

The title 'SMB3' is rendered in a large, bubbly, pixelated font. 'SMB' is blue with a black outline, and '3' is orange with a black outline. The background is yellow with a red and black scalloped border at the top.

SMB3

The subtitle 'BRICK BY BRICK' is in a smaller, blue, pixelated font with a black outline, matching the style of the main title.

BRICK BY BRICK

The central text is flanked by various Super Mario Bros. game elements. On the left, a light blue wall and a pink brick with two screws are visible. On the right, there are orange brick blocks and a green pipe. The bottom of the page features a black and white checkered floor.

THE LEVELS

THE ENEMIES

THE HISTORY

▶ THE GREATEST
GAME EVER MADE

BOB CHIPMAN

This book is dedicated to:

Shigeru Miyamoto

For saving my life, more times than he knows.

Christopher and Catherine Chipman

For always being there.

Peter & Patricia Chipman

For everything.

And in loving memory of:

Evangeline Chipman

For setting an example.

SUPER MARIO BROS. 3: BRICK BY BRICK

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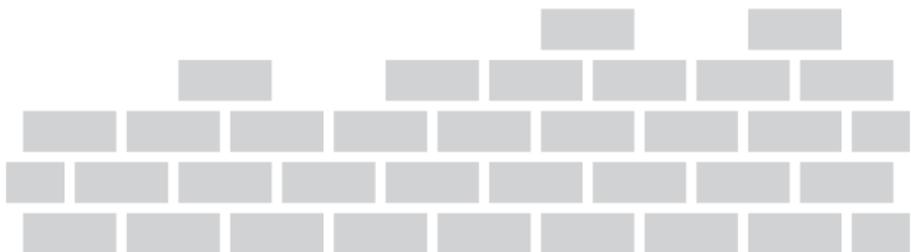


SUPER MARIO BROS.

3

BRICK BY BRICK

by BOB CHIPMAN





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Introduction

Why write a book about “Super Mario Bros. 3?”

I’m going to assume somebody is asking that question. I am, and I’m the one writing the damn thing.

A book more generally about Mario, the character, would seem to make more sense. He’s an icon – the icon of the video game industry and of the medium itself. A character as entrenched in the minds of Generations X and beyond as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny. Video games were the rock and roll of my generation, an art form that came into being and grew in tandem with our own lives, embraced by us to the confusion and exasperation of our parents; and though he wasn’t the first icon of the form, Mario was figured at the forefront: our Elvis – or, if you prefer, our Beatles. Which probably makes Pac-Man Chuck Berry in this analogy...

In any case, if this were to be a book of history or of pop-iconography, surely it would be more comprehensive and sensible to cover the full breadth of Mario’s career. At the time of this writing Mario has appeared in nearly 190 individual games covering almost every conceivable gaming genre, two feature films (one live-action, one animated and released only in Japan), four animated series, multiple comic books and in nearly every form of licensed merchandising imaginable. The story of the character’s eminently humble beginnings, of his iconoclastic creator Shigeru Miyamoto, of his endurance through a changing video-game landscape and sweeping cultural shifts... would these not be more logical things to build a book around?

And even if one did wish to focus on only the games, why limit the scope to only one out of that one-hundred and ninety; especially when there are other games in the series of greater historical significance? SMB3 isn’t Mario’s first appearance (that would be Donkey Kong) or the game that made him a household name by reviving the previously-dead home gaming industry (that’s the original “Super Mario Bros”) or the birthplace of (functional) open-world 3D platforming (“Super Mario 64”) or any of the franchise’s myriad other big-impact moments. It’s merely the third game in the Nintendo Entertainment System era of the franchise. Where’s the import? Where’s the

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story? What's the big deal?

Assuming I was able to gather myself after receiving that withering barrage of queries all at once, I might offer that this book isn't precisely a book of history (though it will certainly contain its fair share) but rather a book primarily of video-game criticism.

...which of course only begs more questions.

Why start with "Super Mario Bros. 3," then? It's not exactly crying out for attention – it's one of the best-selling games in the series (and of all time), already enshrined as an accepted, unassailable classic. Do you intend to challenge that status? Reveal the game as "overrated," perhaps? No? Then, again, why? "New Super Mario Bros. Wii" is more recent. "Super Mario Sunshine" is the most intriguingly-flawed of the series. "Super Mario Bros." and "Donkey Kong" are more historically significant. "Super Mario Bros. 2" has the more interesting backstory. What, if anything, are you looking to tell us here? Why should we be reading this, when there are so many tomes of self-help, political fire-breathing and twelve-volume epics of glimmering vampire bow-huntresses attending wizard school just a bookshelf (or a swipe across the touchpad, as it were) away?

To be honest, even I didn't start out with the intent to write a book about "Super Mario Bros. 3." The format of this project took shape before the subject came into focus for me. You see, at least to my knowledge, at the time of this writing there isn't another book exactly like this one.

Video game criticism has existed as long as the medium itself, said medium having come into being in the era of Specialty Publications (read: lifestyle magazines) and reached adolescence in the age of the Internet; times where it became the norm that everything was to be reviewed, critiqued, and Consumer Reported-upon. But the form has always had an erratic evolution: the first game reviewers found themselves in the unique position of having to be both art critics ("What feeling or sensation does this game elicit?") and product-testers ("Does this device work?")

The rapidly expanding technology of the medium and scope of the consumer base created fissures and divisions as different groups of gamers demanded different approaches from critics: Aesthetic critique. Technical details. "Does it have a good story?" "Forget the story, how does it PLAY??" "Give me detailed analysis!" "Give me a numbered score!" The internet age turned game criticism into one of digital journalism's fastest-growing fields with even more diversity: detailed write-ups and cultural commentary from websites like The Escapist, Polygon, Destructoid, etc. Video reviews, often (but not always) comedic in nature, became the rage with the dawn of high-speed streaming, making unlikely superstars of folks like Ben "Yahtzee"

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Croshaw of Zero Punctuation and James Rolfe a.k.a. “The Angry Video Game Nerd.” James’s focus on older and more obscure titles was part of a growing interest in giving serious critical attention in hindsight to classic or “retro” games.

Today, sites ranging from professional outlets to amateur free-for-alls like YouTube and Blip are packed to the gills with an ever-growing supply of not only game criticism but walkthroughs, strategies and longform chronicles called “let’s plays.” Name any game that has ever existed, no matter how obscure, and chances are you can find multiple reviews, videos and full-length play-throughs of it.

