconds. To actually dispatch an enemy, they need to be stunned, and then kicked away on their platform, which earns some points. There are three major types of enemies: Shellcreepers, which can be stunned and kicked normally, Sidesteppers, which need to be bumped twice before they actually become vulnerable, and Fighter Flies, which bounce around and can only be stunned if they’re bumped while on the floor. When these enemies are first introduced, you’ll usually get a phase with just them to get you used to their pattern. Afterward, though, the game will get right to mixing them up on you, and it doesn’t particularly care if you find that disorienting.

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3 Fun Fact: Shellcreepers would go on to become the Mario series’ iconic Koopa Troopas.
4 Fun Fact: Fighter Flies wouldn’t appear in a Mario game again until Mario and Luigi: Superstar Saga in 2003.
Yeah, I get mad when my downstairs neighbors shake things up, too.

Besides their heads, the brothers have a single weapon at their disposal: the POW Block, a glowing box hovering near the bottom floor that, when struck, instantly flips every enemy touching the floor. It can only be used three times, but it’ll regenerate after a few phases. As the game goes on, obstacles begin appearing to make your life more difficult. These include flying fireballs, falling icicles, and Freezies, which skid onto platforms and freeze them over, making them slippery. Every few phases, you’ll get to play a bonus round wherein you grab floating coins before a timer runs out, gaining a hefty score bonus if you manage to grab them all.

Who keeps flushing these coins down the toilet?

Speaking of slippery surfaces, “slippery” is a pretty good word to describe how this game controls. The brothers gradually pick up momentum when they start running and skid a few feet when they stop. This can make navigating platforms a little tricky since you’ll frequently find yourself either stopping short of where you need to jump up or inadvertently sliding merrily over the edge. Unlike the games to come, you have little to no control over your brother when he’s in the air. If you accidentally
jump straight up (which, unless you’re trying to bump an enemy, usually accomplishes nothing), you need to wait an agonizing second to try again. To maximize your speed in completing phases, you need to learn to put English on your jumps, starting to move slightly and then jumping up so you go at an angle. While it’s perfectly manageable in the early phases, as things start to get more hectic, it’s very easy to bumble right into an enemy or trap. It’s difficult, but unlike Donkey Kong, it’s only really difficult because the controls are so wonky, and that doesn’t sit too well with me.

As I mentioned before, early arcade games didn’t have actual endpoints, because only the most badass nerds could last more than a few screens. Much like Donkey Kong, Mario Bros. has no ending, but the game does killscreen during phase 98, when the life counter glitches out and the game automatically Game Overs.
There’s no way these high scores are real.

Unfortunately, I can’t say I have a lot of love for *Mario Bros*. It’s fun to play with a friend, but in the same way that watching a bad movie is more fun with a friend; it’s a rather unpleasant experience made more bearable by pleasant company. On one’s own, it’s just slippery and frustrating. If I wanted slippery and frustrating, I’d go to a skating rink.
The year is 1985. The videogame industry has finally begun rising from the ashes of the gaming crash of ’83. At the head of the pack is Nintendo, with their secret weapon, the Family Computer (or “Famicom” for short), and its American counterpart, the Nintendo Entertainment System (or “NES” for short). With the notable arcade success of *Donkey Kong* and *Mario Bros.*, Nintendo decided it was time for a tactical strike, bundling the release versions of the NES with a free copy of their brainchild: *Super Mario Bros.*

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5 Fun Fact: The “Crash of ’83” was a massive crash of the gaming industry in 1983. Due to oversaturation of the market and no reliable means of knowing which games were good and bad, consumers became fed up and stopped buying games and consoles almost entirely.
The little squishy faces the Goombas make when you stomp them always make me giggle.

In the magical land of the Mushroom Kingdom, Princess Toadstool rules with a kind and benevolent hand over her subjects, the Toads. One day, however, the kingdom is attacked by King Bowser Koopa and his army of Koopa Troopas. With a magical spell, Bowser transforms the residents of the Mushroom Kingdom into inanimate objects and kidnaps Princess Toadstool, all with the ultimate goal of conquering the kingdom. Mario and Luigi, ever the busybodies, set out to free the people from their curse and save the princess from Bowser’s clutches.

Did Bowser hide these down here, or did I just accidentally rob a bank vault?

Unlike the screen-based structure of the arcade games, *Super Mario Bros.* switches to the series’ more recognizable level-based format. The game takes place over eight worlds, with four levels contained in each. The first three levels of each world have all sorts of themes, including plains, underground caverns, mountains, and the infamous underwater levels, but the fourth level will always be one of Bowser’s castles, where the big man lies in wait at the end. While scoring is once again a factor for bragging rights, this is a game that can be
beaten, though it can only be beaten in one sitting, since this was before saving systems were common in games.  

Someone call the prop department. Bowser got his head stuck in the floating platform again.

Mario’s first and foremost weapon is his feet. Most common enemies can be defeated by stomping on them from above, and enemies with shells like the Koopa Troopas can be rendered prone with a stomp and kicked from the side to knock out other enemies in a line. However, touching an enemy from any other position, be it the bottom or the side of a non-prone enemy, will cost Mario a life. This creates an almost sniper-esque gameplay, wherein you need to carefully time and aim your jumps to land Mario right on that sweet spot. It can be hectic and tough, but it’s also a lot of fast-paced fun. It helps that the slipperiness problem from *Mario Bros.* has been thoroughly corrected; Mario can stop on a dime when running and quickly change directions, and you can even control his movement somewhat in the air. Not only does that eliminate the need to commit to all of your jumps, it also allows for ludicrously precise platforming, assuming you’ve got the fingers for it.

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6 Fun Fact: This was one of the first games to have horizontal scrolling levels. It took homebrew game developers ages to figure out how to ape Nintendo’s technology, though one of the first was John Romero, whom you might know as the creator of the first-person shooter *DOOM*, when he created his shareware series, *Commander Keen*. 
So are all of the Hammer Bros. biological siblings, or is this like a union thing?

Super Mario Bros. was also the first game in the series to introduce a few of Mario’s signature power-ups. When you start the game, you’re just plain ol’ vulnerable Mario. By punching a box marked with a question mark, you can obtain a Super Mushroom. Pick it up, and become Super Mario, doubling in size and gaining the ability to smash brick blocks from below as well as take one additional hit from an enemy before losing a life. Crack another Question Box, and find a Fire Flower to become Fire Mario. In addition to a sweet white outfit, Mario can chuck fireballs that can defeat enemies from any direction. If you’re really lucky, you might even uncover a Super Star, the acquisition of which will make Mario completely invulnerable for about ten seconds. Well, “completely invulnerable” save for bottomless pits and the level timer running out. Nobody’s perfect. Items are your lifelines, and part of the game’s strategy is knowing when to go for them and when to give them up.
Being sideswiped by a little mushroom monster is very surprising.

This game can be tough; enemy patterns, while remaining consistent in their respective levels, do get trickier as the game goes on. Koopas will drop from unseen holes in the sky, fireballs will fly from the ground, and Lakitus, little guys flying around in clouds, will bombard you with spiked shells. There’s always a method to the madness, though, and with keen eyesight and fast fingers, any challenge can be overcome. It can be disheartening to run out of lives on a late stage, though, and even with secret warp pipes hidden around the game, getting back to where you were can be a slog. I can partially forgive this, however, because later re-releases of the game, such as *Super Mario Bros. Deluxe* on the Gameboy Color, did incorporate a saving system.

My, how courteous.

No matter how difficult it may be, though, nobody can deny that *Super Mario Bros.* is a fantastic game, or at the very least a good one. Its super-precise controls, combined with a colorful palette and some memorable tunes (don’t even act like you don’t know them all by heart), gave rise to a game that has withstood, and I imagine will continue to withstand, the test of time. And hey, it almost
singlehandedly brought gaming back from the edge of a cliff. You gotta dole out some brownie points for that.
You ever look at a guy and think *Yeah, he looks like a nice guy. I’d have a beer with that guy?* That’s what I think when I look at Mario. He seems like a really reliable person, not just in terms of being a princess-rescuing adventurer but just in general. Like, if you shared an apartment building with Mario and your toilet was backed up, he’d fix it for you completely gratis, or at the very least in exchange for a jar of your mom’s homemade marinara. He’s just a good person, and to be honest, it feels like good people are at a premium these days as far as game protagonists go.

I know that’s kind of a silly thing to say; Mario probably only seems like a good person due to lack of character development, though I think that’s only if you look at the surface of the mainline series. Going by his more in-depth incarnations, such as the role-playing games, the cartoons, and, I guess, the movie, there’s a bit more to Mario than what’s immediately apparent. For instance, you wouldn’t guess it from looking at him, but Mario’s a bit of an airhead. He throws himself into danger at the first provocation, and while it’s always in the name of the greater good and usually turns out okay,
there have been several instances when he got bit for it. He’s also easily distracted by tasty food, and he ain’t a picky eater. Spin-off games like *Luigi’s Mansion* and *Super Princess Peach* show that Mario is not an infallible juggernaut who stomps everything in his path; he messes up and gets caught sometimes, and he needs his friends and family to bail him out. Granted, they’ll happily do it because he’s an otherwise great guy and they know he’d do the same for them, but that’s beside the point.

If *Yoshi’s Island* and *Mario and Luigi: Partners in Time* are anything to go by, Mario’s apparently had a knack for getting himself into trouble ever since he was an infant. Come to think of it, there is something rather childlike about Mario.\(^7\) I suppose it makes sense, his being a mascot originally designed to appeal to kids. He’s exuberant, physically active, multi-talented, and he maintains a healthy circle of friends (and also enemies, but no one is perfect). Mario is more or less an ideal adult from a child’s perspective: mature enough to do whatever he wants but youthful enough to keep his joyous outlook on life.

I don’t think it’d be hyperbolic of me to say that Mario has been like an ever-present friend in the lives of many growing up. No matter how bad your day was, he was always waiting for you at home, a smile on his face and a spring in his step. You may roll your eyes at me for saying this, but we should all endeavor to be as good friends to each other as Mario has been to us and will hopefully continue to be for many years to come.

\(^7\) Fun Fact: Guess how old Mario is. You’ll never get it. Give up? According to Shigeru Miyamoto, Mario is only 24 years old! Man, we’re the same age, and he’s already got that luxurious mustache.
In case the inherent nerdiness of this project didn’t tip you off, I’ll admit I watched a lot of cartoons growing up. Most of them were made by Hanna-Barbera, Warner Brothers, and the other usual suspects. There was another company, though, that managed to secure my younger self’s microscopic attention span: DiC Entertainment. No, that’s not pronounced how you think it is. DiC produced a lot of great cartoons like Inspector Gadget, Sonic the Hedgehog, Mummies Alive, and the original English run of Sailor Moon, as well as live-action shows like Superhuman Samurai Syber Squad. However, since I was born in 1993, I missed out on one of their bigger programs: a videogame-themed variety show combining cartoons and live-action segments, The Super Mario Bros. Super Show! The exclamation point is in the title, by the way, that’s not me being overly excited.
The live-action segments star the late actors “Captain” Lou Albano and Danny Wells as Mario and Luigi, respectively, running a plumbing business in Brooklyn. These segments would often have the brothers meeting some famous person like Cyndi Lauper or Magic Johnson or fictional characters like Dr. Frankenstein or Inspector Gadget, followed by a lot of puns and slapstick humor. While the good Captain is no Charles Martinet, I don’t dislike his portrayal of Mario. He’s jolly and good-natured as you’d expect, but he’s also impulsive and short-tempered. Wells as Luigi is surprisingly similar to his modern incarnation, with him being a bit more practical and cowardly than Mario. Still, both of them are always more than happy to do favors for friends and casual acquaintances even if they don’t always pan out properly. That picture of Luigi helping Nicole Eggert up there takes place shortly before she ends up completely covered in raw sewage. Womp-womp.
As one tends to.

The real meat of the show (as well as the majority of the runtime) came in the animated segments, aptly titled “The Super Mario Bros.” Interestingly, these cartoons provided an origin story for how Mario and Luigi ended up in the Mushroom Kingdom. Turns out, it’s not particularly glamorous; the two of them were working on a nasty shower clog in a Brooklyn suburb, and the drain just happened to contain a Warp Zone. I wonder if the owner of the house had a permit for that.

Anyway, the two of them are sucked down and spat out of a pipe in the Kingdom right as Bowser (known as King Koopa in this version) is menacing Princess Toadstool and one of her Toad retainers. The brothers fight him off and escape with Koopa swearing vengeance. Toadstool is in a bit of a pickle; Koopa has been waging a non-stop war against the Kingdom and many of its neighboring territories, and to get rid of him, Toadstool will need some non-descript magical mumbo jumbo. Having become fast friends, the brothers happily volunteer their services to Toadstool as bodyguards.

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8 Fun Fact: These segments would air every week Monday through Thursday. On Friday, however, they were replaced with a cartoon based on The Legend of Zelda. If you’ve ever heard Link’s infamous catchphrase, “Well, excuse me, Princess,” that’s where it came from.
Koopa has a very... theatrical flair, let's call it.

Now, most of what I just said comes from a brief nugget of exposition in the first episode. After that, most of Mario, Luigi, and Toadstool’s personal pursuits go by the wayside in favor of weekly schemes, shenanigans, and pop-culture references. Hoo boy, those pop-culture references. The Mushroom Kingdom is made up of a variety of “lands,” each with a different theme. Robo Land, Aqua Land, Car Land; pretty much any noun you can think of has an associated land. Koopa adapts his plans to these lands, often donning a persona to fit in, and a good chunk of these are references of some sort. Japanese-style city? Koop-Zilla. Transylvania knockoff? Count Koop-ula. A spy-centric city? Koopfinger. It’s about as funny as it sounds. Which is to say, not very. But give ‘em points for creativity, it must’ve taken some kind of effort to think of so many jokey settings and having to actually write an episode around them. Though, perhaps “write” an episode is smidge generous; a lot of the non-action sequences involve a lot of standing in one place and pasta jokes. Good lord, the pasta jokes.
Really, Mario? Are we sticking with that?

If I’m not getting anything out of this, it’s probably because I’m in my mid-20s. Putting myself in the mindset of my younger self, I probably would’ve liked it just fine (though I also liked eating popcorn with my feet when I was a kid, so…). It’s a colorful show with lots of nods to Super Mario Bros. and Super Mario Bros. 2, and while the jokes are groaners, they’re delivered with enough conviction to be entertaining. If I had one thing to wish for, should this show ever magically rise from the grave, it would be more live-action segments. Albano and Wells are great as Mario and Luigi both in person and animated, but I find the two work off each other better when they’re standing next to each other. They really just look like a couple of shlubs from Brooklyn, and being descended from a couple of New Yorkers myself, I find that relatable.

How to do “The Mario”: Step 1, swing your arms from side to side. Step 2, take a step. Step 3, do that forever.

The original Super Show only lasted one season, and the live-action
segments were eventually phased out. However, the cartoon lived on through several more iterations based on *Super Mario Bros. 3* and *Super Mario World*, incorporating the Koopalings and Yoshi as characters. Mario didn’t have an established personality until the N64 games, so this was a fun way to introduce kids to a lovable character and his world. I guess it goes to show that with a little creativity (and a lot of pasta), you can give a face and heart to a character that doesn’t have much of either.
Have you ever seen the movie *The Wizard*? It has Fred Savage in it? Y’know, his little brother has PTSD and can only say “California,” but then Fred discovers he’s really good at Nintendo games, so he takes him to California to compete in a big NES game tournament? No, haven’t seen it? Meh, just as well, it’s not a very good movie. But there was one thing that that movie was pretty memorable for: in the climax of the tournament, the MC announces the players will be playing a brand new, never-before-seen game for the final round. Everyone’s like “What’s the game? What could it be?” The big screen lifts up and... *Super Mario Bros. 3*, unreleased at the time in the US. For every 80s kid in the theater, this was the first they had seen of it, and what an advertising move it was.
Mario plans the roadmap to world conquest.

Deciding to mix things up after his last plan went belly-up, Bowser tables Princess Toadstool’s capture for the moment and shifts his focus elsewhere. On Bowser’s orders, his seven children(?)⁹, the Koopalings,¹⁰ steal magic wands from seven kings across Mushroom Country and transform them into animals, throwing the land into a state of disarray. Eager to get things back under control, Toadstool sends out Mario and Luigi for the usual dose of foot-based problem-solving, and the two leave the Mushroom Kingdom proper to visit strange new lands.

Who knew all you needed to stop cannon fire was a good pair of shoes?

Nintendo went all out revamping this game’s art style. Compared to the mostly solid-colored platforms of *Super Mario Bros.*, *Super Mario Bros. 3* contains multi-colored platforms, multiple floor palettes (brick, wood, sand, etc.), and even drawn backgrounds. As much as I love *Super Mario Bros.*’s endless fields of red bricks, ³ almost looks like a small stage production,

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⁹ Fun Fact: The Koopalings were Bowser’s children back when this game came out but were retconned to merely being his elite troops when they returned in *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*. Bowser’s only confirmed flesh and blood at the moment is Bowser Jr., though it’s anyone’s guess who his mom is.

¹⁰ Fun Fact: The Koopalings are all named after famous musicians (Wendy O. Koopa, Ludwig Von Koopa, Iggy Koopa, etc.). This had to be changed when the Koopalings were introduced in the *Super Mario Bros. 3* cartoon to avoid copyright kerfuffles.
with platforms bolted to the background and logs hanging from the ceiling. Mario even exits stage right at the end of a level. It’s a very imaginative way of presenting the game, and it’s utterly charming.\(^{11}\)

Was this guy’s plan to just sit in this block all day in the vague hope I walk by?

The first thing you’ll notice upon booting the game up is that you now have a map screen that you can move around freely on. For the most part, it’s a linear progression from one level to the next, but there are some cases where the path branches in multiple directions, allowing you to skip certain levels wholesale if the interest strikes you. Though, the game usually incentivizes you to beat them by dotting the path with Mushroom Houses, within which you can get items from friendly Toads. It’s kind of like a choose-your-own-adventure book, albeit with the same ending every time. Warp Zones make a return, this time in the form of special Warp Whistles that you can toot to jump ahead to later Worlds. Every World has a fort guarded by a large Koopa minion at the midway point, and a duel with a Koopaling on one of Bowser’s fancy airships at the end. If you run out of lives somewhere along the way, you thankfully don’t have to start the entire game over, but you do have to do the World over. There’s still no save system, either, so it’s all or nothing.

\(^{11}\) Fun Fact: In 2015, Shigeru Miyamoto actually confirmed in a video on Nintendo UK’s Twitter that all of Super Mario Bros. 3 is, in fact, a stage play! Mario was never actually in any danger!
Something feels... disproportionate here.

Mario still runs and jumps as well as he did in *Super Mario Bros.*, but he’s picked up a few new tricks in the interim. If you touch a Koopa shell or similar item while holding the run button, you can pick it up and carry it with you, chucking it later to attack enemies and uncover secrets. This game also introduced a Power Meter that fills up as you run. When it’s full and flashing, Mario can perform massive, sailing jumps into the air. On its own, it’s a neat, if not entirely practical technique. However, it becomes a secret weapon when paired with one of the game’s new power-ups, the Super Leaf.

You get cards with every cleared level. Get three for a bunch of extra lives!