And yet... amid all that, I felt like there was something missing. An empty niche. Maybe not a large niche, but a niche all the same. In my primary career I’m a film critic, so I get to see how criticism differs in the two mediums. And while I won’t let this turn into some missive about what game journalism can learn from film I’m inclined to note that the one type of critical attention gaming appears to be most (though not wholly) deficient of is analysis – in particular deep analysis.

Specifically, in film writing there is such a thing as the “shot-by-shot analysis,” which is exactly what it sounds like: A book (or, more often, academic paper or presentation) that pours over a single film piece-by-piece, scene-by-scene, detail-by-detail. The lines, the compositions, the shots, the score and the actors, directors, writers and production history that informed it all. Not just an aesthetic criticism or a history or a production report but a fusion of all three and more – the complete picture of a film.

Why didn’t this exist for video games?

My first thought, upon not finding much that lined up with what I was now looking for (especially not available to consumers outside the industry or academia) was that it may have been tried and found impossible; but that didn’t make any sense. Games are tangible things, at least as much as digitized information can be. Most of them have beginnings and endings or at least a point where nothing else can be done within them. Whole books, called Strategy Guides, had been written with the purpose of guiding one through a game step-by-step; so why not go the extra mile and gives a reader the background or an aesthetic observation about whatever level or boss you’re helping them to conquer?

And, if I couldn’t find such a book... why not write it myself?

The idea began to take shape: Pick a game. Play through it from beginning to end. Catalogue everything you did – even the places where you did something wrong or had to start over. Describe, in detail, not just the function but the form... the why’s and how’s and who’s behind what was

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happening in the game. For good measure, include what was going on for you during the playing – player-input is key to the experience, after all, so it’s only fair to analyze the background of the player along with the background of the product.

Yes. That might work...

But which game?

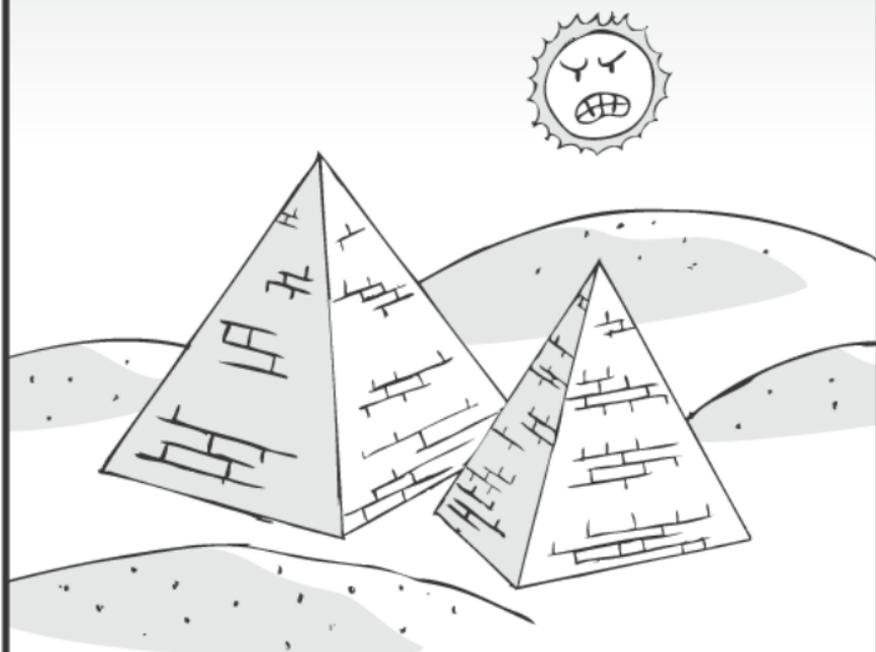
It would have to be an older game, for one. Not so much out of nostalgia or sentiment, but because an older game would have its stature already secure. Preferably it should be a popular game, one that a lot of people would have played or at least know of – a work that has affected the culture in a big, visible way simply offers more to write about. It should have a certain degree of variety; if for no other reason than to keep me consistently engaged so that boredom doesn’t inappropriately color the analysis (even though I wouldn’t be primarily playing for fun, I’d have to endeavor to maintain the sense of enjoyment that “regular” game-playing is supposed to engender).

Finally... I felt like it should be a game I was already intimately familiar with. A game I could not just approach, but return to in the writing. Aside from (likely) making the project that much less difficult, it would be appropriate to the intended tone. Not just some dry, academic deconstruction but an involved, emotive journey. I should be a game I loved.

And, thus, there could be no other choice.

PART I

**A BRIEF
HISTORY
OF MARIO**



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PRESS START

By now, the legend of Mario's creation is old hat to fans, but those who didn't grow up marinating in the game-culture stew would likely be surprised at the utilitarian simplicity of his origins. Today we're used to receiving our cultural icons only after a lengthy process of focus-grouping and demographic charting - particularly video game personalities, who must often bear the weight of cross-cultural expectations (Japanese games frequently see their "androgynous" heroes transformed into hyper-masculine forms to better appeal to Western tastes) and navigate the minefields of socio-political symbology. (Just what is the proper length of a skirt between "sexually-empowered" and "pandering male fantasy?")

Mario, on the other hand, came about the old fashioned way: a character was needed, and one was made in the best form available from the tools available. And rather than a marketing team or a team of demographic-analysts, Mario sprang from the mind of one man, Shigeru Miyamoto. Today, Miyamoto is a living legend, the starry-eyed iconoclast of the video game industry spoken of by other designers less like a contemporary and more like a mysterious sorcerer who deigns to walk among mortals. But, once upon a time, he was just one among hundreds of men and women toiling in the nascent days of the game industry; doubtlessly too hard at work to even consider that their every tiny success and failure might be laying the foundations of an entirely new medium... a new form of art.

Miyamoto's backstory is a mix of iconic and humble, almost perfect enough to render him as a character in one of his games: A precocious child with a great love of art, music and wilderness exploration who dreamed of growing up to be a manga (Japanese comic-book) artist. Instead, he found himself working for Nintendo, a toy and playing-card company that had moved into the video game business... with decidedly mixed results.

So goes the story, Nintendo's most recent game (and Miyamoto's first role as part of a design team) "Radar Scope" had failed to replicate its popularity in Japan when it was exported to U.S. arcades. The head of the company's newly-established American branch (the nephew of it's CEO) was stuck with a surplus of unwanted machines, and the decision was made to re-write the game's program into something new so that the unsold units could be reprogrammed and their cabinets repainted.

The task of conversion fell to Miyamoto - an unconventional decision, given that he was primarily an artist and designer with little experience as a programmer, but one that would prove fateful. He was given very little to go

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on, just the requirement that all of the programming be built from the existing parts of “Radar Scope” and an early suggestion that Nintendo might be able to secure the license for “Popeye the Sailor.” When that fell through, he had to develop new characters and a scenario. In doing so, he was making history: For the first time, a video-game’s characters and story were being developed before the interface was.

The early “Popeye” brainstorming had naturally called to mind the scenario of rescuing Olive Oyl from the villain Bluto, and had fixed in Miyamoto’s mind the idea that players would be enticed to keep playing by the goal of having to rescue the hero’s girlfriend rather than simply trying to rack up more points. Simple and arch though it may have been, this would be the first time that a game had tried to engage players through narrative and emotion rather than strictly through competition. Bluto was replaced by a gorilla, “Donkey Kong,” which in turn suggested the girl-abducted-by-ape finale of “King Kong,” which in turn suggested the gameplay of scaling a building in pursuit of said ape. But the game still needed a main character. And avatar for the player.

It needed a Hero.

In keeping with his desire for the game to have characters as well-defined as the hardware would allow, Miyamoto wanted his hero (whom he was still considering calling “Mr. Video”) to stand out within the game – to have recognizable human-like movements and a face – and while video-game graphics of the day placed severe restrictions on such ambitions, a clever artist could find a way. And so, “Mr. Video” got a big Italian-style mustache to give his face and nose definition in profile, and would wear overalls so that his arms would be more visible against his body. They’d call him “Jumpman,” at first; but he soon got a new nickname based on his apparent similarity to one Mario Segale, a colorful real estate mogul who was Nintendo of America’s warehouse manager at the time.

The finished game, “Donkey Kong,” was a smash hit... and Mario was born.

Miyamoto would revisit the character soon after in two “Kong” sequels and “Mario Bros.,” a two-player co-op game reminiscent of “Joust” that introduced Mario’s brother Luigi and gave them a new backstory as New York City plumbers combating an infestation of crabs, bugs and turtles in a room full of pipes. Nintendo, fueled largely by the success of Miyamoto-developed games, branched out into the home video-game market which had collapsed in the U.S. but was thriving in Japan; and the ability of these “Famicom” games to be longer and more complex led Miyamoto to expand his newly-iconic character in an unprecedented way.

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THE GOLDEN AGE

The title told the tale: “Super Mario Bros.” was “Mario Bros.” blown up to epic proportions. Instead of a single screen, the “hop n’ bop” gameplay would now be spread across an entire world that scrolled from left to right in the inaugural example of a genre that would come to dominate the Golden Age of video games: The side-scrolling platformer. Mario and Luigi wouldn’t simply be crossing the screen, they’d be passing through a whole world – different skies, different terrains, underworlds... even swimming underwater. And this whole world would need still more characters and stories to populate it.

Mario gained the ability to grow to giant (or “Super”) size via magical Mushrooms a’la “Alice in Wonderland,” eventually leading the fairytale-inspired kingdom of castles and magic beanstalks that was being devised (precisely how the Mario Bros. got there from NYC is the subject of much debate) to be named “The Mushroom Kingdom.” The hostage-rescue scenario from “Donkey Kong” was revived with a new damsel in distress, Princess Peach (whom Western audiences would know as Princess Toadstool for more than a decade.) and the turtle enemies of “Mario Bros.” were expanded into an entire race of creatures called The Koopas (a reference to “Kappas,” mischievous turtle-like demons of Japanese mythology) ruled over by the wicked Bowser. Mario and Luigi would traverse eight Worlds split into four Levels, each ending with the conquest of an occupied fortress and all but the last teasing the player with a rescued hostage who would inform you that the Princess was “in another castle.”

The success of “Super Mario Bros” was immediate and overwhelming; the kind of electrifying impact that only ever happens once or twice in the lifespan of a medium. In its native Japan, the game served as an eye-popping send-off for the original Famicom as Nintendo shifted focus to an upgraded disk-system version of the device; but in the West (especially the U.S.) the game was the trigger for something much bigger: a full-on resurrection.

While home gaming on machines like the Famicom had been steadily popular in tech-loving Japan, game consoles had been dead in America since 1983 when quality control issues and a weary consumer based had caused the entire industry to collapse in on itself. The entire industry thought Nintendo was insane for trying to launch “The Nintendo Entertainment System” (a U.S. version of the Famicom) there, but the naysayers were caught slack-jawed as the NES became an instant earth-shaking megahit in 1985 - and it was SMB (the game was sold packed-in *with* early versions of the system)

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that propelled much of that momentum as Nintendo went on to become synonymous with the medium they'd brought back from the dead through most of the 80s and 90s.

In Japan, Mario returned immediately in "Super Mario Bros. 2" - essentially a more difficult, slightly-tweaked remix of the first game - but it was judged both too difficult for neophyte American gamers and too visually outdated by the time it would be reaching U.S. shores (it would ultimately be released there a decade later as "The Lost Levels.") Instead, the decision was made to convert a then-newer Miyamoto game, "Doki-Doki Panic," into *America's SMB2* by redrawing its four main character-sprites as Mario, Luigi, Toad (the first Mushroom Kingdom citizen like those rescued at the end of SMB1's first seven Worlds to be given a name of his own) and Princess Peach.

The American SMB2 divides fans to this day (the radical shift in tone, style and gameplay was explained-away in the "plot" as Mario having a strange dream) but was responsible for many of the series now-standard elements; chief among them recasting Luigi as a slimmer, taller brother rather than a palette-swapped twin of his brother and adding enemy characters like ShyGuys and Bob-Ombs to the Mario canon.

It also, arguably, was responsible for further "proving" that gamers could love a franchise's character and/or world enough to embrace a complete gameplay overhaul. Subsequent NES sequels like "Zelda II: The Adventure of Link" and "Castlevania II: Simon's Quest" would make similarly drastic formula changes from their predecessors.

What *can't* be argued is that the game's release coincided with Mario's ultimate ascent to pop-culture godhood: between the release of this American sequel and "Super Mario Bros. 3" (our main subject), Mario and his cohorts would appear in a deluge of successful TV series, spin-offs and licensed products. His face adorned posters, birthday cakes and Happy Meal toys. Children dressed up as him for Halloween and scrawled the titles of his games on letters to Santa.