In addition to the Super Mushroom, Fire Flower, and Super Star, a whole new slew of power-ups was introduced to the series in this game. The Super Leaf gives Mario the Raccoon Tail (and ears), which he can use to smack away enemies and slow his fall. If you tap the jump button with a Raccoon Tail while the Power Meter is flashing, Mario will fly up into the air, sometimes so high that he goes right off the screen! If you can find a long enough straightaway to build the meter, you can easily clear half a level in one jump. Other new offerings include the Frog Suit, allowing for easier movement underwater, the
Hammer Suit, allowing you to throw hammers like the eponymous Hammer Bros., and the Tanooki Suit, a full-body version of the Raccoon Tail, which also allows Mario to transform into an invincible stone statue. Probably the best new element this game introduced is the Item Inventory, a stock of items you’ve obtained from Mushroom Houses, which can be deployed before levels for a pre-emptive power-up. It’s annoying to lose your power-ups to a bad jump, but a relief to get them back before you take another swing.

He doesn’t look all that perturbed to me.

Super Mario Bros. 3 is one of the best examples of a videogame sequel that I can think of. It kept everything that was good about the original Super Mario Bros. (Super Mario Bros. 2 doesn’t count\(^\text{12}\)) and then added more elements that only improved it further. It’s rare for a sequel to be an across-the-board improvement, but I’d say it deserves that rare accomplishment. And hey, who doesn’t like a good Fred Savage movie? Er, well, a… decent Fred Savage movie. An… acceptable Fred Savage movie. Okay, The Wizard sucks, but this game’s great.

\(^{12}\) Fun Fact: The original Super Mario Bros. 2 in Japan was functionally identical to Super Mario Bros. aside from a notable increase in difficulty. Nintendo of America didn’t think it was workable, so they used an Arabian-themed platformer for the Famicom, Yume Kojo: Doki Doki Panic, as a template and slapped Mario characters on it, leading to the US version of Super Mario Bros. 2. The original version was later released as part of Super Mario All-Stars, titled Super Mario Bros.: The Lost Levels.
The “Mario Mentality,” Part 1: Control

I had my head in the fridge the other day, scouting around for the last piece of chicken parmigiana when an odd line of thought crossed my internal monologue: What do I usually feel while playing a Mario game? Is he a projection of my will through a controller or an independent entity being guided? I had to eat dinner first, but then I came to an interesting realization. As far back as the days of the console wars between Nintendo and Sega, both parties found a winning element to make those funny little lights in our heads wink on all at once: inertia.

Not just speed, mind you, but that is a factor. When I say “inertia,” I’m talking speed, vertical movement, dynamic action, and quick thinking. We all feel it when playing platformers, that feeling of wanting to move through a stage as quickly as possible, not just to beat a timer but because that rush of speed gets our adrenaline pumping. Mario did it, Sonic did it, and lots of platformers since those two have done it. We want to keep the pace, make every pixel-perfect jump, stomp every enemy, all to keep the inertia going. That’s why it’s frustrating to die multiple times in a row, because the inertia stops. Though, in the case of certain platformers with an emphasis on being difficult (Super Meat Boy, I Wanna Be The Guy, etc.), that constant string of failures creates a sort of bizarre inertia of its own.

When I’m playing most Mario platformers, be they 2D or 3D, I can feel the synapses in my brain firing off rapidly during more difficult jumping segments. When Mario hangs in the air, my breath slows, time slowing along with it, as he either sticks the landing or plummets miserably into oblivion. I mentioned before that Mario can feel like a projection of your will, and this is especially the case during these slowing moments, where I’m subconsciously chanting in my head “land it, land it” and trying to nudge him to safety through sheer willpower. I am not Mario, but Mario is me if that makes any sense.
I hypothesize that the reason the original *Super Mario Bros.* was as successful as it managed to be was due to a mastery of its inertia. Since the game was the first platformer to have scrolling levels, you never quite knew what was coming next, but you wanted to get there as quickly and gracefully as possible. It appealed to our base instincts, the simple, adrenaline-fueled pleasure of fast movement coupled with a hint of danger and failure. It’s a bit of a crude explanation and doesn’t exactly paint the boys at Nintendo R&D in a positive light, but hey, that’s videogames for you: all the fun of free running without the danger of tripping on your face and sanding your nose off. This could also explain Mario’s constant peppy attitude and raucous whooping; the guy’s constantly hyped up on free-running adrenaline! And we, as players, get a fun little contact buzz from Mario getting high on life.
Uggggghhhhh. Why do I do these things to myself? (Sigh.)

Educational games (or “edutainment” if you prefer) were big in the 90s. I still remember wiling away the hours of my youth on JumpStart and Math Blaster. Those were good times, and they were good because those games understood how to teach you stuff while still being fun or at least fun for a grade schooler. So, it stands to reason that Nintendo would want a piece of the educational pie, and with a mascot like Mario on their side, surely anything they produce would be solid gold. Perhaps, but this ain’t a Mario game. No sir, it’s Luigi’s time to shine.¹³ How unfortunate.

¹³ Fun Fact: This was Luigi’s first time in a solo protagonist role, an opportunity he wouldn’t receive again until Luigi’s Mansion.
Someone didn’t have a plan~

Bowser has set up another castle in the frozen wastes of Antarctica and intends to use a battery of hair dryers to melt the polar ice caps and flood the Earth. I’m not really sure why, I always thought heat and lava were more his style, but I guess he can do whatever he wants. However, hair dryers don’t come cheap, so to bankroll this confusing operation, Bowser sends the Koopalings to steal priceless artifacts from around the world. Mario and Luigi are on the scene to dole out some Italian justice, but Mario, ever the gung-ho hero, blunders right into a trap door and gets himself captured. It’s up to Luigi to use the Koopalings’ warp pipes to track Mario down, all while retrieving the stolen goods. Road trip!

How does one steal a ceiling? And how am I carrying it?

In case the whole “priceless artifacts from around the world” thing didn’t tip you off, this is an edutainment game focusing on geography: famous landmarks, to be specific. From Bowser’s castle, you enter one of the red doors, which takes you somewhere in the world. Each city has three landmarks, from which various famous tchotchkes have been stolen. Sometimes it’s sensible and valuable things, like a ceremonial mask from Nairobi or a gladiatorial spear from the Roman Colosseum. Other times it’s something completely inconsequential like a brick from the Great Wall of China or
something bizarre like the *entire ceiling* of the Sistine Chapel. Either way, you have to find Koopas throughout the city and stomp them to get a treasure back. Once you’ve found where the treasure goes, you can visit the info booth (oddly manned by a Princess Peach lookalike) to return it, though not before answering some trivia questions to verify the item’s authenticity because, obviously, a counterfeiter wouldn’t know anything about stolen property. Once you’ve returned all of the treasures, you need to use the “Globulator” (which I’m sure is pronounced “GLOBE-u-lator,” but I want to call it “GLOB-u-lator”) to call Yoshi to the city you’re in so he can scare away the Pokey blocking the exit pipe. Lather, rinse and repeat fifteen times, and you’ve beaten the game. Go you.

I’m pretty sure you could steal a single brick from the Great Wall without anyone really caring.

The cities are labyrinthine, to say the least. You have a map, but Luigi doesn’t move very quickly, and every time you change streets, you have to sit through a four-second animation of him running through a crosswalk, which turns your tour into a bit of a slog. There’s also no real indication as to which Koopas are holding the stolen goods; you just have to keep finding and stomping them until you uncover them by complete accident. When you bring the goods to not-Peach and she asks the questions, you can get the answers from a pamphlet she’ll just give to you if you ask. Strangely, though, if you get it wrong, she’ll send you away and then say she’s too busy to talk to you, so you have to leave the screen and come back. I assume this is a measure against brute-forcing the questions, but all it really does is waste a little more of my time (and not actually
prevent me from brute-forcing the questions). You can also talk to the locals to get hints about the treasures as well as what city you’re in, but both are rendered completely redundant by not-
Peach’s pamphlets. I think maybe your score goes up if you talk to everyone and show everyone the artefacts, but this game has no proper saving system, so it’s not like you’ll get to keep your score unless you play the whole thing in one sitting (which, like, why would you even want to do that?).

Wow, that’s uh… one fragile Koopa.

This game is clearly intended for children, which is probably why I don’t find it particularly difficult. That being said, I think I know myself well enough to say that when I was seven years old, I would not have enjoyed this game. There’s barely anything that could be considered gameplay, and the educational tidbits are inconsequential at best. It’s kind of like walking through a cheap geography museum with the world’s slowest tour group; it’s boring, eating up most of your day, and you desperately want something interesting to happen. I’ve always been of the opinion that it is more than possible to create good educational media for children without talking down to them. A good educational game both teaches and entertains. Mario Is Missing does maybe half a job of educating and no job of entertaining. It makes me kind of glad that Nintendo has veered away from the educational stuff for the most part. They know how to make a proper game, but as far as educating me goes, they ought to leave that one to the pros.
Mario Kart, as a series, has had an odd effect on players over the years. It’s just kart racing, no story, no themes, and yet it has steadfastly remained one of the most beloved aspects of the Mario franchise since its inception with Super Mario Kart. I feel that same nostalgic fondness, perhaps not for the series itself but, rather, for what it represented: the hectic chicken-races of my childhood down the starlit banks of the Rainbow Road.\textsuperscript{14} Any good Mario game knows how to harness its speed, and it doesn’t get much speedier than the Mario Kart Grand Prix.

\textsuperscript{14} Fun Fact: Wanna know how much people love the Rainbow Road? Do a YouTube search for just “Rainbow Road,” and one of the first results is a guy singing along to its theme music about how he misses his late uncle. That video came out all the way back in 2008, and people still watch and comment on it.
This is a much closer view of Donkey Kong Jr.’s butt than I ever needed.

Like many spin-offs in this franchise, there’s no real reason for Mario and company to be go-karting. Where did they get the karts? Why are they racing on these very dangerous tracks? Who invited Bowser? You will not find answers to these questions in playing this game, but that’s alright. What’s important is the racing. *Super Mario Kart* was the first commercially successful example of what I like to call a “party racing” game. Regular racing games like *Pole Position* had been a thing since the Atari days; those were nothing new. The big thing that made *Super Mario Kart* stand out, and this is something developers are still aping to this day, is the item system. Scattered around the track are item boxes, and when you run them over, you get a random item. These items are all engineered with the express intent to ruin the lives of friends, family, and well-wishers. Green and red Koopa shells can be lobbed at enemy karts to throw them off balance, banana peels can be comically dropped onto the road to induce spin-outs, and the Super Star turns you into a rampaging juggernaut careening down the track at top speed and knocking aside anyone in your way. It’s satisfying, to say the least. Of course, it wouldn’t really be fair to give you the best items when you’re already winning the race, so the farther-back players are the only ones who get the really cool stuff.
Hands at 10 and 2, buddy.

The game features three cups with five tracks each to race on. The difficulty is determined by the kart cc\textsuperscript{15} you choose beforehand; higher cc means faster karts and smarter opponents. Fifty cc is pretty easy-going, 100 cc is ramping things up, and 150 cc (which needs to be unlocked) will kick your butt. It’s not just about being fast, you also need to race aggressively. Even on 50 cc, CPU racers will not hesitate to get right up your butt, often followed by a green shell. If you place any lower than fourth on any race in a cup, you’re automatically out of the running. Granted, it’s usually pretty easy to secure third at the absolute minimum, but the game doesn’t really want you to settle for second-best. Not to mention you’ll need to get high marks to unlock the fourth cup featuring the aforementioned Rainbow Road.

A track with no guardrails? This cosmic rainbow racetrack is not up to code!

Super Mario Kart deserves some special recognition for its graphical prowess. Utilizing the

\textsuperscript{15}Fun Fact: cc stands for cubic centimeters. It’s a measurement used to determine engine displacement, or how much the pistons in the engine pump. Most commercial cars have ccs in the thousands, so it makes sense a little go-kart would have pretty low ones.
Super Nintendo’s mode 7\textsuperscript{16} rendering technology, it creates the illusion of 3D racers on 3D tracks. Most racing games of that time just had flat perspectives; either you were behind the car and the scenery was just a wallpaper, or you were viewing things from a top-down view like RC cars. Not this game, though, no sir. You can see the entire track from anywhere on it, complete with racers zooming along. How’s that for rendering?

Fishin’ for losers.

Now I’ve been harping about racing against CPUs because I’m a weirdo with no friends, but \textit{Super Mario Kart} also featured split-screen play with a buddy. While not quite the party game juggernaut that its descendants would go on to be, \textit{Super Mario Kart} did set a good precedent for party racing games that continues to endure, both in and out of Nintendo. If you don’t feel like racing, there’s also a battle mode in which players are placed into a closed-off arena and lob items at each other until one runs out of health balloons. Battle mode is good for a quick laugh, though personally, I think the regular races have a little more longevity to them. A lot of the items in this game are homing attacks that don’t really require a lot of finesse to use; the intent is to attack people without having to take your eyes off the road. When you take that aspect out, it feels a teensy bit hollow.

\textsuperscript{16} Fun Fact: Mode 7 was a special graphical processing mode that only the Super Nintendo possessed. In concise terms, it allows games to take large, flat images, and sort of “scroll” them in eight directions. By placing a 2D sprite on top of the scrolling image, it looks like it’s moving in three dimensions, when in actuality, the sprite is sitting completely still. Neat trick, huh?
This doesn’t really seem like go-kart-appropriate terrain.

Compared to the recent Mario Kart games, *Super Mario Kart* is rather no-frills, and that’s refreshing. Fewer items, more raw speed, better balancing. The courses are a little simplistic, but c’mon, mode 7 can only do so much. But that’s fine; when you’ve got your friends with you, *Super Mario Kart* is not unlike playing tag in the park: a simplistic concept, but there’s something infectiously energetic about it.
If Mario is your jovial, outgoing friend, Luigi is your reserved stay-home-and-watch-Netflix friend. I always liked Luigi a little more than Mario when I was a kid, partially because green is my favorite color but also because, at least in his earlier incarnations, there is something kind of... mysterious about Luigi. Heck, in Mario Party 2, his character description in the manual bills him as the “Man of Mystery.”

Luigi has probably gone through more personality archetypes than any other character in the franchise during his tenure. In the N64 Mario Tennis, for instance, he’s soft-spoken, confident, and surprisingly suave. Compare that to his portrayal in Luigi’s Mansion and the Mario & Luigi series as bumbling, cowardly comic relief, and you start to get the impression that no one at Nintendo is quite sure what to do with Luigi. That isn’t to say the developers don’t like him, mind you. He got an entire year dedicated to him, after all. It’s more like the character writers are constantly trying to find a sort of perfect midpoint for him, one where he can be athletic and competent so as to keep up with his brother, but still be a source of wacky comic relief. It’s a bit of a tough middle ground to find, but I think they’re gradually getting there.
Originally, he was no more than a palette swap of Mario, same height, same abilities, same mustache. In *Super Mario Bros. 2*, though, Luigi was given a jump that was substantially higher than Mario’s, an ability that’s stuck with him pretty consistently since. That’s the interesting thing about Luigi; athletics-wise, he’s on par with Mario, if not better than him, but Mario’s the one who gets the lion’s share of the glory. According to supplementary material, while Luigi loves his brother dearly, living in his shadow has bred a spot of resentment in him. If you believe the description of his Final Smash ability in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, Negative Zone, embracing that resentment has actually given him access to dark and terrible magic. So that’s… mildly worrying.

Still, whether he’s the star of the show or not, Luigi’s presence in Mario games has always left me with a positive feeling. It’s actually kind of inspiring, seeing him in *Luigi’s Mansion*; he’s utterly terrified throughout that entire game but as scared as he is, he never once considers abandoning Mario. That’s the true definition of courage, lest we forget: not the absence of fear but the ability to move forward in spite of it. Luigi may scare easily, but it’s reassuring to know that when his friends and family are on the line, he’ll march right into the fray with only an occasional second thought.
When I was a kid, I had a very clear image in my head of a “Mario game.” You run to the right, jump on things, and occasionally fall down a pit and die. Standard stuff, don’t fix what ain’t broken, yadda yadda. But then one day, I bore witness to something that completely shattered my personal Mario paradigm: *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars*. For this was no mere jump-on-things-and-fall-down-pits game, no sir. This was a massive, story-centric, turn-based combat adventure (that also just happened to feature jumping on things and falling down pits), as well as my introduction to what would become one of my most beloved genres of games, the Japanese Role-Playing Game, JRPG for short.
Guessing you guys didn’t workshop that name.

It’s a pretty average afternoon for Mario; Princess Peach is kidnapped by Bowser and taken to his castle, and Mario pursues to give him a good talking to (with his boot). Things take a turn when, while the rivals are fighting, a gigantic living sword named Exor falls from the sky and embeds itself in Bowser’s castle, sending Mario, Bowser, and Peach flying across the Mushroom Kingdom. Exor is a minion of Smithy, a despot from another dimension who seeks to conquer the Mushroom Kingdom. He begins his attack by destroying the Star Road in the sky, stripping the Mushroom people of their ability to make wishes. With the help of companions new and old, Mario must find the seven shattered pieces of the Star Road, all while dodging the attacks of Smithy’s mechanical monsters.

That’s one way to put it.

Being an RPG, this game’s got a bit more of a fleshed out story than other Mario games before it. Square had a very distinct writing style back then; overtly fantasy-themed, but with a pinch of eye-rolling and sarcasm rolled in. A moment that immediately springs to mind is the first appearance
of Geno, a character exclusive to this game, against one of the early bosses, Bowyer; Geno tries to start a really cool monologue, saying he “serves… a higher authority” ellipses included. In response, Bowyer starts shooting a flurry of arrows, and Geno immediately loses his composure, shouting at Bowyer to chill out. It’s very campy, almost like a Saturday-morning cartoon, an aesthetic I find incredibly charming.

What’s really cool about *Super Mario RPG* is that it was the progenitor of the interactive turn-based battles that are present in almost every other Mario RPG. In most RPGs of this game’s time, you’d pick your move, and then sit quietly and watch it play out. In this game, though, you can use special Action Commands during your attacks to boost their power. Even Mario’s basic Punch attack gains a follow-up uppercut with a timely tap of a button. The special attacks are a lot of fun, as well. Mario’s Super Jump attack will go on for up to 100 bounces as long as you maintain the rhythm of your button presses. And don’t even get me started on Geno’s Geno Whirl attack. There’s like, an entire little community of madmen who have mastered the timing on that thing for max damage. The point is, this kind of active system really keeps you engaged in the battles and puts

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17 Fun Fact: The reason Geno, as well as the other exclusive character, Mallow, has never appeared in another Mario game is that Square, having developed *Super Mario RPG*, still owns the rights to the characters. Fans have been very vocal over the years in begging Nintendo to buy the rights, but they still float beyond our reach.
a nice little exclamation point on every attack, which is helpful for staying invested in the game while grinding for levels.

Give Smithy this: he’s got great taste in minion design.

Though, speaking of grinding, therein perhaps lies one of this game’s only major flaws: it’s a little too easy. There are only a handful of encounters in the entire game that you really need to beef up for, but aside from them, just making regular progress through towns and dungeons will give you everything you need to beat the game. As long as you don’t make a habit of running from battles, you’ll never have any shortage of experience nor money to buy more items. In fact, sometimes, when you use items, you’ll just get another one for free. No real reason, you just get a freebie. Enemies also drop temporary items when they’re defeated, such as health boosts and extra turns. Even without the surplus of items, certain abilities, like Peach’s suite of healing skills and Geno’s stat-boost spell, can completely break the difficulty curve when paired with certain pieces of equipment. As nice as it is to not be constantly beset by Game Overs, you don’t want to be able to get through an RPG too quickly, lest the grand adventure feel more like a mild afternoon out with the family.
Why would I come into an item shop if I wasn’t looking for something?