In 1989, the impending release of SMB3 was considered an event of such incredible magnitude that an entire feature film ("The Wizard") was produced on the pretext that kids would catch mere *moments* of gameplay during its climax. The game itself would go on to be, for a long time, the biggest individually-selling game *ever*. This would be the high point of Mario Mania.

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LIFE IN WARTIME

In 1990 Mario once again led Nintendo into a new age as the ambitious “Super Mario World” (“Super Mario Bros. 4” in Japan) became the flagship title of Nintendo’s 16-bit “Super NES.” And while the game was a major success now remembered as a classic of the genre (and for introducing Yoshi the Dinosaur, one of the series’ most popular characters); this was the beginning of the end for Mr. Miyamoto’s plucky plumber as the unquestioned *king* of all video game heroes...

Though it wasn’t fully apparent to all gamers (especially not in the U.S., where the NES ran the floor all-but unchallenged for almost a decade), neither Nintendo nor Mario were ever the only game in town. They had major competition in gaming-saturated Japan, and game-friendly home computers like the Spectrum and Commodore64 went toe to toe with the NES in Europe.

And while the NES dominated North American sales and Mario lorded over gaming’s cultural-image, they had a persistent challenger in the form of rival console-purveyor Sega, whose Master System had eked out a serviceable existence as the “Brand X” NES and whose Genesis beat the SNES to the 16-bit punch by a few years (so did NEC’s short-lived Turbo Grafx 16) and carved out a niche as the system better able to offer more authentic translations of Arcade hits. But it lacked a Mario of its own...

In 1991 that changed. “Sonic The Hedgehog,” looking for all the world like an electric-blue, punk-rock cousin to Mickey Mouse, became Sega’s new mascot and the first serious contender for Mario’s crown in the character’s lifetime. Whereas Mario ambled through his colorful worlds, Sonic was all about speed and visceral conquest: One “beat” a Mario level, but one *survived* a Sonic level.

Canny Sega made the contrast between the two characters - Sonic’s “edgy” 90s flippancy versus Mario’s old-fashioned fusion of fairytale whimsy and working-class Americana - into the driving force of an ambitious marketing blitz: Genesis was the “hip” console, Nintendo it’s “uncool” rival. In playgrounds, arcades and living rooms all over America young consumers chose up sides (in those days it was UNHEARD OF for an average kid to own more than one console) turning friend against friend as both companies gleefully stoked the fires amid skyrocketing sales...

The Console Wars had begun.

When the smoke finally cleared over the great conflict between SNES and Genesis, Nintendo had more or less come out on top in terms of raw sales and corporate stability. Mario, certainly, had a spectacular 90s with

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“Yoshis Island,” “Mario Kart,” “Super Mario RPG,” a litany of cameos and side-projects and the two “Super Mario Land” titles on Nintendo’s portable Gameboy handheld (the latter of which would introduce the enigmatic evil doppelganger Wario to the series’ mythos). But the “war” had taken its toll in the realm of public perception: Sega hadn’t removed or supplanted their rival, but they’d successfully lodged the image of Nintendo – and Mario – as the face of all things old-fashioned, unhip and “childish” in the industry; though Nintendo hadn’t helped their case by maintaining a puritan policy against extreme violent or sexual content in an era where more explicit titles like “Mortal Kombat” and “Doom” were the talk of the industry.

Within the industry, Nintendo increasingly came to be viewed in much the same way the Walt Disney company had been in the 1980s: A powerful but stodgy and unmoving relic standing in vain against the tides of history, and much of their corporate behavior as the 90s wore on only reinforced that notion. At the 1991 Consumer Electronics Show they made an infamous public spectacle out of unexpectedly breaking a CD-ROM console-making partnership with Sony... one day after Sony had debuted the proposed device at the same show.

It was here that the bigger value of Mario as an icon was coming into focus: The only conceivable way any game company could afford to conduct itself in such a way was on the strength of its first party software; and with Mario in particular Nintendo was holding the ultimate trump card... but even he wasn’t invincible. In 1993 Miyamoto’s creation finally found a challenge he couldn’t surmount: A live-action “Super Mario Bros.” movie, made by an American film studio, was an unmitigated disaster upon its release; haunted stories of a trouble-plagued production opening to tepid box-office and horrible reviews. At the height of Mario’s popularity, it was an early sign that things were not as comfortable as they appeared...

HARD TIMES

In 1996, Mario would be the face of gaming’s next evolution once again: “Super Mario 64” turned free-roaming, three-dimensional gameplay from a dream (or a gimmick) to reality as the flagship game of the Nintendo 64 console. But while the game (and others that would follow) is today remembered as an all-time classic, the waning days of the 20th Century would be lean years for Mario and his makers.

In 1994, Sony had become the first company to successfully enter the game console race from outside the gaming biz with the Playstation – a powerful machine built from the remnants of their canceled collaboration with

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Nintendo. It filled a void left by the slow-motion collapse of Sega (who found themselves unable to replicate the Genesis' success in subsequent consoles) and ultimately overtook Nintendo as the top console producer. With third party developers flocking to Sony, Nintendo was relying on its homegrown creations (and the unexpected mega popularity of the "Pokemon" franchise) and Mario especially.

In was in this period that Mario the icon began to more fully supplant the attendant rich gameplay experience as the driving force behind sales and notoriety: Despite the universal acclaim for "Super Mario 64," he wouldn't headline another full-fledged action-adventure title until "Super Mario Sunshine" for the GameCube (another less than financially successful Nintendo console carried mainly by first-party software) in 2002. The legacy of the "traditional" Super Mario titles did continue, but in the form of re-releases and ports for the various Gameboy iterations. (Though faltering in consoles, Nintendo remained unfailingly dominant in the world of hand-held gaming.)

Instead, Mario's console ubiquity took a new form as the standard-bearer for the emerging, popular "party game" genre – while the N64 (the first home console to come with four controller ports as a standard, also accelerating the "party" genre) and GameCube were gifted with only one "full" Mario game apiece, he was all over the rest of their bigger titles. The "Mario Kart" franchise was a smash hit on both systems, and video board game "Mario Party" was so popular (particularly with "Generation NES" kids now entering college, where the party-game genre fully blossomed) it spawned seven sequels across both consoles.

But biggest of all were the two "Super Smash Bros." games (one on each system) wherein players could make Mario and the other Nintendo mainstays fight each other . If nothing else, it seemed that the Mario Bros. would endure... even as the company and the consoles he'd always called home seemed to be slipping away from under him...

THE REBIRTH

By 2006, much of the games industry expected Nintendo to have fallen away like Sega and probably to have taken Mario with them. Neither the N64 nor the GameCube had lit up the world like the NES and SNES had; and while they and their mascot remained household names, the Golden Age of gaming they'd been part of was beginning to fade. Onetime rival Sonic the Hedgehog was a shadow of his former self, and once-familiar names like Mega Man and Simon Belmont were being supplanted by the likes of Kratos

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and Master Chief. The “true” Console War of this new age was between Sony’s Playstation line (about to enter it’s 3rd iteration) and Microsoft’s Xbox, about to launch its new “360” version. Mario, as the face of Nintendo, had become a side-player in the game it used to rule.

That’s what everyone thought, at least.

When Nintendo and Shigeru Miyamoto (who had, in the intervening years, risen to a role of great prominence within the Nintendo corporate regime) announced that they’d be producing another console after the GameCube built around some new form of interactivity rather than a major power upgrade, not much attention was paid. A “Hail Mary” pass from a onetime giant soon to fall, no need to get too excited... until they saw it.

The mystery console, first called the Nintendo Revolution but later renamed “The Wii,” was an ambitious attempt to upend the entire gaming landscape: A platform aimed not exclusively at longtime Nintendo fans nor at the increasingly dominant 18-30+ “hardcore gamer” audience but at families, ex-gamers and even non-gamers; built around a new style of motion-sensing controller. Traditional gamers and industry insiders balked, but consumers went mad for it – all at once, Nintendo products were flying off the shelves (the Gameboy successor, The DS, was also a major seller) and The House Miyamoto Built was the king of console sales once again...

...but where was Mario?

There was a feeling of distinct nostalgia watching consumers once again line up and rush stores for “The New Nintendo,” but The Wii’s initial public presence was anything but nostalgic. The new system’s design and aesthetic eschewed the candy-colored Nintendo of the past for a sleek white and blue “zen” affect clearly modeled on Steve Jobs’ Apple products. The Wii’s flagship game was “Wii Sports,” a showcase for motion control “starring” self-made avatars of the player called “Miis.” And while one of the most enticing early features of the system was the Virtual Console, a service for downloading classic games, the traditional Nintendo menagerie seemed to have been pushed gently to the background. But, as it turned out, it was just a matter of waiting.

“Super Mario Galaxy,” a sci-fi-infused return to the 3D platforming action of Mario64 and Sunshine, marked a big return for the character on the Wii, and was successful enough to spawn the Mario series’ first “direct” sequel since the original Japanese SMB2. An ambitious follow-up to the “Smash Bros.” series also made a major impact, and in that game and a much-hyped separate title built around the Olympics found Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog appearing in the same games for the first time. All well and good, but the real return to prominence for Mario was actually sneaking up

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on people...

Around the same time that the impending launch of the Wii was getting all the attention, Nintendo released “New Super Mario Bros.” to the DS. It was full-scale throwback to the Golden Age Mario games – a sidescroller in the vein of SMB1 with power-up suits and a map system reminiscent of SMB3. Such a thing was bound to be popular with now grown Generation NES gamers, many of whom had adopted the DS as a source of retro-style gaming in the modern era, but it’s sales exceeded expectations and the reception clearly indicated that it wasn’t just “old” fans who loved “old” Mario. Two years later, Nintendo announced they would continue the series... on the Wii.

“New Super Mario Bros. Wii” would best be described as SMB3 but with four players onscreen at the same time. Like its predecessor, everything about it was classic: The Princess? Kidnapped. The culprit? Bowser. Standing in your way? The Koopalings (Bowser’s kids), largely absent from the series for the last several installments. That the response to the game was positive was practically a given, but the magnitude of its popularity shocked the industry – it was immediately one of the most popular Wii games to hit the market, and as of 2012 has sold over 26 million copies, easily placing it among the best-selling games of all time. It was almost poetic: The game that firmly re-established Mario as an icon of equal relevance and presence to more “modern” figures was a throwback to the “obsolete” genre that got him here in the first place.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

Today, improbably, Mario has become even more ubiquitous than ever. While gamers remain bitterly divided over the relative worth and import of The Wii (the console is, in late 2012, approaching the end of its lifespan) it was the most visible, talked-about and biggest-selling machine of its generation; and the sheer magnitude of its penetration has enhanced the visibility of everything associated with it. Miyamoto, once known only to gamers, is now a techno-celebrity honored multiple times on Time Magazine’s “Most Influential People” list... and his creations have fared even better.

The mega-success of NSMB Wii was followed by “Super Mario 3D Land” and “New Super Mario Bros. 2” on the 3DS, both of which were similarly runaway hits (and, incidentally, both involved the return of much-loved elements from SMB3). Mario and his friends, now with two generations (and counting) of devoted fans, are again immortalized in every form from clothing to snack foods to toys. A mom or dad can walk to a store

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sporting a “nostalgic” t-shirt referencing a Mario game they grew up with and purchase a Mario doll for a child who is growing up with him now.

As of this writing, Nintendo is preparing to launch “The Wii U,” a successor console to the original Wii. One of the prime games already slated to be among its premiere launch titles? “New Super Mario Bros. U.” The console that will officially kick off the next generation of home gaming will have as its first big showpiece a Mario game executed in the classic Mario style – after all these years, he still looms that large.

Impressive, considering how humbly he began.

Incredible, considering how humbly I came to meet him...

PART II

MARIO & ME MY LIFE IN THE MUSHROOM KINGDOM



Super Mario Bros. 3: Brick By Brick

THE TIME BEFORE

Mario and I were “born” the same year, 1981 (I’m about 5 ½ months older,) and as such I don’t really remember a world without him. Looking back as best as I’m able I know I must have been “aware” of his existence as long as I was aware of anything else, but I’ll confess that I was not an immediate devotee.

Arcade games (both in full arcades and as individual machines at restaurants or convenience stores) were fairly common then, so I’d certainly seen the Donkey Kong machine about. And I distinctly remember Mister Rogers once demonstrating how arcade cabinets worked via that same machine. I remember seeing the DK cartoon show (featuring Mario) once or twice, though it wasn’t part of my regular TV viewing - “He-Man” was more my thing, at the time. In fact, apart from those aforementioned ventures to arcades (most often the one at good old Salem Willows Park) video games were just not much of a presence in my early life.