But I suppose if the only notable issue of a game is that it’s not grinding my face into the dirt, I can’t really complain all that much. Difficulty aside, *Super Mario RPG* is still a grand old time, full of fun and flashy attacks, memorable heroes and villains, and a delightfully snarky script. Not to mention that if it had not pioneered the interactive battle system, I can guarantee that every subsequent Mario RPG would not be nearly as fun as they ended up being (or most of them ended up being, anyway).
The circumstances surrounding my personal acquisition of a Nintendo 64 console have long since disappeared into the dark annals of my memory. It’s really quite bizarre; one moment, my sister and I are watching cartoons on the living room couch, the next, we’re inexplicably playing Rayman 2 on an N64. It’s possible that, since the N64 was my first personal gaming console, I didn’t have a real understanding of what I possessed. I was like, seven or something, so that’s not unusual, but it is kind of a shame. That lovely black doorstop would set me down a path of nerdy enthusiasm that would last a lifetime. But as much as I enjoyed Rayman 2 and other assorted platformers, there’s no game that quite stuck in my mind like Super Mario 64, the man’s first foray into the realm of 3D.

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18 Fun Fact: This game was remade as a launch title for the original Nintendo DS, aptly titled Super Mario 64 DS. In addition to more and different rooms in the castle and 30 more Power Stars, the remake also allowed you to play as Yoshi, Luigi, and Wario in addition to Mario.
Get a load of that lovable mug.

Mario\textsuperscript{19} receives a letter from Princess Peach inviting him to sample a cake she baked for him. No, that’s not a euphemism for anything; she really did bake a cake because she’s a nice person. When Mario arrives at Peach’s castle, he finds it mysteriously vacant. As it happens, Bowser decided to drop by earlier in the day and stole the castle’s 120 Power Stars. Using their energy, he creates entire worlds within the castle’s walls and paintings, trapping Peach and the castle’s residents inside. Mario will need to enter the worlds Bowser has created and reclaimed the stolen Power Stars from his minions to free his friends and kick Bowser out.

\textsuperscript{19} Fun Fact: This was the first mainline Mario game featuring his current and long-time voice actor, Charles Martinet. It is not, however, Martinet’s first role as Mario. That honor goes to \textit{Mario’s Game Gallery}, an MS-DOS game from 1995.
Huh, so that’s how third-person cameras work.

Most of the doors in the castle are locked by Bowser’s magic mojo. To unlock them, you’ll need Power Stars. The castle is divided into three sections, each one housing a handful of stages hidden behind paintings (or, occasionally, in walls or small objects). Each stage hosts six challenges that yield Stars upon completion. When you choose a challenge at the start of a stage, the world changes slightly to acclimate that challenge. It is possible, however, to do a bit of sequence breaking and find stars you weren’t meant to earlier on. Of course, if you do, it’ll probably be by luck, since every challenge has a hint for a name, and without that hint, you’ll have no idea where to look. Heck, some of the hints are so vague you won’t know where to look anyway. Thankfully, 100% completion is not required to beat the game, so if you’re having trouble getting a Star in one stage, you can just get the Stars you need from different ones.
I always called Chain Chomps “Woof-Woofs” when I was a kid. I was also terrified of them. Not sure why I gave them such a cute nickname.

Since this was Mario’s first time moving in 3D, he ain’t exactly a savant. Besides his normal signature jump, Mario also has a side-jump and backflip for reaching higher places. He’s also got a punching combo, though you won’t get much use out of that since it’s usually easier to just jump on enemies. That punch combo becomes a diving attack when you’re running or in the air, and get ready to hate that move because accidentally diving off a ledge because your aim was slightly off will lead to the lion’s share of deaths.

Admit it; you’ve done this pose at least once when no one was looking.

Yes, Mario’s mortal enemy in this game is not Bowser but the laws of physics. Mario doesn’t have as much control in the air as you’d like, which forces you to
commit to your jumps. That’s a problem when the camera won’t give me a good view of what I’m jumping toward (this was back when cameras were controlled by buttons rather than sticks, mind you), and I frequently bounce lamely off a ledge or miss it wholesale. Speaking of ledges, actually, Mario has this weird quirk where if you get near a ledge, he’ll automatically hang down from it. I don’t even know why they added this; you can’t shimmy along the edge or anything. He keeps doing it when I’m trying to line up a jump, which can be frustrating when I’m under some sort of time constraint. And of course, in instances when you’d want him to catch the ledge, like a botched jump, he almost never seems to.

*How does he not just fall out of the hat?*

Give the game credit, though, it did introduce some neat mechanics to the franchise. Besides those two high jumps I mentioned, we also got the Flying Cap and Metal Cap power-ups. Though the former has yet to appear in another Mario game, it’s still one of his most iconic abilities. And Metal Mario, I mean, come on. It’s Metal Mario. Everyone loves Metal Mario. The Bowser fights are also a lot of fun, requiring you to grab Bowser by the tail and swing him into bombs around an arena. It’s probably one of the only major elements of the game that doesn’t require jumping and is paradoxically (for a Mario game) better because of it.
Metal Mario: The power-up so powerful, it became its own character.

For reasons of sheer nostalgia, I could never hold any real contempt toward *Super Mario 64*.

My first time playing it was a formative experience in my childhood, and for that, it will always have my love and gratitude. That being said, when observed from an objective point of view, this game has not aged spectacularly. The physics are wonky, bordering on broken, and some of the Star solutions are a little too convoluted for their own good. It should be played by everyone with even a passing enthusiasm in Mario, but more for the sake of experiencing an important piece of gaming history and less to actually have fun.
Did you ever play Monopoly with your friends, and by the time you’re finished, you don’t have friends anymore? Yeah, board games tend to have that effect on people. Screwing each other over, tricking each other into traps, getting the absolute worst roll of the dice possible, there’s really no more cutthroat way to spend a couple of hours. But the real question is this: is it possible to distill the friendship-destroying essence of a board game into a videogame format? Well, Nintendo found a way, and they slapped Mario’s face on it and called it *Mario Party*.
Or we could just wait a week for Bowser to do something.

For unspecified reasons, Mario and his friends (and also Wario, who I’m pretty sure is not Mario’s friend) have gotten into an argument over who among them is the “Super Star.” What is a “Super Star,” you ask? Beats me. Based on their argument, it’s someone who is strong, courageous, cunning, and energetic. An adventurer, basically, which I think would disqualify Peach, but I suppose she does travel a lot. Toad, sick of being in the middle of the squabble, advises everyone to visit Mushroom Village and use its special warp pipe to go on an adventure to see who really has the best chops. And by “go on an adventure,” I, of course, mean “play a board game.”

It’s odd how frequently Mario seems to end up in cannons.

Here’s how the basic flow works: on each board, your goal is to find Toad and pay him 20 coins for a star. After a set number of turns have passed, the player with the most stars wins. How do you get coins for stars? Ah, well, that’s
where the wrinkles begin to appear. On your turn, you roll a dice and whatever space you land on will either give you a few coins or deduct them, as well as mark your character with blue or red, respectively. After all four players have taken their turns, you then play a mini-game for the chance to earn some more coins. Depending on the color marks on each character, the group may be divided into teams. Four blues make a four-player free-for-all, two blues, and two reds make a two-versus-two team battle, and one blue and three reds (or three blues and one red) make a one-versus-three game with lopsided odds. Most of these games are entertaining enough, usually revolving around simple concepts like running away from things or being the last survivor in a hazardous space or some kind of memory or attention challenges. The team games usually feature more races and battle-type games and require cooperation between teammates via differently assigned controls. The one-versus-three games are often the wackiest since the lone player is given some kind of edge over the team like a Bowser suit to play tug-of-war or a bowling ball to chuck at the team turned bowling pins. Though, there are also many cases wherein the lone player needs to accomplish something while they are antagonized by the team, lest anyone think these games are unbalanced. Whatever game you get, just pray it’s not one that involves rotating the stick really fast, because the N64 control stick will utterly destroy your palms.

*Didn’t I see this bit in an episode of Batman once?*

Of course, if this game were just a simple test of skill in mini-
games, it wouldn’t have the backstabbing edge of a board game, now would it? No, sir, there is no shortage of opportunities to completely ruin other players’ lives, both intentionally and by sheer dumb luck. Battle spaces swipe coins from every player and put them in a pot as a prize for a special mini-game. Bowser spaces call up everyone’s favorite Koopa to inflict some random form of torment upon one or all players. Even the boards themselves are packed full of gimmicks that can completely derail another player’s journey towards Toad, such as randomized paths and locked doors. By landing on the special Happening spaces, you can force these gimmicks into action, which will almost always ruin someone’s day. If you’re really lucky (or unlucky, considering), you might land on a Chance Time space and get the opportunity to steal coins or even stars from another player, no strings attached.

I think I just heard an inhuman scream in the distance.

Playing this game with other people is plenty fun, provided everyone involved is sufficiently thick-skinned and good-natured. It’s also a fairly accessible game, as the luck element prevents players who know the board or mini-games well from getting too much of an edge over newbies. The game offers a handicap function that can grant players some free stars, so if your companions are really terrible, you can level the playing field. On the flip side, however, playing by yourself against
computer-controlled opponents is a bit less fun, mostly because the computer players hate you and everything you stand for. You can set the difficulty on the AI, but even with the normal setting, there doesn’t really seem to be a middle ground. AI players are either hilariously moronic or dastardly tricksters. One could be forgiven for thinking that when the difficulty is turned up, the game is intentionally giving AI players the perfect rolls they need to mess you up.

*What the heck are those little minion things? Bowser needs to pull the plug on his eugenics research.*

Speaking of AI players, besides the regular boards, there is also Mini-Game Island mode, wherein a single player takes on a gauntlet of mini-games on a special board to win prizes. The AI is absolutely ruthless in this mode, often ganging up on you even in what should be a free-for-all mini-game. It doesn’t help that Mini-Game Island uses a life system, so if you lose too many games in a row, you’ll be sent back to the last checkpoint, all of which are extremely spaced out. Simply put, if you botch one game, prepare to play the last four before it a few more times (and a few more times after that, most likely).
Instead of trying to scare the Boo away, wouldn’t it be easier to just get off the bike?

Still, the intent of a board game is to play with friends, so if you’re playing by yourself, you’re kind of doing it wrong. With good friends (and maybe some alcohol), *Mario Party* can be a fun way to pass a few hours. But maybe don’t invite that one friend who gets really competitive. You know the one; we all have one.
Dr. Mario 64, 2001, Nintendo 64

Now you might be asking yourself “Why is he talking about Dr. Mario 64 instead of the original Dr. Mario?” It’s actually very simple: the original Dr. Mario puzzle game came out on the NES in 1990, and since then, its formula has remained almost entirely unchanged, save for an occasional graphical update and a brief, failed foray into a power-up system in the most recent entry. So I figure, if all of the games are functionally the same, I might as well talk about the one that has a story and a different art style.
Do viruses have souls? Oh man, that’s a creepy thought.

It’s flu season, and Mario has donned his lab coat and head mirror to become Dr. Mario, challenger of the chills, to battle the epidemic. Don’t ask if he actually has a license. It’s not like he needs one anyway because, thanks to his miraculous Megavitamins, he can cure just about any ailment. Wario, Mario’s longtime rival, passes by during an operation and gets the idea to steal the Megavitamins for a quick buck. Before he can, however, the vitamins are pinched by Mad Scienstein for an unknown employer, and he takes off across the country. Dr. Mario, with Wario hot on his heels, takes off after him to get the vitamins back before everyone ends up covered in snot, dueling Mad Scienstein’s minions in viral battles along the way. The cutscenes are presented in a paper puppet show format, a bit cutesy for my tastes, but I found it more charming when I was younger. During actual gameplay, there are lots of bright, pastel backgrounds, which I’m sure would be very pretty to look at if I weren’t murderously focused on my viral jar the whole time.

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20 Fun Fact: Mad Scienstein, as well as all of the other opponents, are on loan from *Wario Land 3* for the Game Boy Color.
I wonder if competitive doctoring could ever be a spectator sport.

There are a few different modes in this game, but they all revolve around the same basic concept: you’re presented with a bottle full of viruses in three colors. Multi-colored vitamins gradually drop from the ceiling, and you can move and rotate them. Line up four vitamins and/or viruses, and they’ll disappear, earning you points. Bust every virus in the bottle, and you clear the stage. If you’re playing multiplayer, you’ll also win by default if your opponent’s bottle overflows. This sounds simple on paper, but when the game gets started, it doesn’t pull any punches. In order to even clear the stage, let alone get the best time and highest score, you need to plan every move you make well in advance. It may look cute and innocent, but this is not a game for idle thinkers.

I genuinely can’t even play this game if it’s not on the lowest level.

Even on the low difficulty and speed settings, playing this game creates an almost oppressive atmosphere around you if you aren’t mentally prepared for it. Simply busting viruses one at a time might work for the first couple of stages of single-player gameplay, but as the game goes on and the viruses multiply, you’ll find that the leftover blocks from your score lines can
completely wreck your next few moves. This becomes even more of a problem in multiplayer gameplay because when your opponent clears multiple lines with a single vitamin, you’ll get junk blocks dropped into your bottle. In a way, Dr. Mario is not unlike a game of chess, requiring not only foresight and cunning but also reflexes. If you have an insane level of kinetic vision (or you hate yourself), you can actually crank the speed and virus count up from the start of a session. Vitamins lock into place the moment they touch something under them, so you can’t afford to look away from the screen for even a moment. Though, if you maintain that laser focus on your own bottle, don’t be surprised when the game suddenly ends when your opponent effortlessly cleared all of their own viruses away while you weren’t looking.

I’ll be honest; I’m not great at these kinds of puzzle games. I simply don’t have the foresight required to set up massive combos. Hell, half the time, I inadvertently screw myself out of a few precious seconds just trying to bust a single virus. If you’re not the kind of terrifyingly clever person who plays match-puzzle games on a regular basis, this game probably isn’t going to be very much fun for you. Heck, even if you are, this ain’t no Candy Crush; Dr. Mario marches to the beat of its own drum and doesn’t much care whether you’re along for the ride or not. This isn’t the same

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21 Fun Fact: In order to get the true ending of this game’s story mode, you need to beat every single virus battle without losing once. On one hand, that sounds like torture, but on the other hand, you can unlock Metal Mario. Gotta decide how much he’s worth to you, I guess.
kind of difficulty as your typical Mario platformer; this is a game for smart people, and if you’re as bad at it as I am, you’re probably not going to feel very smart by the time you decide to stop playing. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why the story is so childish… did this game call me a baby-brain? Oh, hell no.
Horror games and I have never mixed. It’s not that I dislike being scared—okay, I do dislike being scared. Immensely. But more than that, most horror games (proper ones that emphasize atmosphere and such) are also puzzle games, and I don’t really have the patience or fortitude to solve puzzles while under constant threat of jump scares. So you can imagine my slight reluctance when, while visiting a friend’s house as a kid, he wanted to show me a game on his GameCube about fighting ghosts in a spooky mansion. The feeling I got while watching him play *Luigi’s Mansion* back then was somewhere between unsettled and impressed; I don’t like scary things, but apparently, the presence of Luigi is a calming element, which is odd, considering how frequently he shrieks like a spider monkey.
Luigi receives a letter one day informing him that he has won a massive, opulent mansion in a lottery drawing. Initially confused since he never entered a lottery, Luigi’s excitement gets the better of him, and he sets off to visit his new estate, sending word to Mario to meet him there. Upon arriving at the location in the letter, Luigi does find a mansion, albeit a decrepit, intimidating, and just generally unpleasant one. Taking a few cautious steps inside, Luigi is immediately attacked by malevolent spirits, who reveal that they’ve spirited away Mario and intend to do the same to Luigi. Thankfully, Luigi is saved by the quick intervention of ghost researcher Professor E. Gadd and his ghost-fighting weapon the Poltergust 3000 (which may or may not just be a vacuum cleaner). With support from Gadd, Luigi dons the Poltergust and musters what little courage he has to rescue Mario from the mansion’s clutches.

To make your way through the mansion, you’ll need to systematically clear the ghosts out of every room. Upon entering a
dark room, ghosts will begin spawning to attack you, or in some cases, you’ll need to smoke them out by rattling furniture with the Poltergust. The ghost-busting system is simple yet surprisingly involved, kind of like fishing; when a ghost shows itself, you need to flash it with your flashlight to stun it, and then wrangle it with the Poltergust in the opposite of whatever direction it tries to run until its health runs out. You can do this to multiple ghosts at once, though as you’d expect, things get hectic when you’re trying to pull in the opposite of literally every direction possible. Suck up all the ghosts in a room, and the lights come back on, usually followed by a prize like a key to another room or some money. The money’s only there for scoring purposes, but it is kinda satisfying grabbing a bunch of bills out of the air like some kind of cartoon rich guy.

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I’ll teach YOU to sit and read quietly!

Things get a little more complicated when dealing with Portrait Ghosts, the deceased residents of the mansion (named as such because Gadd uses a machine to turn them into paintings post-capture). Portrait Ghosts won’t reveal themselves with just a flash; you’ll need to solve quick puzzles to make them vulnerable, sometimes multiple times, as they’re purposely too strong to catch in one wrangle. For the most part, these puzzles are well-designed, requiring only some basic deduction and targeting skills, although the way Luigi strafes while holding the Poltergust can make it a bit
hard to aim when you need to shoot something. Later in the game, you’ll also need to capture Boos to advance, which can’t be wrangled and can pass through walls into different rooms. It’s rather irritating to get a Boo down to its last nub of health only to have it disappear into a room you can’t access.

I think I’d be worried if my vacuum suddenly started spewing fire.

Actually, on that subject, one of this game’s only major weaknesses is its obtuse map layout. Luigi does have a map of the mansion (accessed via his “Game Boy Horror,” hardy har har), and it even tells you what room a key goes to when you get one. There are situations, however, where you’ll get a slightly more obtuse direction, like a specific room to visit. The rooms aren’t labeled on your map, so you’ll have to just make educated guesses until you find the right one. There are also a handful of cases where the game just won’t tell you what you need to do next, leaving you to wander around the mansion aimlessly until you find a room with an event in it or accidentally stumble onto whatever it is you missed.
Talking to ghosts isn’t really that impressive when you are one.

I think what always surprised me about this game is how, at times, it actually manages to be a little spooky and unnerving. You wouldn’t think so given its rather subdued art-style and silly premise, but a combination of mood lighting and spooky music makes me reluctant to play this game by myself at night. Luigi is just so consistently scared that it’s kind of hard not to cop a contact spook, though thankfully not to the point where it becomes annoying and you can’t focus on puzzles. Maybe I’m just a smelly coward baby, but being trapped in the dark with a hostile entity that you’re under-equipped to fight is a primal fear held by just about everyone.

It’s frustrating to me how many puns the word “boo” can be worked into.

Looking back on Luigi’s Mansion, I have to say it was a game ahead of its time. Sadly, that worked to its detriment; as a launch title for
the GameCube, nobody really knew what to make of it, and it didn’t get a direct sequel until many years later with *Luigi’s Mansion: Dark Moon* on the 3DS. I think if this game were released for the first time these days, when people are a little more flexible with their perceptions of what is and isn’t a cool game idea, it would’ve performed much better. Well, hindsight is 20/20, I suppose. As it is on its own, *Luigi’s Mansion* is a fun and clever puzzle-action game with a pleasantly spooky design. Luigi does have what it takes to be a leading man if he puts his mind to it. Or if he’s scared out of his mind. Either or.
Back in 2002, the GameCube had already been kicking around for about a year, and people were eager to sink their teeth into something new. Something… Italian, perhaps? And the time was ripe for it, as there hadn’t been a new mainline Mario game since Super Mario 64 in 1996. But Mario had already journeyed across the Mushroom Kingdom (as well as a handful of neighboring kingdoms) several times; it was time for a new locale. Don your embarrassing swim jams, kids; it’s time for a romp in the tropical sunshine, Super Mario Sunshine.
Mario knows what he’s about. Mario and Peach, along with Peach’s personal butler, Toadsworth, take a vacation to the beautiful Isle Delfino, a country neighboring the Mushroom Kingdom well known for its booming tourism industry. It’s a sunny, tropical island full of friendly locals, postcard-worthy scenery, and lots of tasty food (much to Mario’s excitement). When the party arrives on the island, however, they find many of the landmarks plastered in sludge-like graffiti, the toxic influence of which has driven away the island’s guardian spirits, the Shine Sprites. Worse yet, the most wanted suspect for this heinous deed is none other than Mario! Mario is immediately caught and sentenced to community service for his supposed crime. Armed with the cybernetic water pump, F.L.U.D.D., Mario takes to the streets to clean up his supposed mess, all while pursuing the true culprit, the mysterious “Shadow Mario.”

Fun Fact: Sunshine was Toadsworth’s first appearance, and he became a mainstay character after. Though, come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve seen him in a Mario game recently. Huh, maybe he retired. Fun Fact: F.L.U.D.D. introduces itself as a product of Gadd Science, Incorporated. Yep, the same E. Gadd who invented the Poltergust from Luigi’s Mansion. Ghosts may be his passion, but a scientist has to make ends meet somehow.
Similarly to *Mario 64*, Isle Delfino acts as a hub area for the rest of the game. Through Shadow Mario’s graffiti portal things, you can venture out into the island’s various little resorts and attractions and complete tasks for Shine Sprites. Most of these are some variation of “go here, spray water on a thing,” occasionally followed up by a platforming challenge. More on those later, but F.L.U.D.D.’s versatility does do a lot toward making all of this new and fun. Mario can still jump on things, but a lot of locations and enemies are covered in toxic sludge graffiti that will damage him if he stands in it too long. As such, water is your first and foremost weapon, and there’s thankfully plenty of it to go around. Besides the basic spray nozzle, which, y’know, sprays water, you also have a hover nozzle that can give Mario some extra hang-time in the air. That one’s the workhorse; I can’t tell you how many botched jumps were rescued from the bowels of failure by that lovely piece of machinery. It also doubles as a handy means of clearing water out from underneath you, which is good, because the spray nozzle doesn’t always have the reach or spread you’d like it to have. It’s less like a fire hose, more like a garden hose.  

![Are the shorts part of his body or just a weird fashion statement?](image)

Unfortunately, we can’t always have nice things. Going back to those platforming challenges, F.L.U.D.D. is taken away from you during the vast majority of them. Now, I don’t begrudge the game for doing that on paper; if someone told you to jump over a gorge and you were like “Okay, one second, let me strap on my water-powered jetpack,” you’d probably be laughed out of the room. But the problem is that this game’s physics were created
with F.L.U.D.D. in mind; when you remove a vital part of Mario’s means of vertical mobility, he becomes a lot more difficult to control. The bulk of any deaths you experience in this game will be during these platforming challenges. Mario doesn’t always seem to jump in the way you want him to (doubly so for things like wall-jumping), and without a way to get your footing back, you just have to sit and watch miserably as he falls to his demise. It’s really demoralizing to lose all of your lives to a stupid jump that you should be able to land but just can’t seem to, especially in levels where you have to accomplish a lengthy objective before you even get a shot at the platforming challenge. Don’t even say the words “pachinko level” to anyone who has played this game; I guarantee you they will explode into a cloud of pure, unfiltered rage. I know; I’ve seen it.

Still, when this game isn’t slowly draining your will to live, it’s fun and colorful. When F.L.U.D.D. is available and properly utilized, it adds a fun twist to traditional Mario platforming, as well as a helpful lifeline for when that traditional Mario platforming decides it hates you. There are plenty of unique locales and boss fights, each with their own strategies and patterns (though, admittedly, some of those fights go on a little longer than they need to). There are additional nozzles for F.L.U.D.D. you can unlock, which give some levels some replay value, and, without giving too much away, an old friend of Mario’s makes a playable appearance later on. Though
somewhat paradoxically, this old friend immediately disintegrates the moment he touches water, so I hope you weren’t planning on doing anything too interesting with him.

I’ve heard many divisive opinions on *Super Mario Sunshine* over the years; it’s some people’s favorite Mario game, while it’s others’ most hated. I think the game’s primary problem is that it has a lot of cool stuff going for it, but it never gets to really utilize any of it to its full potential. Instead of swiping F.L.U.D.D. from you for the platforming challenges, for instance, wouldn’t it be better to design unique challenges with F.L.U.D.D. in mind? I suppose it could be argued that was the intent of the main levels, but F.L.U.D.D. is used more for climbing stuff in the main levels than for regular don’t-fall-in-pits platforming. *Mario Sunshine* isn’t a perfect game, but it was an interesting experiment with Mario’s standard abilities, so I think that warrants a bit of praise if nothing else.
Character Thoughts: Peach

Let me put my thoughts on Peach herself aside for a moment to address something that’s always confused me, and I don’t think I’m alone on this. So Peach is the ruler of the Mushroom Kingdom, right? But there’s the problem right there: it’s the Mushroom Kingdom. The entire point of a Kingdom is that it has a King. That’s why it is called a kingdom. So if Peach is a princess, shouldn’t it be, I dunno, the Mushroom Principality or something? I mean, technically, principalities are the territory of princes, but I don’t think there’s a separate term for princess territories. I’m just asking, is there a Mushroom King we don’t know about? If there isn’t, shouldn’t Peach be a queen? Or does whatever planet they live on just have different political rules, and I’m talking about absolutely nothing? Erm, don’t answer that.

Anyway, Peach. Peach gets a lot of flak for being a vapid damsel in distress, but I’m not too sure about that. You ever notice how, despite her constant kidnappings, the Mushroom government never seems to hit any hard patches? I’m just spitballing here, but it’s possible Peach has actually developed her own government for the express purpose of functioning without her. She might just be a political genius. The people of the Mushroom Kingdom all really like her, so she’s got to be doing something right.
It’s odd; in every game in which Peach is a playable character she can run and jump with the best of ‘em. Heck, she even got her own game, *Super Princess Peach*, where she got to rescue *Mario*. It makes you wonder why Bowser can nab her so easily every time. Who knows? Maybe the time she spends kidnapped is the only downtime she gets. It certainly serves as a convenient excuse to leave unfinished paperwork to Toadsworth.

As with Bowser and Luigi, Peach gets most of her actual character development in the RPGs. In between chapters in the first two *Paper Mario* games, Peach shows herself to be rather capable, not as a fighter but as an infiltrator. Though she’s stuck in unpleasant situations (trapped in her own castle in the sky in the first game and trapped in the X-Naut base in the second), she never breaks down and gives up. She puts herself at risk to sneak through her captors’ lairs to find clues and items that can indirectly help Mario and shows herself to not be above a bit of subterfuge, tricking and bribing the guards.

Peach may have what I like to call an “on/off” personality. She has off days where she can’t really seem to get things done and everything goes south for her. These are most of the main games. But then she has her on days, and she kicks butt and solves puzzles like a classic gaming wiz. Maybe that’s why all the Toads respect her; she’s not perfect, but when she’s in get-stuff-done mode, she gets stuff done.
Mario Kart: Double Dash!, 2003, Nintendo GameCube

Have you ever heard of “sidehacking?” It’s where you ride an off-road motorcycle with a sidecar frame welded to the side and you have a partner standing in the sidecar and leaning really hard to swing you around tight corners. Wouldn’t blame you if you’ve never heard of it; far as I know, it’s a fake sport made up for some dumb 60s movie of the same name I saw on late-night cable once. The reason I bring it up, though, is that multi-passenger racing is a thing (in one shape or another) and makes for an interesting, if not somewhat bizarre, spice-up to the typical racing paradigm. While the karts in Mario Kart: Double Dash aren’t exactly sidehacks, it at least seemed like the aptest comparison I could think of.
This is the kinda thing people do for silly YouTube videos.

*Double Dash* maintains the usual *Mario Kart* formula: three laps around a track laden with gimmicks while enduring various objects being thrown at you. Get the best place to win, get the worst place to lose. The first and most obvious addition to this formula is that you now have two racers per cart, one in the driver’s seat and one on the back platform thing. The driver, well, drives, while the passenger throws items. To compensate for this addition, double item boxes that give both racers an item can be found on the track. You can flip between your racers with a quick button tap, though that doesn’t really do anything besides keeping items in reserve. Incidentally, whenever you flip racers, they’ll say a little quote (Mario’s, for example, is “It’s-a Mario time!”). I’ve heard some folks find that to be annoying, but personally? It actually kind of makes me laugh. I just love to mash the Z button while I’m driving straight to make them babble endlessly. Anyway, the combination of racers you choose, as well as the kart they ride, influences how fast the kart goes, how quickly it accelerates, and, perhaps most importantly, how much it weighs.
Giant banana doesn’t get paid enough for this.

Compared to other Mario Kart games, Double Dash puts a greater emphasis on kart weight. If your kart doesn’t have the ideal weight for your playstyle, you’re going to slip and slide all over the place. Even a minor turn can send you careening into a wall, doubly so on higher ccs. I’ve found that with the heaviest karts, utilizing characters like Bowser and Donkey Kong, I can barely even turn at all without fishtailing. Smaller characters like Baby Mario and Toad, while their higher acceleration matches better with my personal playstyle, have the opposite problem; their weight is so low that I can’t make sharp turns. It seems like the only way to really get anywhere in this game is to either stick with middle-of-the-road characters like Mario and Luigi exclusively or force yourself to adapt your playstyle to the wonky physics.

Imagine if a giant rainbow racetrack just appeared over New York City. I don’t know if I’d be fascinated or terrified.

To its credit, Double Dash did introduce some cool mechanics to the mix, one of which even managed to become a series mainstay. These two mechanics are visible mini-
turbos and signature items. Drifting has been a thing since back in *Super Mario Kart*, so obviously *Double Dash* features and encourages it. When drifting in previous games, if you did it juuuuust right, you’d get a mini-turbo, maintaining your momentum with a tiny perk-up to your speed. The problem with that was that it was rather difficult to gauge when you were doing it right. *Double Dash*’s mini-turbo system eliminates the guesswork; when you start drifting, your kart will emit sparks. If you hold the drift for a long time, the sparks will change color, signifying a mini-turbo first, followed by a super mini-turbo if you hold it even longer. It’s a lot easier to plan and time your drifts when you have a visible indicator of their status. For someone like me, who holds drifting as a keystone component of my *Mario Kart* strategy, it’s invaluable, which is why I’m really glad that the mini-turbo sparks have remained a constant in the series since then.

*Happiness is a warm fireball.*

An equally cool perk, though it sadly did not return after *Double Dash*, is signature items. When you get an item box, there’s a chance you’ll get an item exclusive to whoever is currently in the passenger’s seat. Mario and Luigi get color-coded fireballs, Donkey Kong and Diddy Kong get gigantic (and amusingly grumpy-faced) banana peels, and Bowser and Bowser Jr. get titanic, spike-covered Koopa shells, to name a few. Besides being good for turning the tide of a race and being generally amusing to use, the signature items also encourage you to mix up who you play as in order to access different items.
You could just play as Mario and Luigi, but then you’d just be getting fireballs both ways. If you pick, say, Mario and Wario, you get a fireball and a Bob-omb. Though, like I said earlier, this does come at the cost of having a heavier or lighter kart than you’re comfortable with.

![Image](image_url)

**Gotta give this game credit for the advent of one of my favorite tracks. Seven laps of madness.**

The game’s got four cups with four tracks each but keeps its longevity by offering unlockable karts and characters. More karts mean more options, and I’m just a fan of unlocking stuff in racing games in general, since things can get a little stale if you have everything from the beginning. *Double Dash*’s weird weight hang-ups can create a bit of a higher entry bar than other *Mario Kart* games, but it makes up for it with a hearty dose of character shenanigans and improved mechanics in other departments. If you have other *Mario Karts* handy, I wouldn’t begrudge you for wanting to play them instead, but if it’s what’s for dinner, there are certainly worse ways to spend an afternoon than playing *Double Dash*. 
For a long time, the name “Super Mario Brothers” was a bit of a misnomer. Mario did all the important stuff, and as far as it mattered, Luigi was just a second Mario wearing green and occasionally jumping a little higher. The fact that Mario and Luigi are brothers never really played into anything, and that’s including any rare instances that the two of them were actually on-screen at the same time. This was one of many reasons why I was captivated by *Mario and Luigi: Superstar Saga*; this was the first time the Super Mario Brothers got to be equal measures of super and brothers.
Bowser will not tolerate changes to the script.

Princess Peach is visited by a dignitary from the neighboring BeanBean Kingdom (five guesses what their shtick is) in an act of goodwill. When she opens the dignitary’s present, however, a machine pops out and steals her voice, replacing it with a dangerous explosive language. Like, literally, her words explode when she says them. Turns out the real dignitary was kidnapped and replaced by an imposter: the evil witch Cackletta. Cackletta flees back to the BeanBean Kingdom with the Mushroom military unable to pursue without causing an international incident. The Mario Brothers, hoping to give chase, hitch a ride with Bowser (who is rather cheesed off that someone made a move on the princess before him) on his airship into the unknown lands of BeanBean.

There are a surprising number of red-and-green twins in this kingdom.

What’s fun about this game, as well as most of the Mario and Luigi series, are the subtle insights we get into Mario and Luigi as characters, which is actually kind of bizarre, as neither brother has a single line of dialogue. When Mario or Luigi needs to explain something to someone, we hear it
as a string of rambling faux Italian. Actions speak louder than words, though, and the brothers show a lot in how they react to each other and others. They both get annoyed with the other when he does something dumb, but they frequently hug it out after a dangerous situation. Luigi is cowardly and clumsy, and Mario is brave and resilient (to an almost cartoony point, considering the number of things that land on his head in this game). I think what really says the most about the brothers, though, is that when one of them falls in combat, the other will immediately rush to his brother’s aid to defend him from further attacks, even at his own peril. That’s some real brotherly love right there.

You ever feel like we never see these two plumbers doing all that much plumbing?

Superstar Saga is a turn-based RPG though with a bit more of an emphasis on exploration-based puzzle-solving. In the field, Mario and Luigi walk together in a line, with the abilities they can use changing depending on who’s in the lead. Luigi, for instance, can use Mario as a springboard and launch the two of them up, while Mario can create a propeller with Luigi and spin the two of them over large gaps. The game uses these mechanics to create specific puzzle mechanisms, like whirlwinds you need to spin into or high-up switches that only the bounce can reach. For the most part, these are clever and enjoyable, though the problem with introducing a platforming element into a game that isn’t built for it is that the platforming isn’t always as precise as you’d
like it to be. This can frequently lead to some frustrating falls, often right into the waiting arms of an enemy encounter.

I’ll accept laser-faced Snifits, but what exactly is yo-yo man’s plan here?

The combat, though, is where this game really shines. Mario and Luigi have their basic jump/stomp/whatever-you-want-to-call-it, as well as hammer attacks and even elemental attacks acquired later in the game. Much like Mario RPG, well-timed button presses while attacking will add additional damage. As an evolution of that system, the brothers can also dodge and even counter enemy attacks on their turn by jumping over (or on) them or deflecting projectiles with their hammers. If you’ve got good timing and strong thumbs, you can get through almost any encounter virtually unscathed.

Can you imagine how much it’d hurt to have two sweaty plumbers dropped right on your head?

The really cool stuff is the Bros. Attacks. Based on the principles of field abilities, Mario and Luigi can team up for some wacky attacks, hooking up in the air to crush enemies with their combined weight, just to give one example. There’s actually an interesting
subsystem with the Bros. Attacks: each attack has an individual level you can adjust before performing it. At lower levels, time will slow and the brothers will light up with button instructions. The trade-off is that the attack will do less damage as well as cost more to perform. In this way, the game encourages you to get good at Bros. Attacks in order to maximize their potential. And lemme tell ya, nailing a perfect Bros. Attack on the highest level for the first time? It feels really dang good.

Who knew Mario made such a good propeller?

I would call this game an RPG, but if I were to give it a deeper classification, I would call it a “light RPG.” Not light on content, mind you. This game’s got a campaign length that can rival the best of ‘em. Rather, it’s efficiently light. The only members of your party are Mario and Luigi, and you’ll never fight more than three or four enemies at a time. Unlike some RPGs, you won’t have a particularly large array of attacks by the last stretch. Mario and Luigi only have eight Bros. Attacks between them, and two of them are hidden. But that’s okay; this is not a game about overwhelming the enemy with a massive arsenal of situational techniques and spells. Rather, it’s about making strategic use of the resources that you have based on the flow of battle. It can be challenging, but it’s a challenge to your planning skills and reflexes rather than balancing a big character sheet of stats.
That is a very unfortunate thing to be famous for.

In addition to being a genuinely fun turn-based RPG, *Superstar Saga* gave both Mario and Luigi the spotlight and allowed them to be not just heroes, but a team. Mario hasn’t run off without Luigi or gotten himself erroneously kidnapped nor is Luigi stuck house-sitting. They may be the Super Mario Brothers in name, but this was the first game to really show us that the Super Mario Bros are Mario and Luigi instead of Mario and not-Mario.
The original *Paper Mario* on the N64 was a pretty great game and certainly a worthy follow-up to *Super Mario RPG*. The paper style, while a bit unusual, lent itself well to the franchise’s overall aesthetic. Coupled with amusing dialogue and a well-designed combat system, it was an all-around enjoyable experience. So why, I’m sure you’re asking, am I not talking about *that* game? Well, in a similar vein to *Dr. Mario 64*, *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door* is pretty much just *Paper Mario* except, like, better. Way better. I would not hesitate to call it one of the best Mario RPGs, if not one of the best RPGs Nintendo ever made.
You’re standing five feet away from a gallows, lady. Let the man worry.

Ol’ Peach has been cruising around the world for laughs, and her next stop is the small burg of Rogueport. Existing on the outskirts of the Mushroom Kingdom borders (and laws), Rogueport is mostly home to salty sailors, thieves, and mafiosos. Lovely vacation spot, really. After slipping away from Toadsworth’s watchful eye, Peach encounters a peddler in the street who gives her a box. In the box is a map supposedly leading to the Thousand-Year Door, the resting place of a great treasure. Peach sends the map to Mario in hopes of arranging a treasure hunt and is then promptly kidnapped by a group calling themselves the “X-Nauts” who seek the treasure. In hopes that the treasure may lead him to the X-Nauts and Peach, Mario follows the map cross-country to find the seven Crystal Stars that open the Door, making friends and righting wrongs along the way.

Don’t get smart with me, old man.

Talking about this game is difficult because it is, in a word, dense. *Thousand-Year Door* is one of the biggest, most varied Mario RPGs ever made. To find the Crystal Stars, you’ll need to (in no particular order) slay a dragon, become a fighting pit champion, search for sunken treasure, and solve mysteries on a train. And
that’s not even everything. The territories surrounding Rogueport are surprisingly labyrinthine in their own rights, not to mention covered head-to-toe in monsters and puzzles. But I guess that’s what makes any good adventure fun, and this is a game that spares no expense in the fun department. You like big, colorful worlds? It’s got that. You like funny characters? It’s got those.