Home gaming, a BIG “fad” in the late 70s and early 80s, was well into its famous crash when I was becoming conscious of the world around me. The only thing I really “knew” of it was that it was some kind of “grown-up toy,” since the only time I ever saw a console was when my Uncle and Aunt would come over to hang out (after I was supposed to be in bed) and he and my father would play through a game or two of Baseball on dad’s Atari 2600 – a machine that, with its black and wood-paneled design, looked like all the other “grown-up toys” (the stereo, the station wagon) that I wasn’t supposed to play with.

Even the marketing blitz that accompanied the launch of the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985 didn’t really intrigue me. Advertisers hadn’t really figured out how to translate the fun of game-playing through commercials yet, and early NES ads focused on the system’s more explicitly “toy-like” features: R.O.B., a toy robot that ostensibly served as a second player in some games but in reality was Nintendo’s bid to make toy stores feel more at ease stocking their product, and the Zapper light-gun. Well, I already had toy robots (Optimus Prime was much cooler than R.O.B.) and I’d seen other toys purporting to interface with TVs that didn’t look like that much fun to me.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

But I remember exactly where I was when I first “connected” with the NES, because it was also the moment I first “discovered” Mario.

I was with my mother, paying a visit to the home of a new friend. We’d met in Kindergarten, and my mother wanted to meet his before we arranged any play dates. (I was the firstborn, so research like this went into pretty-much every decision.) While our mothers chatted, my friend had something he wanted to show me in the kitchen: His NES, currently sitting on the kitchen table hooked up to a small TV set. And there, on the screen, was “Super Mario Bros.”

I was captivated immediately.

I had never seen a video game, at home or otherwise, look like this. Instead of the usual black background populated by conflicting neon shapes, here was a bright blue sky with puffy white clouds over rich brown earth and green bushes. The creatures were identifiable, with eyes and feet and movement. The bricks looked like bricks. The castles looked like castles. And there was Mario – chubby, clad in unassuming overalls and his preposterous mustache, looking for all the world like no hero of anything else that I’d ever seen.

I watched him play, gladly, for what seemed like forever (it was probably more like 20 minutes) before I was offered a turn myself. I was terrible at it, dying repeatedly, but I was also transfixed. This miraculous machine, to my eyes, projected a cartoon that you could control onto a TV. And there were more of them than this? Ones that looked, according to my friend, “even cooler?” With soldiers and bombs and cars and all manner of things? And maybe even more with this “Mario” person whose image now refused to leave my mind? I was mesmerized. I was hooked. I was sold.

My parents, on the other hand, would take further convincing: my brother and I were not exactly hurting for playthings, a game console was quite an investment, and I can only assume they remembered that the last time a toy like this had become a big deal it hadn’t lasted for very long. In addition, well... I was not the easiest child in the world to be raising, at the time. I was “bad” at school, mainly: I acted out in class, sassied my teachers, zoned-out into daydreams, and turned in a lot of poor work. I wasn’t “good” at much of anything school related other than drawing and creative writing. So it wasn’t as though I was in for some kind of “attaboy!” reward that an NES would fill.

Instead, they broke out the old Atari 2600 and said it could be “mine”

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now – thanks to the NES, the market had come back to life and they were making games for the system again. It was no substitute for an NES (and especially not for Mario!) but it was something, and looking back starting with such an earlier form of gaming helped refine my skills and probably gave me a lot more respect for the evolution of the medium overall. Meanwhile, I was filling page after page of drawing paper with painstaking recreations of the vivid images I'd seen on my friend's kitchen TV... that wide open world, those fearsome enemies, that iconic hero...

...and this is supposed to be the part where I tell you how I got my NES. The circumstances. The reasons. How I felt.

Except I don't remember.

That sounds ridiculous, even to me, given the subject of this book and the detail with which I recall everything else. Granted, I was five, but still... nobody is more surprised that I don't remember exactly when I got it. Christmas? Birthday? Good report card? (Unlikely.) Even my family didn't recall the exact details. One day I didn't have one, the next day I did.

I feel strangely bad that I don't remember this – it makes me feel ungrateful, like something this important should've stuck in my head, permanently, by sheer force of gratitude. But, maybe that's the point. Maybe the act of finally procuring my own direct access to Super Mario Bros. was so monumental to my young mind it rendered everything else occurring immediately around it nonexistent in my mind. What I do remember is that my young life now had a clear dividing line: pre- and post-NES.

THE NEW WORLD

In any case, at last, I had it. My very own Nintendo and my very own copy of Super Mario Bros., both of which I could play whenever I wanted for however long I wanted – providing I kept my grades up, kept my behavior decent, and promised to share with my brother, of course. Soon enough there were games other than Mario: Duck Hunt, Balloon Fight, Ice Climber, The Legend of Zelda, Contra – the same “sampler” of classics a lot of Generation NES remembers.

But SMB was the one I kept coming back to – helpfully, the game was actually extremely hard to complete (I never actually beat Bowser on my own without help until years later, to be honest.) My brother and I would take turns playing through, trying to get just a little bit further. Sometimes Dad would help out – for the longest time, he was the only one in the family who could do the famous 1-Up trick in Level 3-1.

The NES and Mario were the first “toy” that I ever loved enough to

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invest into the broader culture around it. I played the game constantly, but I also devoured any shred of information about games that I could get my hands on. I'd tear through books and magazines about games when I found them at the store, I'd pump my NES-owning friends for information on what was new and awesome. I read every scrap of info about Mario I could find, especially. It was during this "research" that I came to know that Mario was a plumber, for example – which made my connection to him that much stronger since that was also the profession of my grandfather, whom I adored.

On the schoolyard, I learned from friends of a magazine – "Nintendo Power" – devoted *only* to NES games. That in and of itself was enough to interest me, but the game being advertised on the cover of its 1988 inaugural issue was a dream come to life: Super Mario... ??? I just had to get a subscription (I did, as a Christmas gift. The first issue now hangs in a frame on my wall), and I definitely had to have that game.

Like most people, I didn't find out until I was older that what Western gamers got in SMB2 was actually "Doki Doki Panic," a different Japanese game from Mario's creator that had been reprogrammed to feature Mario and his friends as the playable characters. But the fact that Mario's second game was so remarkably different from the first (a whole new play style, new enemies, a new main bad guy named Wart) actually made me even more invested in the character and his world (now worlds) by virtue of how "big" it suddenly seemed.