You like smooth, strategic combat? Oh-ho, it’s got that in spades.

I love how Mario’s first inclination upon being confronted by something three times his size is to jump on it.

Combat utilizes the Action Command system that was pioneered in Mario RPG and improved in Paper Mario. The primary difference is that there are meters and prompts for when you need to push the button/hold the stick/whatever, so the guesswork is eliminated in favor of pure timing. Mario starts with only his jump attack, as well as a hammer he picks up early on, but with special badges you equip outside of combat, you can get all sorts of crazy attacks. From screen-clearing quake-smashes to status-inducing stomps, anything is possible if you’ve got the badges (and badge points) for it. There’s also an audience present during all of your fights that gradually grows the better you perform, fueling the special attacks you get from the Crystal Stars and occasionally throwing your items (and rocks, the jerks). The combat keeps things simple, numerically speaking, opting for lower health and damage values than some other RPGs, but that helps keep the damage you deal consistent and clear and allows for better strategizing. There’s a decent amount of level grinding
you’ll have to do to keep up with the enemies’ ramping levels as the game goes on, but as long as you don’t run from fights, you’ll never be too far behind the curve.

Throughout his quest, Mario is joined by a motley crew of adventuring companions from all walks of life. There’s the spunky archeology student Goomba, Goombella, the timid wannabe hero Koopa, Koops, and my personal favorite, salty retired sailor Bob-Omb, Bobbery, to highlight a few. Each partner has uses both in and out of combat. Goombella can use her book smarts to give you hints about your surroundings and reveal enemy HP bars, while Koops can shoot his shell to retrieve far-away items and attack all enemies on the ground. Besides being generally useful, though, every partner has their own personality and will offer their own little quips and riffs on the situation during cutscenes. It’s kind of hard to put away your favorite partner because you just want to keep hearing them talk. Even Mario, ever the silent protagonist, breaks out his world-class pantomiming skills to show some personality of his own.
When Mario puts his weight into that hammer, the whole town feels it.

Though, even with the aid of your allies, some areas of this game are a teensy bit of a slog. Locations housing final bosses tend to be very dungeon-like, full of locked doors and puzzles. Obviously, that’s not an inherently bad thing because what’s an RPG without dungeons? But it can be easy to get lost, and it’s not always clear what you need to do to solve a puzzle. Something that feels extremely obvious might not work properly until you go and trigger an arbitrary requirement five rooms over. I distinctly remember one instance when, in order to get the answer to a puzzle, I had to walk into a completely empty room and stand motionless for a good minute until a ghost appeared and gave the answer to me (a ghost which, by the way, I had been given maybe a passing notification of the existence of).

I’d like the record to show that this is the “trial” I have to complete to claim a treasure from an ancient fortress. Ancient people are weird.

Aside from its occasional obtuseness, I don’t think I could possibly recommend this game enough. It takes itself just the right amount of seriously, spinning a mostly lighthearted tale full of funny and fascinating characters.
and punctuating it with deep and entertaining combat and puzzles. To this day, I have not met a single person who hasn’t played this game and loved the heck out of it. If you’re a fan of Mario games, RPGs, or both, you owe it to yourself to play it. Go do it. Right now. I mean it.
Tennis is, to me, one of those things that everyone tries at least once in their life and maybe 30% of those people actually play regularly. I’m not throwing any shade on tennis, mind you; it’s a perfectly good sport, encouraging active movement and precision. I just don’t find it particularly fun to watch, a perspective I’ve had since I was a kid. Well, once again Nintendo must’ve tuned in to that wiretap they’ve hidden in my house (I’ll find it one day) because in 2004 they released *Mario Power Tennis* for the Gamecube to challenge my philosophies.
You know you’re having a weird day when you’re playing a chimp in tennis.

Mario Power Tennis is actually the fourth game in the Mario Tennis subseries, preceded by Mario’s Tennis on the Virtual Boy, Mario Tennis on the Nintendo 64, and Mario Tennis on the Game Boy Color. While none of these games were particularly bad (except Mario’s Tennis, though you can blame that on the retina-scorching Virtual Boy), they didn’t really have any notable mechanics that put a proper Mario spin on things. Barring some special game modes in the N64 game or the bizarre RPG mechanics of the GBC game, all of them pretty much just… Mario playing tennis. With his friends. And not-friends. Just… playing tennis. Mario Power Tennis, on the other hand, has a bit more meat to it.

Malevolent spirits aside, that doesn’t really look like the best turf for this game.

If you already know how to play tennis, then you know the basic rules here. The ball comes at you, you hit it back, miss it a bunch, and you lose. It’s tennis, not rocket science. Mario and company spice things up a bit first and foremost with their Power Shot mechanic. Every character has a circular meter on their racket that gradually lights up as you
rally the ball. When it’s full, you can perform Power Shots unique to your character that work either offensively or defensively. Offensive shots smack the ball back and put some kind of effect on it to disorient your opponent. For example, Mario’s offensive shot turns his racket into a hammer that inexplicably sets the ball on fire, while Waluigi’s offensive shot has him spin into a tornado that knocks the opponent back and spins them around. On the flip side, defensive shots allow you to return the ball from anywhere on the court through some equally silly means. Luigi, for instance, will pull out the Poltergust to suck the ball closer to him, while Peach blows a kiss to it that draws it close to her. The Power Shots are flashy and fun to do, but their presence creates a bit of a problem; when two players are equally matched, the presence of Power Shots doesn’t really do much to turn the tide either way. One character uses their offensive shot, the other returns it with their defensive shot (or their offensive if they catch it in the right place), and then it turns back into a normal rally. Most low-to-intermediate-level opponents can be beaten just by shooting the ball onto whatever side of the court they aren’t on. As for higher-level opponents, eh, it’s mostly just a matter of whoever just happens to miss an easy return first.

Why does being bonked on the head electrify him?

One of the game’s big draws is its gimmick courts, which are, well, courts that have a gimmick. These courts have a variety of whozits and whatsits with the general idea being
to make it a lot less easy to play tennis. One that immediately springs to mind is Wario’s Factory, which has a court made of conveyor belts that are toggled by switches above the net. It’s kind of irritating to set up for a return that I suddenly can’t hit because I’ve been carted halfway across the court. The gimmick courts are fun for a laugh, I suppose, but not so much if you want to play a serious game, especially since a higher-level CPU will almost always mysteriously have the gimmick courts work in their favor. Can’t imagine why, if you’ll ignore my gigantic rolling eyes.

There is no way this place is up to code.

If you get sick of plain old tennis, there are some mini-games that you can play, albeit with an obvious tennis theme. All of these, as you may expect, involve hitting a ball at something (usually a wall of some sort). The mini-game “Artist on the Court” has you lobbing paintballs at a blank picture to fill it with color. This mini-game seems impossible at first because there’s no real way to aim your shot until you realize that all you have to do is stand on the reflection of the image below you, at which point it becomes pathetically easy. Some games don’t have that luxury, however; for many of the walls you’re slapping your balls against, you kind of just have to make educated guesses about where they’ll go, which is a rather annoying way to play those kinds of games.
Instead of playing squash, you could just, y’know, take the balloons off the wall.

There are some characters to unlock and additional stages of the mini-games to play, as well as singles and doubles tournaments (if you’re playing doubles, by the way, bring a friend; the CPU partners are idiots) to win trophies, though the trophies don’t actually do anything for you. It’s difficult to put into words, but it kind of feels like *Mario Power Tennis* does everything in its power to be everything except tennis, but then it always just turns back into tennis by the end. And tennis, well… tennis isn’t that interesting. Yeah, you heard me, hidden microphone in my room. As much as I love flashy special attacks and wacky stages, it’s just not enough to make tennis interesting to me. Sorry. Try rugby, maybe.
**Character Thoughts: Bowser**

I like Bowser. He’s a fun villain. I have a variety of reasons for liking him, but the first and foremost one is that he exemplifies a favorite trope of mine that I feel is under-represented in fiction: the self-actualized villain. Bowser is a villain, and he sees himself as such. He’s a bad guy, he knows he’s a bad guy, and he’s got no qualms about being the bad guy. That’s just how he rolls. Most of his minions (when they aren’t cowering before him) actually respect him a lot for this, and it makes sense. Being comfortable with one’s lot in life produces a profound, magnetic charisma. Bowser isn’t exactly charming, but there’s something about him that makes you want to root for him. He’s like a gang leader: a criminal, for sure, but those under his protection and authority respect and admire him.

Contrary to his surly and impatient attitude, Bowser is a surprisingly by-the-books villain. He always gives Mario a fighting chance, he’s usually courteous to Peach when he kidnaps her,

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24 Fun Fact: In the Disney/Pixar film *Wreck-It Ralph*, Bowser is in attendance at the “Villains Anonymous” meeting near the start of the story. Maybe that’s how he learned to be comfortable with himself as a villain.
providing adequate lodging and service, and while he’s not beyond tormenting innocent bystanders, he won’t usually hurt anyone who isn’t involved with his scheme. Bowser may be a villain, but even villains have standards (the good ones, anyway). A good example of that occurs in *Super Paper Mario*, in which Bowser is one of the playable protagonists. One of the worlds in that game ends up being erased by the machinations of the villain, Count Bleck, leaving a completely blank wasteland with no signs of life whatsoever. Mario and company are understandably horrified by this, but surprisingly, Bowser is right there with them. He’s all for conquest and subjugation, but the complete erasure of an entire kingdom and its people goes way too far, even for him.

Though, then again, the better-rounded Bowser we see in the RPGs doesn’t always carry over to the main series, unfortunately. In *Super Mario Galaxy*, for instance, he’s more than willing to crunch half the universe just to make a private galaxy for himself. That would probably result in a lot of dead people. Thankfully, Bowser’s schemes don’t usually go to that level, so I think we can give him a mulligan on that one.

Mario has had his fair share of villains over the course of his career, but I don’t think he’ll be ending his little waltz with Bowser in favor of any of them any time soon. As much as Bowser wants to conquer the Mushroom Kingdom and have Peach to himself, I don’t think it’d be strange to assume that part of him enjoys his little tête-à-têtes with Mario. I’m pretty sure if Bowser ever truly and conclusively beat Mario, he wouldn’t know what to do with himself. And I like Bowser too much to deprive him of his reason for being.
New Super Mario Bros., 2006, Nintendo DS

The original DS, while not quite the powerhouse handheld that its descendent the 3DS would become, was a respectable little doodad with a neat gimmick in its secondary touchscreen. I can’t even begin to tell you the hours my sister and I wiled away playing WarioWare Touched. But we’re not talking about Wario right now (much as I’d kind of like to), we’re talking about Mario. Mario had his share of DS games, but one particular standout was something of a curveball to the players: a revival of the mechanics that raised Mario to greatness in the first place. No, not Donkey Kong, but good guess. I’m talking about New Super Mario Bros.
You’d think if Bowser wanted to crush me, he wouldn’t put these little safe spaces in here. Maybe they’re for the maintenance guys.

*New Super Mario Bros.* has about as much story to it as the original *Super Mario Bros.*, possibly less, since there’s no separate story stuff in the instruction manual. Mario and Peach are out on a walk when the castle suddenly bursts into flames. Mario runs off to help while Peach just sort of stands there and watches. Seeing his opportunity, everyone’s favorite genetic mystery, Bowser Jr., snatches Peach away and runs off to a nearby fortress. Mario does pretty much what you’d expect at this point. If I seem apathetic about this, there’s a good reason for it, but I’ll get into that in a little bit.

I’d make a Godzilla reference, but I can’t really think of a relevant one.

As the name implies, *New Super Mario Bros.* features the same sidescrolling, Goomba-stomping paradigm as the original trilogy. Start on one end of the map, run to the end of the map and grab the flagpole, and try not to die. Mario controls similarly to his NES incarnation, albeit with some of his updated repertoire like wall jumping and ground-pounding. You’ll only really need to make extensive use of those mechanics if you’re a completionist, however; for the majority of the levels, running and jumping will suffice. The usual power-ups return as well, with the Super Mushroom making you bigger and
the Fire Flower giving you fireballs. There are two new power-ups in the form of the Blue Shell, which allows you to slide along the ground and knock enemies away, and the Mini Mushroom, which makes Mario even smaller than usual in order to fit into tiny places and run across water. The real show-stopper is the Mega Mushroom, which temporarily makes Mario as tall as the top of the screen and able to crush just about anything in his path. It’s sort of like a natural evolution of the unstoppable feeling of the Super Star and feels just as satisfying. As an additional dollop of whipped cream, if you crush enough stuff, you’ll get some free power-ups and 1-Ups.

No, a slight overhang! My one weakness!

Level design is, again, mostly the same as the old stuff, though with a bit more animation in the levels. I don’t mean moving platforms; Super Mario Bros. had plenty of those. More like wiggling mushroom platforms, rotating sections of the ground, and big crushing spike trap things. They’re neat and all, I guess, but they don’t add a whole lot to the game beyond making it look a little nicer.

What, you couldn’t stock the item box with something helpful, Toadsworth?

And speaking of looking arbitrarily nicer, it’s time to address that apathy from before. The main thing I have against New Super Mario Bros. is
not what it did as a game, but what it did as a trendsetter. *New Super Mario Bros.* was the
instigating factor in a long period in Mario history that I like to call “The Plateau.” *New Super
Mario Bros.* became a sort of subseries to the mainline Mario series, following up with *New
Super Mario Bros. Wii, New Super Mario Bros. U, New Super Bros. 2*, and, somewhat
tangentially, *Super Mario 3D Land* and *Super Mario 3D World*. The main problem with the *New
Super Mario Bros.* “family,” let’s call it, is that nearly every one of those games is functionally
identical. Beyond graphical facelifts, a couple of extra controller ports (because *everyone* wants
to play through a Mario game as a couple of random Toads), and some additional power-ups, it
is very difficult to tell any of those games apart. *Super Mario 3D Land* and *World* fall onto The
Plateau as well because they are, again, pretty much the same game, albeit in a 3D perspective
and with a playable Peach and Rosalina in the case of the latter. I’ll get more into *3D Land* later;
don’t worry about that. The overarching point is that they’re all the same game, and yet Nintendo
just kept on cranking them out, eventually outpacing the mainline 3D platformers like *Super
Mario Galaxy*. *New Super Mario Bros.*, in essence, usurped the mainline series from its rightful
owners, and that’s really frustrating to me. You know what we call a game that does the same
thing over and over and expects to be praised for it every time? *Call of Duty*. Just kidding.
Mostly. No, we call that boring. It’s a very boring state of being, and as of writing, I’m not
entirely sure Nintendo has managed to move past it.
Giant bobbing mushrooms. What horrors hath science wrought?

About the only new thing this game managed to shoehorn into the sidescrolling Mario formula was multiplayer, in this case in the form of little competitive mini-games. Multiplayer would later become a primary element of the New series, for better or worse considering the antagonistic nature of the hit detection between characters. But that just goes back to my sticking point; New Super Mario Bros. introduced maybe a handful of new elements to Super Mario Bros., kept maybe three of them for future games, and then completely stopped. New Super Mario Bros. is a creative dead end that just sort of keeps popping up every couple of years. There hasn’t been a new one since New Super Luigi U (great idea, by the way, a DLC expansion sold as its own game), and I sincerely hope it remains that way. Stagnation is poison to creative thinking, and this industry needs all the creative thinking it can get.
Everyone has a handful of games that they really like that nobody else seems to. Sometimes it’s one little detail that really flips your switches and makes up for an overall low experience, or other times there’s a deeper aspect that you saw that you felt others didn’t. Either way, for me, one of these games is *Super Paper Mario*. Opinions are split on all corners of the internet, with some of the belief that it was the first step toward Paper Mario’s current sorry state. I don’t believe that personally; *Super Paper Mario*, while not perfect, is just as worthy of praise as its predecessors, albeit in a different manner.
It’s another textbook Bowser kidnapping and Mario’s having none of it. Before the rivals can rumble, they are interrupted by the arrival of extradimensional villain Count Bleck, who whisk away Peach and forces her into a shotgun wedding with Bowser (who is actually pretty okay with this). Bleck is a servant of the Dark Prognosticus, an ancient book that foretells the end of all things. In order to get the apocalypse rolling, Bleck needs Peach and Bowser to marry in order to produce the Chaos Heart, an artifact of unspeakable dark power. Meanwhile, Mario teams up with a pixelated fairy named Tippi who wants to prevent Bleck’s apocalypse. Tippi brings Mario to Flipside, a small town on the outskirts of reality, where they meet the sage Merlon. Merlon is the keeper of a legend of four heroes who will prevent the apocalypse with the power of seven Pure Hearts and believes Mario to be one of those heroes. With Merlon’s blessing, Mario journeys across time and space to uncover the Pure Hearts and prevent the literal end of existence as we know it. No pressure.

Oh yeah, I get this error all the time.

Super Paper Mario is probably the only Mario game I
would classify as an action RPG. It’s a side-scrolling platformer, but jumping on enemies deals numbered damage. You can level up by defeating enemies, though the only thing leveling up does is increase your health a bit. Mario deals fixed damage against all enemies, power-up items notwithstanding. You might think that’d be a little annoying, but things mix up a bit as Mario is joined by more party members down the line in the form of Peach, Bowser, and Luigi. Peach does less damage than Mario but can glide short distances and defend herself with her parasol, while Bowser deals double damage and can breathe fire but can’t fit into small places. Luigi… is pretty much the same as Mario, actually, save for his super-jumping ability, but he’s a late game addition, so whatever. It might sound like, with the abilities every other character offers, you’d never need to play as Mario, and for the most part, you’re right. However, Mario has a signature ability in this game that only he can use: the Flip. By Flipping, Mario moves the camera behind him, forcing a 3D perspective onto a seemingly 2D plain. Flipping allows for some clever optical puzzle solving, as it reveals things you couldn’t see in two dimensions, like two switches sitting vertically side by side or an entranceway in a wall.

This might be the most abstract game in this franchise.

The downside to Flipping is that it can make navigating certain areas of the game needlessly obtuse. The worlds you visit are quite large, and there’s no map function, so whenever you’re presented with more than one means of progression, you need
to keep a mental note of where you have and haven’t explored already. Several times through my run of the game, I got lost in labyrinthine areas with multiple doors accessed by Flipping in different circumstances, and I wound up going in circles for a good hour and a half before throwing my hands up and checking a video walkthrough. This becomes especially frustrating when you encounter a certain enemy that kicks you all the way back to Flipside if you so much as touch it.

Bowser does have priorities, he just doesn’t like admitting it.

Flipping is, thankfully, not the only means of puzzle solving. Throughout your adventure, you’ll pick up a cadre of fairies (known as Pixls) besides Tippi who grant access to a variety of skills. Two that stick out in my mind are Carrie, who transforms into a ridable moving platform (that you will use a lot because it’s slightly faster than walking), and Slim, who allows you to turn sideways and become effectively invisible. Though, while these abilities are handy, the Pixls show a bit of a missed opportunity story-wise; they each have a fun little introduction when you first meet them that showcases their personality (one, in particular, you can get to shout dirty phrases for laughs), but after that, they’re completely silent. Not that I don’t appreciate Peach, Bowser, Luigi, and Tippi’s little riffs on any given situation, but it would be nice to have the rest of your party as a sounding board as well. I mean, they’re floating there during cutscenes anyway; you might as well let ‘em talk.
Who knew all you needed to survive in space was a fishbowl and a little squid thing?

Though, that particular gripe aside, I actually really like this game’s story, if perhaps not its character design. Many of the otherworldly denizens you meet, particularly in Flipside, have bodies constructed of random geometric shapes. It’s a bit awkward, and many of these characters look alike. As you go through the game, though, they really start to grow on you. If there’s one thing I can rely on a Paper Mario game for, it’s entertaining writing, and Super has got a story that’s funny, witty, and even a little touching at times.

Nothing like an ever-present black hole to light a fire under you.

While its puzzles are occasionally obtuse and its layout labyrinthine, Super Paper Mario is a good time for those willing to experiment a bit with both platformers and RPGs. It’s got a surprisingly compelling story and some (not all, but some) memorable characters, and while the combat is simple, you still get a good sense of satisfaction from stomping your enemies. If absolutely nothing else, I can resolutely declare that Super Paper Mario was not the point where the series went downhill. No, sir, that came later…
Much like tennis (and most sports, come to think of it), soccer never really did much for me. Maybe I just grew up in the wrong country for it; I always hear about Brazilian soccer and British soccer being these brutal sports on the same level as American football, but when I watch American soccer, it’s just dudes kicking a ball. Perhaps I need something more… gritty.

Something a little more in your face and extreme. Something that would come out of the 90s. Well, it didn’t come out in the 90s, but *Mario Strikers Charged*\(^\text{25}\) certainly knows how to get my blood pumping, bizarrely enough.

\(^{25}\) Fun Fact: *Mario Strikers Charged* was titled *Mario Strikers Charged Football* in the PAL territories because we are literally the only people in the world who call it soccer.
I get the distinct impression that someone at Nintendo has yet to get beyond Thunderdome.

If I were to sum up this game’s aesthetic in one word, it would be “clashing.” The setting here is a massive wasteland with enormous, jagged soccer fields placed few and far between. These fields have electric fences that separate the spectators from the brutal action on the cracked stone field. And to top it all off, at the start of every game, the team captains jump out of a frigging airplane and do a superhero landing onto the field. If this weren’t a book about Mario games, I imagine that’d sound like some kind of post-apocalyptic death sport, like something you’d see in a Mad Max movie. This is where that clashing thing comes up. The captains? Mario and friends. The spectators? Toads, Koopas, Piantas, etc. It’s really jarring to have this grungy, in-your-face murder-soccer being played by the jolly and colorful Mario cast. Though, oddly enough, after you’ve played for a while, you kinda start to get used to it. Mario’s got a mean war face, lemme tell ya.

Luigi has been suspended from the league on suspicion of substance abuse.
As with the other Mario sports games, it’s plain old soccer on the surface. You control a team of three: one captain, three sidekicks. By passing the ball in rapid succession between your players, you build up the ball’s charge, and when you kick it, it’ll fly farther and faster and, ideally, over the goalie’s head. As most soccer riots have taught me, however, the sport is rarely that simple. During play, you’ll be besieged by stage hazards like pitfalls, landmines, and lightning strikes, as well as shells and bananas, tossed from the opponent. With a bit of luck and crafty item use, it is entirely possible to remove the entire enemy team from play for a few seconds. The captains also receive special signature power-ups, such as Bowser’s fire breath, Waluigi creating movement-limiting thorns, and the Mario Bros. growing to mega size.

Mario: Full-time plumber, part-time sun god.

Speaking of “mega” things, this game’s signature gimmick is the “Mega Strike.” When your captain charges the ball high enough, they’ll launch into the air and fly up after it. They’ll then shoot the ball right at the goal with a flashy super move (which I think we’ve established by now I’m rather fond of). If you’re on the receiving end of this, you’ll play a little mini-game with the Wii remote in which balls fly at you and you have to point at them to destroy them. Any ball that isn’t destroyed counts as a point. Mega Strikes are a fun and flashy way to suddenly turn the tide of the game, though don’t be surprised if none of your shots make it in on higher difficulties.
Waluigi does this crotch-chopping thing every time he scores. I wish he wouldn’t.

I’m really glad that, despite being on the Wii, the motion-control functionality of this game is fairly limited. Beyond the Mega Strike mini-game and some other little optional features, Strikers Charged is all sticks and buttons. This is a good thing; matches in this game can get quite heated and frantic, and I can’t really think in terms of waggling when I’m focused. Not to mention, considering how aggressive the CPUs get on higher difficulties, I simply cannot play a high-speed game like that. That’s a similar little issue to other multiplayer-centric Mario games; the difficulty curve is a bit weird. The lowest-setting CPUs will give up Mega Strikes like they’re going out of style, but go one level up, and you’re getting bodied on almost every potential shot, even the normal, nonexplosive ones. It’s nothing that can’t be learned without a little practice, and this game does have a fairly detailed tutorial section, but it does make the bar of entry for new players a little higher than it perhaps should be.

Apparently Peach has mastery over extradimensional Polaroid cameras now. Lady of many talents, that one.
Don’t let my lack of skill dissuade you, however; this is a surprisingly fun game when it really gets going. Unlike other Mario sports games, this one turned the intensity and wackiness all the way up, and it paid off. It is a little weird for Mario and company to be playing wasteland death-soccer (sans the death), but once you get past the initial weirdness of the premise, *Mario Strikers Charged* offers a lot of fun for both single-player-sports game enthusiasts and casual multiplayer fans. The reason watching sports has never been all that fun for me is due, primarily, to a lack of “impact.” That is to say, since I’m not well versed in some sports, it’s difficult for me to find moments in the game where I can be like, “Holy crap, did you see that? That was amazing!” *Strikers Charged* saw that and said, “Let’s just make Mario a soccer sun god; that amazing enough for you?” Yes, hypothetical Nintendo representative. Yes, it is.
I remember when the original Wii first came out; it was the hottest thing since molten lead. You couldn’t get one of those suckers anywhere. Heck, I only managed to nab mine by sheer chance; my dad looked everywhere for one for Christmas and managed to track down a pre-owned one in some tiny shipping store in the middle of nowhere. But with any new Nintendo console has to come a new and unique Mario platformer (lookin’ at you, Wii U), and Nintendo decided they needed to step things up for the plumber’s next adventure. It may not have worked for Jason Vorhees, but Mario made the jump to space a little better in *Super Mario Galaxy*. 
Wow, Petey Piranha’s got a big family if he’s got relatives all the way out here.

It’s the Star Festival, a big ol’ celebration of a huge comet flying overhead and dropping little star nuggets all over the place. Peach invites Mario to the castle to party it up, but about 30 seconds after he arrives, Bowser shows up with not only his usual fleet of airships but a gigantic UFO. Having tried to flee Mario across the world before, he decides to opt for a different direction, ripping the castle out of the ground and flying into space with Peach in custody. Mario gives chase, and in the process meets the spacefaring Rosalina and her star-like companions, the Lumas, aboard their home, the Comet Observatory. Turns out Bowser’s new space tech came about thanks to Power Stars stolen from Rosalina, and in exchange for getting them back for her, she’s willing to be Mario’s galactic travel agent. With the Observatory as his vessel and a friendly Luma in his cap, Mario scours the cosmos for Bowser and his minions.

“Mission control, this is Plumber-1 en route to space peanut. Please acknowledge.”

Similarly to 64, Galaxy has a variety of levels that you’ll need Power Stars to access. Around the Observatory are several domes, each projecting to a handful of little galaxies with individual Star requirements. There are
no consistent themes to the galaxies; some are mini-forests populated by insects, some are full of gigantic floating toys. As far as aesthetics go, I actually prefer the Comet Observatory to the regular levels, since the wandering Lumas and orchestral music give it a bit of a whimsical feel. Every Star challenge loads a different instance of a Galaxy, though the most obvious change here is that at the start of a challenge, you’ll usually start somewhere completely different. Most of the levels are linear by design but create an illusion of openness by having lots of platforms and planetoids floating in space. I admit, it is fun to have Mario launch himself from the star launchers and watch him hurtling through the air to get to these, but it comes at the cost of being able to explore a level and uncover stuff at your own pace. Still, the upshot to linear layout is tighter level design; it’s much clearer where you need to go, what you need to do, and how you need to get there, and the physics have been touched up (mostly) to warrant safe travel. Mario still has a bit of a jump-committal problem, but that’s remedied somewhat by his new ability.

Try not to think about the pulsating black hole just 20 feet beneath you.

Luma’s nondescript space mojo grants Mario the ability to spin. What? They can’t all be flashy moves. Spinning may not look too impressive, but it is a multi-use ability. It can be used as an attack to stun and defeat enemies, it can activate the launchers Mario needs to progress, and it can smash stuff. It can also be used in a pinch to give you a little extra hang-time in the air, which you’ll need in the event of a botched jump. Once again, gravity and Mario don’t exactly see eye to eye, especially in the dark depths of space. As I mentioned, many levels are
composed of small, round planetoids with their own gravitational pull; when you land on them, Mario’s orientation shifts accordingly. It’s a neat trick, but it can get a little bit disorienting when you have to start walking upside down. Due to the Wii Remote’s lack of a second analogue stick, it’s not as easy to wrangle the camera as I’d like, and coupled with the fact that the direction the stick moves Mario can abruptly change with your orientation, there were multiple times I walked right into a pit because I couldn’t get my bearings. There are also some times when you’ll need to jump from one gravitational zone to another, but if you jump outside the window where it shifts (which you can’t see), Mario will fall off into nothingness.

This… I can’t even make a joke; this is just strange.

Galaxy also introduced a new line of power-ups to Mario’s ever-expanding closet. My personal favorite is the Bee Suit, which allows you to fly and climb on honeycombs, though again, gravity rears its jealous head at your defiance of it; if you’re ever flying between gravitational zones, the physics will sometimes just wet the bed and slingshot Mario to his death. There’s also the Spring Suit, which is less of a suit and more of a giant spring Mario just sort of sits in, that doubles your jumping height. It also removes your ability to walk, however, replacing it with short bounces. You don’t have a lot of air control while you’re bouncing so expect to bumble into a few traps. Thankfully, not all of the power-ups are air-based; there’s the Boo Mushroom that, well, turns Mario into a Boo, allowing him to float and pass through bars. The Fire Flower makes a comeback, along with its
counterpart the Ice Flower, allowing you to melt (or create) ice as the situation demands. These don’t appear in every level, sadly, but the ones they do appear in are built for the express use of these powers and are more enjoyable for it.

Nothing like floating through space suspended only by a tiny wire of light.

There are 120 Power Stars to collect in total, though the game does mix things up with the inclusion of Prankster Comets, which add special challenges to the galaxies they orbit around, as well as Luigi’s Green Star challenges. Yes, Luigi ain’t the star of this one, but he’s still raring to help out his brother where he can. If you collect every star in the game, you can actually play through the whole thing again as Luigi, who handles slightly differently from Mario.

Ugh, ONE GUY dresses up like an evil shadow version of you, and suddenly the whole universe is doing it.
Galaxy feels very much like a follow-up to 64, for better or worse. The physics are still a bit stranger than I’d like, and I do miss exploring levels freely. When everything feels like working properly, though, it’s a fun platforming romp with some colorful locations and clever mechanics. I’m not really sure why, but something about Mario and space settings always seems to gel in the rare instance they come together. Maybe plumbing is the profession of the future? Will all astronauts be trained plumbers someday? Eh… maybe not.

Fun Fact: Galaxy actually got a direct follow-up a few years later with Super Mario Galaxy 2, but that game is effectively the same as the first aside from the inclusion of Yoshi. It did have a spaceship shaped like Mario’s head, though. That’s pretty funny.
Back in mid-2011, the 3DS had just begun its life cycle, and there wasn’t a whole lot to play. Being an early adopter of the system, I amused myself for a period with the built-in AR camera games like Face Raiders. After a couple of months of that, however, I began to crave something meatier, something that could really put the system through its paces and give me my money’s worth. Also, something that wasn’t a port. Good god, were there a lot of ports on the 3DS at the start. The first really big game that came out was Super Mario 3D Land; I played it and enjoyed it very much. So… why can’t I remember anything about it?

“Boy, this... sure is a tree.”

One dark, stormy night near Peach’s castle, the heavy wind blows some leaves off a tree. This is a plot point. Turns out those leaves were Super Leaves, which I guess everyone just sort of forgot existed after Super
Mario Bros. 3, and the majority of them blow right into the hands of one King Bowser Koopa. Powering up his troops with the Leaves, Bowser snags Peach before anyone can even notice. Like, seriously, Mario gets up in the morning, goes to look at the tree, and finds a floating letter from Peach containing a photo of her being kidnapped. Bowser’s apparent ninja stealth skills aside, Mario and some of the Toads rush off down the road to save the Princess.

Does anyone actually like the Musical Blocks? Because I always found them annoying.

Super Mario 3D Land is sort of like a mid-point between the 2D and 3D Mario platformers. Levels are rendered in 3D and you can walk anywhere you like, but they’re also linear and have a time limit to get to the flag at the end. Mario’s got his usual array of 3D jumping tricks like the backflip, side-flip, long jump, and triple jump. Though, in a carryover from the 2D games, Mario won’t run at his full speed unless you’re holding the dash button. Now, that makes sense in a 2D game where you can’t really see what’s in front of you and need to slow down sometimes, but in a 3D game, it’s just kind of annoying, since there’s almost never a time I wouldn’t want to be moving as quickly as possible. It’d make more sense to relegate all of that to the control stick (or nub, I guess; whatever we’re supposed to call the thing the 3DS uses).
If we turn this in a certain direction, does it become a picture of a skeleton or something? The majority of optical illusions seem to do that, in my experience.

The major selling point power-up of this game is the Tanooki Suit, returning from Super Mario Bros. 3 after a very long absence. There’s no vanilla Raccoon Tail this time, just the suit, which is fine since it does the same stuff anyway. As was the case before, Mario can use the Tanooki tail to swat away enemies and float short distances. The statue-transformation ability has been relegated to a separate power-up, however: the Stone Leaf. Since it’s a very circumstantial ability, it only pops up a few times in the late game. There are a couple of new power-ups like the Boomerang Flower that allows Mario to throw boomerangs and the Propeller Block that allows him to jump higher, but there are two, in particular, I want to highlight.

Dude, come on, even children know spinning around with your fists out isn’t gonna win you any fights.

The Invincibility Leaf appears next to a checkpoint after you’ve died five times in a row. It gives you the abilities of the Tanooki Suit as well as making you invincible to all damage except for pits. If you die ten times in a row,
you get a P-Wing, which just skips you right to the end of the level. These were very divisive power-ups among the Mario fan community, and it’s easy to see why. Both power-ups, the latter more so, are pretty much just “get out of effort free” cards. The intent is for younger players to be able to keep playing the game even if they can’t beat a level, but what’s the moral there? Fail enough times and someone will carry you to the finish line? If you’re not gonna play the game properly, why even bother playing the game? I’m already pretty angry when I’ve died multiple times in a row, but dangling a little existential carrot in front of me like that every time I try again just makes me angrier like the game’s just waiting for an excuse to call me a quitter.

*We’ve loaded this cannon with the most dangerous ordinance we have: a single chubby guy.*

The only really clever gimmick this game has to offer is its 3D puzzle rooms. Certain rooms, both inside the regular levels and in levels of their own, contain platforms arranged in such a way to create a sort of optical illusion. By turning on the 3DS’s 3D-viewing mode, you can see them in true 3D, allowing you to jump on them. There are also platforms that can change the room’s orientation, giving you a different view. There’s usually not a whole lot in these rooms besides the Star Medals you need to open more levels, but it is a clever use of the 3DS’s technology and deserves recognition for it.
Whoever created the Mushroom Kingdom’s Warp Pipe system must’ve been really obnoxious.

Since you don’t have any goals besides just finishing the levels and getting the Star Medals, you could probably finish this game in around three hours if you’re good. Granted, there’s a set of additional worlds you can play through after you’ve beaten the regular eight and rescued Peach, though that makes me wonder why they even designated them as “special” worlds instead of just having the game be sixteen worlds long.

So are we just not doing themed worlds anymore? We haven’t had a water level in a while, so let’s have one for laughs? Alright, then.

As I mentioned when I was talking about *New Super Mario Bros.*, this game was a part of the Plateau phenomenon that caused stagnation in the main series and shares the same primary problem: the platforming works just fine, great even. But there’s nothing particularly memorable about the entire exercise. I started the game, I rescued Peach, and everything in between (and after) is a blur. A bunch of disconnected platforming levels is fine for the 2D games, but I think I’d be forgiven for expecting a little more out of my 3D Mario games.
Character Thoughts: Toad

There are few characters throughout the Mario franchise that inspire as many different emotions as Toad. Or, well, Toads. Plural. Toads are a race, not a guy… though that does make me wonder who the Toad is in the Mario Party games that acts as host of everything. He’s just called Toad. Is that his name, or can no one be bothered to learn his name, so they just call him by what he is? Talk about casual racism. Anyway, let’s talk Toads.

Toads in General

It seems like the farther a Toad is from the Mushroom Kingdom proper, the more capable they are. The Toads living within the vicinity of Peach’s castle and Toad Town tend to be somewhat impulsive, cowardly, and thick-headed, with the only notable exceptions being older Toads like the cooking expert Tayce T. and that karate master guy, both from Paper Mario. Toads farther away tend to be more capable and self-sufficient, like the nomadic ones living in the desert or the settlers in the north of the BeanBean Kingdom. About the only capable Toads I can think of that hang around the castle are the unnamed blue and yellow ones that accompany Mario and Luigi in New Super Mario Bros. Wii. Those guys are pretty decent platformers if they can run with the Bros. A shame they don’t have names.

Speaking of colors, the jury is still out on whether or not the top of a Toad’s head is a hat or just their head. They come in all sorts of colors and patterns besides the usual white with red
spots, and no Mario game I can think of has ever gone any deeper into Toad genetics, so I don’t know if its hereditary or a fashion statement. Though, I have seen Toads with hair poking out from under the top parts, so that does give some credence to the hat theory. Either that or Toads all have really weird hairlines.

Toadsworth

Toadsworth has been working as Peach’s attendant for a good chunk of his life. Going by *Mario and Luigi: Partners in Time*, he’s been doing it since she was an infant. Makes you wonder how he himself views the princess; you keep an eye on a kid for that long, you’re gonna start to feel your daddy instincts awaken. That’s probably why he’s the first one to freak out when Peach is kidnapped. In his eyes, someone’s taken his daughter from him. It’s kinda sweet, actually. Of course, I’m just hypothesizing here, so for all I know, he just gets a really good benefits package, and Peach being kidnapped puts him up for a performance review. Well, motives aside, Toadsworth works hard for Peach and is always available to provide his services to the Mario Bros. should they need them. He’s also apparently quite athletic when he needs to be, popping up as a playable character in *Mario Superstar Baseball*. Guy’s got a killer pitch. Not much for batting, though.
Isn’t naming your kid “Toadette” kind of like naming your kid “Humanette?” Makes you wonder about Toadette’s private life. Come to think of it, we don’t know much about Toadette. She just sort of appeared out of the blue in *Mario Kart: Double Dash!* and has remained a constant since. I don’t really know what her job is, aside from part-time member of the Toad Brigade, but she seems to live in Peach’s castle and do some kind of job for her. I do recall in *Mario and Luigi: Paper Jam* that she worked as an inventor/foreman of sorts, directing paper Toads to build the giant papercraft effigies for Mario to ride. Whether she was given this job by someone in a position of authority or just sort of walked in and started folding paper, I haven’t the foggiest. It seems like wherever Toadette goes, she just happens to have a relevant and prolific career. Enterprising little fungus, isn’t she?
I’ve seen in several Mario games that Peach does, in fact, employ Toad guards in the castle. Like, with spears and stuff. Though, giving a Toad a spear is kind of like putting a pointy hat on a houseplant; it might hurt you if you slap your hand right into it, but you could probably just kick it over. As far as their track records go for preventing Peach kidnappings, well, I don’t think I need to spell it out.

One aspect of Peach’s entourage that does provide a valuable service, however, is the Toad Brigade, led by the infamous Captain Toad. On their own time, they act as explorers and treasure hunters on behalf of the Mushroom government, mapping out uncharted territory, archiving ancient history, tracking down mysterious artifacts, and all that other Hollywood-style archeology stuff. When Peach is kidnapped, however, they immediately dedicate all of their resources to aiding Mario in whatever way they can, and for Toads, they’re surprisingly good at it. Heck, in Super Mario Galaxy, they built a small fleet of functional spacecraft from scratch just to head up into space and help Mario. Captain Toad himself even got his own game in the form of Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker, where he and the brigade rescued Toadette from a giant bird monster. Captain Toad also pops up periodically in Super Mario Odyssey, uncovering Power Moons for Mario to
aid in his quest. Let me tell you, among all Toads, the good Captain might just be the most helpful and accomplished.
From *Mario Party* to *Mario Party 8*, the series’ general formula remained more-or-less the same. Run around a board, get stars, win mini-games, and screw each other over. A couple of the games would throw curveballs like the “Tycoon Town” board in *Mario Party 8* where stars were doled out based on how much property you owned, but those were few and far between. The first major departure from this formula came in the form of *Mario Party 9* for the Wii. After playing it, all I can say is that I really, really miss the old games.

*Nothing like a leisurely drive through a dark mineshaft being slowly consumed by white-hot magma.*
It’s a lovely evening, and the assorted associates of Mario are spending it watching Mini-Stars through a telescope. Considering the frequency of Stars in Mario’s life, this might be akin to watching paint dry, but far be it from me to judge the hobbies of others. As everyone is gazing, the stars all begin to coalesce into a single point in the sky. No, it’s not a harbinger of the end times, it’s just Bowser sucking them up with a vacuum. I guess if he can’t have regular stars, he’s willing to settle for bite-sized ones. With steely resolve, Mario and the gang run off to steal the Mini-Stars back from Bowser the best way they know how: by playing a board game.

*Are we just calling places “stages” now?*
*Like, are there road signs nearby that say “next stage: five miles?”*

Instead of each player moving around the board at their own pace, all four are crammed into a car and move together with each roll. The active player, known as the “captain,” receives any Mini-Stars that the car collects as it goes and is also the target of any board events. If you thought the old *Mario Party* formula was cutthroat, well, you’re right, but this car format turns every turn into a devious game of chicken. The usual strategy is to roll in a way that moves the car forward but not so far forward that your opponents can get to the Mini-Stars first. Of course, since this is completely luck-based, you’ll more often than not either stop right before Mini-Stars, letting an opponent get them, or blunder right into a trap. You’re going to be either mad at yourself for a bad roll or mad at everyone else for screwing you over.
One-on-three touch football. It’s high school PE all over again.

The primary attraction of any Mario Party game, in my humble opinion, is the mini-games. But it seems like the mini-games in Mario Party 9 have been deliberately relegated to the back seat of the proceedings. Firstly, you don’t play a mini-game after everyone takes a turn anymore; you only play one by landing on the designated mini-game space. This means, however unlikely it may be, that it is theoretically possible to go through an entire board without playing a single mini-game. Of course, being on the Wii, the majority of the mini-games contain high levels of Wii Remote waggling, the quality of which depends on how your Wii is feeling that day. When playing this game with friends, I can guarantee there will be an audible sigh of relief through the room when a mini-game has you hold the Wii Remote sideways and use the buttons.  

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27 Fun Fact: As of writing, Nintendo recently released a collection of Mario Party mini-games for the 3DS titled Mario Party: The Top 100 that features mini-games from every game so far. It’s rather telling that Mario Party 9 has the second smallest number of offerings to that list, behind only Mario Party 10.
Is competitive wood chopping a real thing? I think I saw that somewhere before.

I’ve heard rumblings in the past that *Mario Party* games are too slow-paced, so I get why they would implement this car thing to move everyone along at the same time. However, the fatal flaw of that decision is that every board still takes a good hour to finish. In previous games, you could set the number of turns you wanted to play if you wanted a quick pick-up game. In *Mario Party 9*, it’s the whole board or bust. This might be excusable if there were still a prevalence of fun Mini-games, but since the Mini-games have been relegated to a space-specific event, the majority of any play session is taken up by board shenanigans.

Luigi’s Mansion would’ve been a lot shorter if he knew all it took to beat King Boo was a game of match-3.

There’s also a single-player mode you’ll need to play to unlock the last two boards, which is a fun little nightmare in itself. You’re basically just playing the boards with two CPU companions, one of which is working for Bowser. If the Bowser guy wins, you have to play the entire board all over again. I’m not saying you can’t have a game without a way to lose, but I feel a lot less inclined to replay something I lost at when every attempt is another hour out of my life.
So wait, if we KNOW Shy Guy is working for Bowser, why do we even let him in the car with us?

Have you ever been stuck on a long car trip with an annoying sibling, and you eventually get into a little war to see who can make the other more miserable? That’s kind of what this game is like. Previous *Mario Party* games could be cutthroat and devious, but they could still be surmounted through a balance of raw skill and a healthy dose of luck. *Mario Party 9* places too much emphasis on luck and not enough on skill, with far too much time spent faffing about on the board instead of playing something resembling a videogame. Perhaps that’s somewhat contradictory, expecting a board game videogame to be less of a board game, but if I wanted to play a regular-ass board game, I’d play a regular-ass board game. If I wanted a beefier board game experience with videogame elements, I’d play literally any other *Mario Party* game (except *Mario Party 10* because it also did the car thing).
Throughout my years as a gamer, Paper Mario remained a relative constant in one form or another. The original on the N64, The Thousand-Year Door on GameCube, and Super on the Wii; each game was a wonderfully entertaining and engaging experience. So you can imagine when I was in my sophomore year in college, how excited I was at the prospect of Paper Mario: Sticker Star on the 3DS. Oh boy! I thought, a brand new Paper Mario game! And on a portable console, no less! This is sure to be a grand old time worthy of all of my wonderful memories of the series! So, I’m sure you ask, was it? Let me put this in the most succinct terms I can manage: there are very, very few videogames, if any, that hold the distinction of my pure, unbridled hatred. Paper Mario: Sticker Star is one of those devilish few, for the twin crimes of being a generally awful game and, more importantly, taking the best elements of one of my favorite series and crushing them beneath an apathetic boot.
Who cares about stickers when a literal comet just politely landed on a podium?

I can only assume that, in the intervening time between this game and *Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door*, the residents of the Mushroom Kingdom came to the startling scientific conclusion that they are, in fact, made of paper. Instead of having an existential crisis, they decide to get way into being made of paper and start basing a good chunk of their economy around paper and sticker products. Case in point, Princess Peach and Mario host the annual “Sticker Fest” in which the Sticker Comet descends to Earth and everyone gets to just sort of look at it for a little while. Bowser and his folks crash the party and lay claim to the comet, and the comet is inadvertently shattered into six “Royal Stickers” that make everything sparkly, and as an expert in stickers will tell you, being sparkly means being more powerful. Using the sparkly nonsense, Bowser sticks a bunch of Toads to walls and kidnaps Peach. Mario, with the assistance of the sticker fairy Kersti, has to bum around the kingdom and collect the Royal Stickers before Bowser… I dunno, starts investing in Trapper Keepers or something. It’s a bargain bin story that just reeks of “let’s get this over with.” Bowser’s doing the usual Bowser thing, Peach is doing the usual Peach thing, and Mario is doing the usual Mario thing. Same crap, different day. Kersti tries to do a sort of wise-cracking sidekick thing, but half the time I forget she’s even there before she opens her nonexistent mouth; that’s how inconsequential she is.
Am I the only one who never really saw the appeal of sticker books?

Instead of the usual open world of previous *Paper Mario* games, *Sticker Star* uses a map with separated levels. In each level, the only goal is to get from point A to Point B, occasionally solving a puzzle or two and getting into turn-based fights along the way. In order to accomplish just about anything in this game, you need stickers. Stickers for solving puzzles, stickers for attacking enemies; if it’s something that would normally have a simple practical solution, you need a sticker for it. Here’s where the main problem of this game rears its head: in order to progress and beat the enemies you need to beat, you need good, powerful stickers. The obvious solution is to just save your good stickers, right? But you only have so much space in your sticker album, and lousy stickers don’t do a lot of damage. So when you’re beset by a regular, non-mandatory enemy, you inevitably have to burn your good stickers to get them out of your way without losing health. Then you get to a boss, and hey, guess what? Your stickers all suck. Oh well, time to go to the levels again to get more coins to buy more stickers from town (which you have to go all the way back to between each level).

You can spin a slot to use multiple stickers per turn. Because nothing says “good design” like leaving your ability to fight up to complete chance, right?
You might be thinking *this is an RPG, though, right? You need to fight regular enemies to get stronger!* Yeah, you’d be right if this were a well-designed RPG. There is no experience point mechanic. Fighting enemies just gets you more coins, which gets you more stickers, which you waste all of when you have to fight regular enemies. In other words, the best solution for getting through the game with your best stickers is to avoid battles entirely, something which runs counter to the very core of RPG mechanics. It should feel fun to enter a new area and see new enemies (and stickers, I guess), but all I feel is “let’s get this over with.” Seeing the pattern yet?

*Well, that’s just rude.*

Occasionally, you’ll find “Things,” three-dimensional objects treated as mystical relics of power because, apparently, a Toad scientist can’t identify a desk fan if it’s not two-dimensional. These can be used in battle as big, screen-clearing attacks, and in the field as solutions to a puzzle. But once again, the sticker mechanic rears its big, stupid head. Thing stickers are often needed in the big boss fights because each one is weak to a particular Thing, like scissors against a giant Goomba made of a bunch of little Goombas or like a sponge against an ink-shooting Blooper. But Thing stickers are also bloody gigantic and can take up an entire page of your album on their own. So you save space for them, but then you can’t fit any powerful regular stickers in your album, and you make it to the fight and exploit their weakness but, hey, guess what? The rest of your stickers suck! Oh
well, a shame you didn’t have any money to buy some better stickers that wouldn’t fit in your album anyway.

Is this like bragging about bench-pressing?
Because it’s about as interesting.

I know I’ve spent this whole thing ranting about the combat system, but what else is there? The puzzles range from boringly obvious to maddeningly obtuse, the charming and clever dialogue of past games has been replaced with paper puns, and the levels are completely lifeless. Oh, and don’t go hoping for any interesting partner characters because they completely cut those out for reasons beyond my understanding. This is a completely nothing game. Actually, no, that’s not quite right. Paper Mario: Sticker Star is not a game. It is a chore. A chore that I paid forty bucks for when it first came out because it was masquerading as something I loved. The only thing worse than doing chores is being tricked into doing chores.
The Nine Best Mario Power-Ups

Power-ups are central to the Mario franchise’s identity. Even outside the main series, you can always find a power-up or two to make your life a little more interesting. Now, there have been a lot of power-ups in this franchise, and it would take all day to go through all of them, so in the interest of time, here are some of the power-ups that have stood out to me over the years.

Super Mushroom

Well, obviously. You can’t have a Mario game without this sucker. It’s always hanging around in one form or another, either as a power-up or just a scenery dressing. Now, this is just a rumor I heard once, but supposedly, the reason the Super Mushrooms have eyes is that they’re citizens of the Mushroom Kingdom cursed into an immobile form by Bowser. Mario is not eating them he’s rescuing them, and they make him big to thank him. Of course, like I said, just a thing I heard once. For all I know, Mario’s chomping away at these things whether they’re sentient or not. Gosh, that’s kind of a dark thought, huh?
Getting a Fire Flower in any Mario game always makes me feel like a superhero. The ability to defend yourself in a way other than jumping on things, and in such a cool manner, just says “Saturday morning cartoon” to me. Who wouldn’t want to lob fireballs at things, really? Ask yourself this. There is only one correct answer.

Super Star

Complete untouchability for about thirteen seconds (bottomless pits notwithstanding). If I were to sum up the feeling a Super Star instills in me, it would be one word: satisfaction. There’s this indescribable rush that comes from storming through a level,
throwing caution to the wind, and mowing down any foolish enough to stand in your way. And that invincibility jingle, hoo boy. It’s only, like, two lines of notes, but what two lines they are.²⁸

Tanooki Suit

You might be wondering why I chose the full-on Tanooki suit instead of the plain old Super Leaf. There are a few reasons: one, it has all of the same flight and tail-whipping abilities of the Super Leaf’s Racoon tail. Two, in *Super Mario Bros. 3* and via a special version in *Super Mario 3D Land*, the suit can transform Mario into a stone Jizo statue, which is both practical, in terms of hiding from enemies and crushing things, and amusing. And three, the most important reason of all: Mario just looks so cute and comfy in snuggly raccoon dog pajamas. If I had a Tanooki Suit, I can guarantee you I would never take it off.

²⁸ Fun Fact: The invincibility jingle got a really sick jazz remix in *Mario Strikers Charged*. Seriously, look it up; it’s the best song in that game.
I know at least one person is looking to quote The Incredibles at me right now, but can we all just agree that capes are cool sometimes? And besides everything, Mario looks darn good in a cape. Like, the whole flying and projectile deflection things are nice and all, definitely. But I never thought about how much good a bit of yellow could do an outfit before Mario decided to tie a shower curtain around his neck. Though, and I know this is a stupid question, how does a feather grant one a cape? Like, wings or something would make sense, but why a cape? Maybe… is the cape made of goose down? I’m going with that.
Wing Cap

The Wing Cap is the signature power-up of *Super Mario 64*, right there on the box art. With the Cape Feather before it, flying in Mario games was nothing new at the time. This, however, was a flight in 3D. Two little wings right on the cap; elegant in its simplicity. I actually have a little plushie of Mario with the Wing Cap on my shelf, arms outstretched in a perpetual flight position. I had many joyful hours as a kid running around the house with him making wooshing noises and then unceremoniously chucking him at my sister. Good times.
If the Wing Cap was the official signature power-up of *Mario 64*, the Metal Cap was the unofficial one. Many times, when I ask folks what their favorite thing about *Mario 64* was, they’ll tell me, “Metal Mario!” It’s easy to see why: complete invincibility, that sick chrome paint job, and that exclusive theme song. It’s no wonder that Metal Mario is still a recurring character in many Nintendo party games like *Mario Kart* and *Super Smash Bros*. Guy’s always a crowd pleaser.
Propeller Mushroom

My overall thoughts on the *New Super Mario Bros.* series aside, I will admit it made good in the power-up department. The Propeller Suit is pretty much just a baseball helmet with a propeller on it, but no matter how silly it may look, being able to jump all the way up to the top of the screen is no chuckling matter. I recall a handful of multiplayer moments where other players felt exceedingly envious of any who had the propeller when they did not. As if that game wasn’t good enough at destroying friendships as it is.

Bee Mushroom

I know red is Mario’s thing, but honestly? He looks really good in yellow. Not unlike the Cape Feather, the Bee Suit bestowed flight as well as the ability to crawl on honeycomb. But if these two power-ups have taught us anything, it’s that we should be dressing up Mario in yellow more often. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why Wario likes yellow. He’s trying to ape Mario’s style before it’s even Mario’s style! Ooh, that clever devil.
Super Mario Maker, 2015, Wii U

Does the word “kaizo” mean anything to you? It’s not as common to hear in gaming circles as it used to be. Back in the mid-2000s, a Japanese ROM hack creator by the name of Takemoto created a special hack of Super Mario World for a friend of his entitled “Jisaku no Kaizō Mario (Super Mario World) o Yūjin ni Play Saseru.” Now that’s a mouthful, obviously, so most folks just call it “Kaizo Mario World.” Kaizo Mario was a ROM hack created with the express purpose of having hair-pulling, eye-gouging, and lungs-burning levels of difficulty, and to this day, there have only been only two recorded runs with zero deaths. The reason I bring this up is that since the advent of Kaizo Mario, there has been a dedicated Mario homebrew community, its members using games like Super Mario World as a canvas to create something entirely new. Thing is, hex editing isn’t particularly easy, so there’s a bit of a learning curve

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29 Fun Fact: A “ROM hack” is when you take a data file of an old videogame (a ROM) and alter it with a hex editor to create something new. This can include new graphics, new levels, and even new gameplay elements if you’re crafty enough. Some companies disapprove of people editing their games, while others actively encourage it, seeing it as free publicity.
when it comes to becoming a ROM hacker. You can imagine, then, the sudden torrent of new users when Nintendo released *Super Mario Maker* and smoothed that curve down.

There’s no setup here or anything; Mario doesn’t suddenly own a construction site and need to beat Bowser to become the king of real estate. Though, come to think of it, that’d be kind of neat. But no, *Super Mario Maker* is pretty much just a suite of tools for creating your own Mario levels. You can choose any previous side-scrolling Mario game as a theme (*Super Mario Bros.*, *Super Mario Bros. 3*, *Super Mario World*, and *New Super Mario Bros. U*) and lay down blocks, walkways, enemies, and power-ups as convenient tiles. You can even customize the way certain objects and enemies behave in relation to Mario and the rest of the level. For instance, you could, I dunno, have a giant spinning spike come flying out of a question block. You could set cannons to shoot Thwomps instead of Bullet Bills. You could use the sound effects function to make mushrooms laugh at you when you pick them up. Really, if you’re creative enough and have a decent enough sense of spatial reasoning, there isn’t anything you can’t make with this game.

You’re a little limited in the tools you can use at first, but by using the creation mode for a little while, you’ll gradually get access to everything else,\(^{30}\) which you’ll want if you want to keep up with the online community.

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\(^{30}\) Fun Fact: Originally, to get every tool in the suite, you needed to wait a whopping nine days. Thankfully, Nintendo patched this post-launch to give you more tools sooner based on how much creating you do.
Yes, *Super Mario Maker* had (and continues to have, despite the Wii U no longer being in production) quite a booming online community. Any level you make with the creation tools can be uploaded to the internet for others to try and comment on. From perusing the library of levels, you can see that most of the available ones fall into three broad categories: regular levels to be played and completed, insanely difficult levels that, I presume, were made by sadistic people with too much time on their hands, and gimmick levels, which are less “levels” and more showcases of a creator’s ingenuity. If you’re feeling adventurous, you can try the 100 Mario Challenge, which gives you a randomized set of levels from the catalog and 100 lives to clear all of them (which can be a lot more difficult than it sounds).

But as much as the community booms with creativity and sadism, something about *Super Mario Maker* kind of nags at me, and I think it’s this: it’s not really a Mario game. It has Mario in it, and it is a playable piece of software for a game console, but, well… A game, I feel, is something to be played to either completion or, in the case of most online games, mastery. You can’t complete or master *Super
Mario Maker. Depending on what it means to you as a product, it’s either a chance to match wits and skills with creative people or a chance to flex your own creativity. But even a game with an extensive emphasis on creativity needs to have some kind of goal to it. For what purpose am I being creative? To prove that I can? I admit I might not be the target audience for this game, mostly because I don’t have the patience to create an entire gimmick-filled level, nor do I care much for overly difficult platformers. It’s fun to watch someone do those things on YouTube, sure, but in doing it myself I just get kind of bored and frustrated.

Now, why didn’t Bowser ever think of this?

Let me be 100% crystal clear here: I am not saying Super Mario Maker is bad. If you are creative and/or enjoy playing difficult platformer games, it’s probably perfect for you, doubly so if you have an interest in homebrew Mario games. But speaking as a gamer, consumer, and critic, I can’t help feeling a mildly cynical air about Super Mario Maker. Granted, I’m a cynical person, so maybe I’m just looking for faults where there aren’t any. But considering Nintendo’s somewhat adversarial stance against homebrew Mario content over the last few years, this game seems to paint a message of “you can only make your own Mario stuff when we say so.” The community was already there, Nintendo just started charging for tickets.
The "Mario Mentality" Part 2: Community

Gaming has always been a very inclusive hobby, if not a somewhat dense one. There are points of entry in just about every genre, from platformers to shooters. While Mario games don’t often inspire the same level of community as, say, an online shooter like Overwatch, Mario games do have their audience and collective. This is typically comprised of old-school fans who have been into the games since the early days and younger fans who are just looking for something fun to play.

Despite most of the games being single-player focused (barring obvious exceptions like Mario Kart and Mario Party), I still find that Mario games play well to social interaction. Though, when I say “social interaction,” I mean less “weekly LAN party” and more “Saturday-night sleepover.” Mario games, in my personal experience, lend themselves better to the social interactions of the aforementioned younger fans.

I distinctly recall a weekend back in middle school when a friend and I spent an entire Saturday playing through half of Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door. How does one play a single-player game with another, you might ask? Honestly, there’s no right way to do it. Some folks try to establish house rules like “pass the controller on death,” but since we were playing an RPG, dying was a rarer occurrence. We pretty much just passed the controller back and forth at random, with one of us taking the helm and the other lounging on the couch behind them throwing out jabs and generally backseat gaming. It sounds incredibly obnoxious on paper, but it was a surprisingly fun time (though I think Thousand-Year Door’s good writing aided on that front).

Adults can have their fun with Mario games as well, however. While not to the extent of fighting game communities, new Mario Kart entries always have a dedicated multiplayer
community and occasional real-life events like tournaments (certainly more than any other racing game I can think of, anyway). The Mario homebrew community, bolstered by the advent of Super Mario Maker, has been thriving since the mid-2000s with all sorts of fan-made games, patches, and hacks created from just about every Mario game out there. Though, somewhat counterintuitively, Nintendo has made a habit over the last few years of cracking down harder on fan-made content, demanding take-downs and threatening lawsuits if compliance is not given.

I recall an incident back in 2015 when a fan recreated the first level of Super Mario 64, Bob-Omb Battlefield, in HD using the Unity engine. It was very well-received in the fan community. However, about a week later, Nintendo filed a copyright infringement complaint and had all of the game’s official downloads taken down. You can probably still find it floating around the internet somewhere, but I can’t say I understand why Nintendo would go out of their way to kill nonprofit fan content like that.

Anyway, discussing Mario games with friends is different from discussing games that focus primarily on multiplayer like the aforementioned online shooters. It’s less about strategies and more about experiences; after all, in a single-player-focused game, every player is going to experience the same moment sooner or later, but how that moment is experienced varies based on the player. Mario games, with their hectic inertia and occasionally massive settings, spin tales of feelings, skills, and occasionally, frustrations. It’s almost like backpacking through a countryside and sharing your experiences with other travel enthusiasts. You all probably saw the same sights, but each experience was yours alone and a treasured memory that will last a lifetime. You only visit the Bob-Omb Battlefield for the first time once, after all.
Since I didn’t have a Wii U at the time of its original release, I didn’t a chance to play *Mario Kart 8*. Luckily for me, in what I presume to be an effort to pad out the Switch’s somewhat small launch library, Nintendo ported *Mario Kart 8* to the Switch in the form of *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe*, and I finally got to try it. I have to say, for as much as I was looking forward to what many touted as the peak of the *Mario Kart* experience, this game feels a tad… empty.

*If this is a wild Yoshi sanctuary, where are all the Yoshis?*

*Mario Kart 8* showcases a culmination of every major new element introduced in a *Mario Kart* game in the last decade or so. We’ve got mini-turbo drifting from *Mario Kart 64*, multiple item slots from *Double Dash*, drafting from *DS*, jump tricks, motorcycles, and motion controls...
from *Mario Kart Wii*, and glider segments from *Mario Kart 7*. One new mechanic *8* introduces is zero-gravity sections, in which your kart floats slightly above the ground and colliding with other racers and small objects gives you a mini-turbo instead of spinning you out. It’s a neat little gimmick, and the stages certainly do try to cram as much of it in as possible, even in the flashback stages.

*Is that a rafflesia flower? Good god, the smell must be unbearable.*

As has become tradition in the last few *Mario Kart* games, *8* features tracks from past iterations, though the notable difference is that, in addition to the aforementioned zero-gravity sections, the stages themselves have received notable graphical facelifts; the general track layouts are the same as their older counterparts, but the effects, backgrounds, and certain stage gimmicks have all been modernized. I actually get a bit of a warm, fuzzy feeling seeing the N64 Rainbow Road (my favorite iteration) brought into the modern age with a stunning nighttime cityscape beneath and a goofy golden train flying around shooting coins and fireworks.
It’s good to be home.

The first thing you’ll notice about 8 Deluxe when compared to vanilla 8 is that every character (sans one super-secret character) is unlocked from the beginning. On the one hand, that’s nice and all, especially since 8 has lots of fun cameo characters from other Nintendo games (Link from Zelda, the Inklings from Splatoon, etc.). On the other hand, though, I can’t help feeling mildly robbed of part of the gameplay experience. Racers in racing games are meant to be unlocked, not just handed to you. I lose a lot of my incentive to play when I have the whole roster from the word go. At the very least, you still unlock parts for your kart, though this is accomplished through picking up coins on the track rather than actually winning, so you can do that whether you’re good or awful.

Wait, did I boot up the wrong game?

Now, maybe I’ve just played so much Mario Kart in my life that its mechanics have become second nature to me, but this game just seems a smidge too easy. The speed level goes up to 200 cc, which you think would make for a challenging race, but the problem is that increasing the speed doesn’t make the AI racers any smarter, it just makes them faster. As long as you assemble your cart with a single purpose in mind, you can ditch most of the pack at the start. After that, it just becomes a matter of tanking endless shells up your butt and not crashing. I know the point is to
come in first, but it’s kind of lame spending the entire race with a target on my back; I want to get neck and neck with, like, two or three other karts and battle it out for first, not get passive-aggressively wailed on by AIs with far too many Blue Shells.

So is casual self-necromancy just something Bowser’s into now?

The races only really come alive when you’re playing with friends or online. Makes sense, I guess; Mario Kart was always designed to be a party game first and foremost. Though maybe this is just a coincidence, whenever I play online, I always seem to end up on the same five or six tracks. It’s not because those are the ones everyone is picking; track selection is randomized every round, and you get to choose from three of them for a vote. However, at least one of those same few tracks always seems to end up in the rotation, and because there’s nothing else to really pick, that’s what everyone votes on. It’s annoying in a game with 48 tracks to feel a sense of déjà vu after playing for only a few hours. You can also play battle mode online, but really, who even cares about battle mode?

Alex and Kimberly can’t even front on this.
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe isn’t a bad game per se; the Mario Kart formula has been a winning one for a long time, and adding all of those good elements from previous entries was a step in the right direction at perfecting said formula. That being said, what needs to happen in future installments, I think, is not improved kart mechanics, but a proper sequence of rewards, as well as better AI development. I want to win to get stuff, not just to be told I won. Characters were unlocked normally in vanilla 8, and I don’t see what’s supposed to be “deluxe” about removing my reason to play. It’s great to have all of the characters available, but I’d still like to unlock them at my own pace. As for the AIs, Mario Kart may be a party game, but any game should be able to hold itself up on single player content alone. These slow, passive-aggressive AIs aren’t as fun to race against as those of past installments. They just hang back and lob shells at you when you’re right in front of the finish line and then magically appear behind you, zooming past. I know rubber-banding is nothing new in Mario Kart, but it’s starting to get a little out of hand. If it gets any worse, it’s not going to be fun to play the single-player cups anymore. And contrary to the beliefs of some, I like to have the option of a complete single-player experience.

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31 Fun Fact: “Rubber-banding” AI in racing games refers to AI that becomes faster and more aggressive the more it is lagging behind. The intent is to create dynamic difficulty; in other words, AI that poses a reasonable challenge no matter what its position is relative to you.
Merchandising!: Mario Cereal

Back in the 80s, Nintendo was slapping Mario’s face on just about everything they thought they could get away with. Winter gloves, lunch boxes, TV trays, pencil cases, trash bins— pretty much any practical thing a child could want probably had a Mario variant. As was the case back then and continues to be to this day, whenever something reaches a certain level of merchandising, sooner or later, you’re going to get a chance to eat it, usually for breakfast. Just for laughs, let’s look at some Mario cereals.

In 1981, the most popular game in the arcades was Donkey Kong, so to get a piece of that lovely merchandising pie, Nintendo sold the rights to Ralston Cereals, who produced a Donkey Kong cereal. “Crunchy barrels of fun!” the commercial claimed. In reality, it was just a plain old sweetened corn cereal, crunchiness notwithstanding. But through a combination of a catchy jingle and brand recognition, the cereal actually managed to stay on the shelves for a good couple of
years before being discontinued. You can even see a box on the shelf of a cereal aisle in an old episode of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. There was also a *Donkey Kong Jr.* cereal, but who cares about him.

Five years later, in 1989, Nintendo took another swing at the cereal game with Ralston at their side in the form of the “Nintendo Cereal System.” This was a fun one; it was a single box that contained two kinds of cereal, one with *Super Mario Bros.* shapes and one with *The Legend of Zelda* shapes. The Mario cereal was fruit flavored while the Zelda cereal was berry flavored because, apparently, berries aren’t fruit. The cereal had a great commercial, using a jingle that co-opted the melody from World 1-2 of *Super Mario Bros*. Boxes of this stuff are still highly sought after as collectibles to this day, though if you do find one, maybe don’t eat the cereal. You’ll probably destroy your teeth.

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32 Fun Fact: Seeing the success of the Donkey Kong cereal, General Mills grabbed a game license for a cereal of their own, *Pac-Man* to be specific.
Fast-forward to the present, Nintendo released a new Mario cereal to coincide with the release of *Super Mario Odyssey* for the Switch. Ralston is still around, but they don’t really do gimmick cereals anymore (they only do plain wheat cereals now, yawn). In lieu of their old partner, Nintendo turned to Kellogg’s for this one. As far as I know, there’s no commercial, which is a shame, but then again, cereal doesn’t seem to advertise as much anymore. Regardless, the new Mario cereal featured berry-flavored, star-shaped bits as well as marshmallows shaped like mushrooms and question blocks. The real draw to buy a box, however, was the box itself. Stuck to the inside of the box is an NFC chip, which a Switch will recognize as an honest-to-goodness Amiibo! So if you happen to be playing *Odyssey* and, I guess, eating breakfast at the same time, you can tap the box to your controller for an in-game prize. Or, well, it bills itself as a “prize,” but in reality, you just get a few coins or a heart. Seems like a wasted opportunity to me; it would’ve been hilarious to give Mario a little cereal box on his head or something. Oh well. Perhaps one day Nintendo will properly master the art of breakfast cereal.
Super Mario Odyssey, 2017, Nintendo Switch

With the Switch’s advent near the beginning of 2017, Nintendo fans began to resurface from the mildly hazy period that was the reign of the Wii U. Besides Mario Maker and New Super Mario Bros., the Wii U hadn’t really provided any new substantial Mario content, leaving a vacuum since Super Mario Galaxy 2. Nintendo needed a new platformer to win back all the marbles that the other guys had been picking up in the plumber’s absence, something to remind all of us of what makes Mario such a winning concept to begin with. The answer was surprisingly simple: jump, run around and collect stuff. With those three concepts as its war cry, Super Mario Odyssey was born, and the civilians stared in awe.

There’s no closer bond to be had than a man and his headwear.
We join our hero in media res as Bowser is attempting to kidnap Peach yet again. Unfortunately, Mario is having one of his off days, and Bowser promptly wipes the floor with him, leaving with Peach in tow. This week’s evil scheme: Bowser plans to travel around the world, stealing priceless artifacts for the sake of creating the greatest wedding ever between himself and Peach, aided by his mercenary wedding planners, the Broodals. Mario lands in the nearby Cap Kingdom, where he meets Cappy, a member of a race of little ghost people with a mastery of all things hat related. Turns out his sister, Tiara, was taken by Bowser to be a part of Peach’s wedding dress. Cappy takes the place of Mario’s hat and the two set off in a flying vehicle, the Odyssey, to chase Bowser across the globe.

 Mario has all of his usual jumping tricks to platform about and track down Power Moons to fuel the Odyssey. You got your triple jump, your backflip, your side flip, your dive, and all that jazz. The real game changer is Cappy; Mario can throw Cappy out to attack enemies as well as use him as a floating footstool to jump off of. Cappy’s main ability, though, is the “Capture.” By throwing Cappy onto certain enemies and objects, Mario can then take control of them and utilize their abilities. Grab a Goomba and stack ‘em up to reach high places. Catch a Bullet Bill and fly off to distant platforms. Possess a power pylon and zap along electrical lines. If it’s wearing a hat, you can more than likely capture it, which leads to all sorts of clever

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33 Fun Fact: During the game’s development, Nintendo made a statement on their Twitter that Mario is not, in fact, possessing enemies, but merely capturing them. There’s totally a difference, shut up.
puzzle-solving insights, as well as some generally amusing moments. You only get to capture a T-rex twice, but what a couple of times they are.

**OH, GOD! WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?**

Let me just come right out and say this: this game has some of the best level design I’ve ever seen in a 3D platformer.

The game takes place across fourteen kingdoms, each with its own visual style and residents. At a glance, these kingdoms appear small and linear, but there are secrets hidden around almost every corner. When you first visit a kingdom, you’re given an objective and a path to get there, but nothing’s actually keeping you on that path. You’re just walking along when out of the corner of your eye, you see a door obscured by foliage or some sort of out-of-place contraption. Walk up, figure it out, boom, Power Moon. Then you turn around to get back on the path, but wait! There’s an NPC who needs help! Help them out, boom, Power Moon. There were several occasions when I collected enough Power Moons to completely fuel the Odyssey before even finishing the main objective because there’s just so much to explore. Every discovery leads almost seamlessly into the next; it’s a nonstop train of adventure!
From nameless damsel to the beloved mayor and world-famous jazz singer. Pauline sure has moved up in the world.

That’s actually the best word I would use to describe this game: “adventure.” Previous 3D Mario platformers like 64, Sunshine and Galaxy were much more linear. Go to the level, do the thing, get the tchotchke, leave. You could break sequences and go off the path if you really wanted to, but each challenge in those games crafted the level differently to its needs, locking out the rest of the level. Odyssey doesn’t do that, though. Though the kingdoms do change after major events, you can still get at least a good ten to twenty moons before even finishing the main objective, aided by the fact that the level doesn’t reset when you find one. Odyssey actually utilizes some similar tenets to one of the Switch’s launch titles, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild: freedom of exploration and doing so at your own pace. Just bouncing around the Kingdoms skimming every last nook and cranny for one more Power Moon is remarkably engaging, and I’ve burned several afternoons away doing just that.

A friendship that will last a lifetime.

Before playing Odyssey, I had a friend tell me that it contained all of the best elements of previous 3D Mario platformers, and that’s a good summation. This game has gotten closer to absolute
perfection than any other 3D Mario platformer, all because it understands the elements that make Mario games fun and utilizes them in the best possible manner: the power to jump up super high and the freedom to go wherever you want. Mario’s natural upward mobility gives him the ability to be an unparalleled explorer, and *Odyssey* does its best to give you worlds worth exploring. It’s an adventure with no limits, and in addition to stoking my childhood nostalgia, it alights the adventurer’s spirit in my heart. If I’m being completely honest, I bought a Switch for the express purpose of playing this game. And you know what? It was totally worth it.
Conclusion: World 8-4

According to the most recent statistics I could find, the core Mario series (presumably the 2D and 3D home-console platformers) have sold a combined 310 million copies since the character’s inception. That’s just the mainline games, no spin-offs. I can’t even imagine what that grand total would be. Mario has well and truly stolen the hearts of the last few generations, and I don’t see his meteoric rise stopping anytime soon. I sadly don’t have any official statistics to rely on, so this is just speculation based on what I personally know, but based on the sales of Odyssey and how frequently my own adult-aged friends discuss Mario, it’s not strange to assume that the series still attracts a healthy audience of both newbies and veterans. It makes me happy to think that sixty years from now, when I’m old and wrinkly (or existing as an entity of pure

34 Fun Fact: To be specific, I am referring to this article (https://www.nintendo.com/whatsnew/detail/vy8mvC_LJPHnlpBFTR5w-BYV1FP_m7hN) from Nintendo’s website about the success of Super Mario Maker. This is from a few years ago, though, so I imagine Odyssey heaped another couple million on there.
thought in a computer, fingers crossed), that happy, mustached face and red cap will still be bouncing around the world.

It might seem as though I’ve been hard on many Mario games, especially those of the main series, and I’ll concede that. As I’ve done my best to write without nostalgia clouding my judgment, I’ve been more able to see the glaring flaws of games gone by. But let nobody ever say that I dislike Mario games. If I didn’t like Mario games, I wouldn’t be writing about them. There are plenty of other games out there to play and deconstruct. Why waste my time on something that brings me no joy? Two reasons: because I want Mario to be the best plumber he can be, and, well, I just sort of wanted to.

The platformers aren’t always perfect, but wherever Mario fails in one genre, he makes up for it in spades in another. These last few years have been a bit of a downturn for Mario’s career as a game mascot, and that saddens me, but when we hit a downturn in our lives, the only thing we can do is pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and take a good, hard look at what went wrong. That was the purpose of my writing, as is the purpose of any critical writer: to find what worked and what didn’t. As long as Mario games have fans, he’ll never fade away, and as long as he exists, Nintendo can keep experimenting with ways to really get the most out of him. And, admittedly, while I try to stay unbiased for the sake of quality writing, I couldn’t hold back that insatiable urge to embrace my childhood nostalgia. Even a bad game can be amusing to revisit once in a while, in the same way that looking at embarrassing baby pictures can be amusing; you can laugh at yourself and ask, “What was I thinking?” while also receiving a warm reminder of days gone by. I don’t replay games as often as I’d sometimes like to (I play a lot of games and don’t have a lot of time in my schedule for replays), and this project made for a good excuse to do so.
I’ll admit, for a few years now, I’ve been feeling the occasional pang of apathy toward Mario. The mainline platformers had become complete recycles of each other, Paper Mario killed everything he touched (including the *Mario & Luigi* series, if you were wondering about my thoughts on *Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam*), and the sports games just couldn’t seem to find the groove they once had. But then I played *Super Mario Odyssey*, and I felt this fire ignite in my heart. It was such a fantastic game that I needed more Mario in my life, which is why I went back and played the older games; because they gave me numerous reminders of why I fell in love with this franchise to begin with.

Feel free to laugh at me for saying this, and I admit I’m groaning inwardly as I write, but after so many years playing his games and experiencing his world, Mario is like family to me. Your family sometimes does dumb things and you want to smack them upside the head for it and tell them why that’s wrong, but it always comes from a place of love. Mario is my brother, and I want to stay in touch with him just as much as I want him to succeed in life. Sometimes that means reminiscing over baby photos; sometimes that means chewing him out.
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