Video game sequels, at the time, were typically expansions or refinements of their predecessor (this had, of course, been the case with the "real" SMB2 in Japan), but here was a "part 2" that suggested, simply by existing, that Mario was "more" than just the graphics and gameplay that had come first. He may not have been an especially well-developed character in the games themselves, but in my mind he was bigger and more richly-drawn than any other hero in games by virtue of this newly revealed malleability. If Mario could fight evil in The Mushroom Kingdom and Subcon (SMB2 is said to take place in a world of dreams) there was no limit to what he could do. In between (and sometimes during) sessions of gaming, my imagination would be alive with what Mario and company might be saying or doing beyond the borders of the "story" I was playing through.

Soon enough, I wouldn't have to wonder.

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BEYOND BORDERS

Looking back at it objectively, “The Super Mario Bros. Super Show” was one of the most ridiculous things I ever devoted time to watching as a kid: an hour-long eyesore of self-conscious kitsch separated from earlier, equally baroque kiddie programming only in that its pool of visual references were culled from Nintendo ephemera instead of circus clowns or animal puppets.

One half of the thing was a blatant lift of “Pee-Wee’s Playhouse,” with pro-wrestler Captain Lou Albano and character actor Danny Wells as a live-action Mario and Luigi having slapstick adventures in a basement plumbing office also populated by wacky props and creatures where every frantic physical comedy gag was punctuated by a video game sound effect rather than the traditional “boink!”

These scenes framed the show’s main-event: episodic animated adventures of Mario and company as they battled “King Koopa” (a fusion of Bowser and SMB2’s Wart, as Nintendo hadn’t informed the animators which villain would be the ongoing baddie in the games) through comic adventures and the occasional broad movie parody... except on Fridays, where the cartoon segments switched over to a “Moonlighting”-esque adaptation of “The Legend of Zelda.”

Of course, I loved every minute of it.

However ubiquitous Mario and games in general were to my generation, “my generation” were children and children don’t run the culture; so when some sliver of the culture featured one of your game heroes as a show, movie, comic, etc. you almost *had* to snap it up; not knowing where the next “fix” was going to come from. Neither the “Super Show” nor the various comics and books pushed out as tie-ins were high art, but it was what we had - and they helped further solidify the idea of Mario as a character with life beyond the games.

This was also the first point where you started to see video games stretch beyond their separate sections at toy stores and elsewhere. There wasn’t the *deluge* of Mario merchandise there is today, but you started to see them around - especially at smaller shops that imported bulk-sundries from Japan where these things were more heavily merchandized. I found a small, sturdy figurine of Mario holding up one of the vegetables from SMB2 in a tiny outlet while vacationing in New Hampshire and wound up carrying him in my pocket the rest of the way through grade school as a good luck totem... which I very much needed.

I should stress, lest I come off as even more obsessive about these things

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than I actually am, that I did have other interests. I'd become a voracious reader (thanks in no small part to my Nintendo Power subscription) and a lover of science and technology... which in turn had led me to an interest in special effects, which in turn led me to a greater fascination with films and filmmaking. And I certainly had other venues of entertainment: like many others our age, my brother and I were *consumed* by the world of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" for much of the late 1980s.

What Nintendo and Mario were was my "happy place," my constant.

While I won't claim that I had anything *close* to an unhappy childhood, particularly compared to many of my friends, I wasn't having an easy time of pre-adolescence. I was, quite emphatically, a "nerd" in every sense of the word, save for academic excellence: I had too much of a problem with authority to be any good at schoolwork, but was still too weird and bookish to be accepted by most of my peers. Instead of dealing with this in some kind of mature fashion, I made one bad decision after another – including the classic asshole move of trying to endear myself to the "cool" kids by trying to join the name-calling and belittling of the other "uncool" kids. A part of me will probably hate myself for that until my dying day.

I should probably add that I was attending a Catholic School at the time, so all my issues came packaged alongside an inseparable religious guilt to boot and the teachers, free from the rigors of dealing with kids with serious problems like their public school counterparts, had plenty of time to devote to "fixing" me. I was in the principal's office a lot, and so were my parents. They tried therapy, but I developed an unhelpful hobby of reading about child psychiatry techniques and then either purposefully subverting them or smugly informing the therapist that I knew why he was doing what he was doing. I even had an EKG (which at least required me to stay up all night beforehand watching Nick at Nite and playing Nintendo, so there was that). They recommended Ritalin and other mind-altering drugs... but my parents said no. I thank them at least once a month for that, sometimes more.

And amid all that, the most reliable escape I had was almost always Mario. While I could get bored with even my favorite movies or books after awhile, the games were always a little bit different every time I played. So I played them. And watched the cartoons. And read the comics and the magazines. And filled my notebooks and sketchpads and the margins of my textbooks with Mario drawings. And felt my ears perk up when rumors began to swirl of... "Super Mario Bros. 3"

When it came to Mario, the rest of the world... was about to catch up to me.

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THE THIRD AGE

The lead-up to the release of SMB3 was unprecedented in video game launches and definitely exceeded the pageantry surrounding the release of anything I was ever intensely interested in. Sporting events, holidays and certain movies got big, overblown coverage. Not video games - not until now.

But I never heard anything “real” about the making of one outside of my own fevered, Nintendo-saturated imagination. The news came from encountering a fellow gamer at the campground at our forth yearly family trip to New Hampshire. He said he’d seen a Japanese magazine showing “Mario 3.” He said Mario turned into a raccoon, or something...

...what??

My first look at it came from (where else?) Nintendo Power: a short puff piece that was, in my mind, akin to a vision from God. Mario had a raccoon tail? It made him *fly*? He would dress like a Frog?? Bowser was back and had children!?! This was also the first time I ever saw “behind the scenes” game development images (it may even have been the first time that I was “conscious” of Shigeru Miyamoto’s existence as Mario’s creator), and I recall buying a bunch of graph paper when I saw that was how the designers were plotting out sprite art. Actual “news” about the game came out in an agonizing trickle, but that didn’t stop the hype from continuing to build. Local news shows ran interviews with excited store owners. Magazines that *weren’t* about games reported on it. Every kid I knew was excited about it...

...and then there was a movie.

MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

“The Wizard” is a fairly terrible movie, and also one of the most bizarre examples of a “children’s film” ever produced. The plot is a shameless, beat-for-beat rip-off of “Rain Man,” recast with pre-teens: a kid (Fred Savage) breaks his younger brother out of an institution (he’s suffering from a vaguely-defined traumatic disorder) and, after discovering that said brother has an almost-superhuman aptitude for video-game playing (he’s “The Wizard” of the title), schemes to hustle their way to Las Vegas so the kid can prove his sanity by competing in a gigantic gaming competition.

Like other “hobby movies” of the 80s (“Rad” for BMX bikers, “Gleaming the Cube” for skateboarders) it was prefixed on wish-fulfillment and pandering lionization, presenting the world as young gamers wished it could be: games were everywhere, a big enough part of the world that massive

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crowds would assemble for a competition but also still “ours” enough that gaming skills could help you thwart the will of clueless adults. For the most part, however, it’s kind of a dark downer of a movie - sad kids, angry parents, bleak backstories and end-of-the-80s ennui.

Oh, and it’s a Nintendo commercial, too.

Most movies “about” video-games just made up their own rather than pay licensing fees, but Nintendo was “behind” this one so their products and services were everywhere: not only were the kids and adults always finding an excuse to play Nintendo games, but a nasty “bad kid” antagonist wields the notoriously clunky “Power Glove” controller like a Bond nemesis showing off his doomsday weapon, and the Nintendo Power Game Counselors (a tip-line you could call for help with any game) got a shout-out as well.

But the real star attraction? “Super Mario Bros 3.”

Even with the Nintendo connection, “The Wizard” probably would’ve passed without much notice. But Nintendo and the producers had a secret weapon: the first gameplay footage of SMB3 would be revealed to Western audiences through this movie. And they made sure everyone knew about it.

So, on December 15, 1989 me and hundreds of thousands of other kids across America lined up for “The Wizard.” I’ll admit that I was among those who fooled themselves into thinking it was a great movie for years afterwards, but on that day all we really wanted was to get SMB3 in front of our eyeballs. Just let us see it. Please, just let us see it...

Now, having watched the film much, much more often than it deserves since then I can likely quote about 80% of it chapter and verse. (“You got 50,000 points in Double Dragon!?” “I love the Power Glove... it’s so bad.” “Video... Arrrr-maaaaa-geddoooooon!” “HE TOUCHED MY BREASTS!!!!” “California...”) But the climactic reveal of SMB3 is burned - no, seared - into my memory the way JFK’s assassination was for my parents’ generation... or the way 9/11 would be for mine a scant 12 years from then...

My God... was it really only 12 years?

In any case, the climactic reveal of SMB3 in “The Wizard” is an all-time marvel in the theater of the absurd: The Wizard stands stone-faced and emotionless on a preposterously over-designed stage (all smoke, lasers and “futuristic” set dressing) alongside his rivals—the Power Glove guy and a young woman. Behind them, a huge stadium crowd cheering. In front of them, towering screens displaying their individual game progress.

The unctuous emcee calls for quiet as he announces that the final, deciding match will test the competitors against “a game that they have never... EVER! Played before!!!” In the crowd, The Wizard’s family and road trip allies are struck with fear, believing his special gift contingent on his

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familiarity with the games he plays to the exclusion of all other extrovert engagement. Back up on the stage, the emcee's guttural bellow proclaims The Words: "Super Mario Bros... THREE!"

And there it is. The title screen. The flashing yellow "3." A map screen in a Mario game?? The Troopas are back! The Goombas, too! And Question Blocks! YES! The raccoon tail (we didn't know to call it a Tanooki yet) exists—and it does make you fly! Was that a giant Goomba???

In the film, the "Rocky"-esque suspenseful score drowns out the game's sounds, but in the theater the audience drowns out the film's very tone: this is meant to be a tense, "will he or won't he" contest to earn the happy ending, but we couldn't care less. This is what we came for. It's arrived. Our victory is achieved. Across the country we sat there, jaws agape and hearts racing, as The Most Important Thing That Had Ever Happened blazed across the screen and before our eyes months before any of us would be playing it.

Oh, The Wizard wins, by the way - proving his mettle and reuniting his broken family. Not that anyone really cared. "Super Mario Bros. 3 was real. We'd seen it. Now we just had to keep waiting to play it.

THE MOUNTAINTOP

SMB3 came out on February 12, 1990, and (thanks to my sainted Mother) within a few days I had a copy of my very own to play. For once I was the actual "first on my block" (and within my own circle of friends) to have it.

Since the subsequent bulk of this book is dedicated in part to my memories of playing through the game, I'll avoid preemptively repeating myself here. Instead, I'll try to convey as best I'm able what every other part of my world (gaming and otherwise) was like "outside" the game. What sticks out—what I remember most of all—was that this was the first time Mario "peaked" in the popular culture; the absolute height of his fame and renown during the period when he was the unquestioned King of video-game heroes...

As such, it was the first (and, for a long period, last) time that the rest of the world and I were almost in sync. SMB3 was the children's-media story of the moment, the first opinion polls showing that kids worldwide recognized Mario equally or moreso than Mickey Mouse were being breathlessly touted as "Hey boomers, you got OLD!" newswire puff-pieces, and the rest of the world was finally waking up to what my generation of youngsters (and none more so than me) had known for years: the little fat guy with the mustache and the overalls was the coolest thing on the planet.

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The “Super Show” had long since slipped from first-run airwaves, but a new series based exclusively on SMB3 had taken its place - not in syndication, but in a prime network Saturday Morning spot. There were Mario t-shirts, toys, and knick-knacks in “real” stores - not just game-centric outlets or grey-market import shops. Morning news shows “covered” the phenomenon. There was even an SMB3 Happy Meal at McDonalds: the ultimate symbol of something having “made it”—to an 8 year-old, at least. All in all, it felt a little bit like at least some of the differences between me and the rest of the world might have just been a matter of me being ahead of the curve, and now everything else was catching up. This, I thought, was the beginning of a new and better world.

It was actually the beginning of the end.

A BOY GOES TO WAR

Marketing, especially youth marketing, in the 90s was all about dividing and conquering: establishing an “identity” for your product, encouraging a less-attractive “identity” for a rival product, and getting consumers to flock to you to claim that “good” identity for themselves. We got a taste of this in the 80s with “The Cola Wars,” and Nike essentially started a race war among my sports-fan friends by selling “The Magic Shoe” and “The Bird Shoe” concurrently at the height of the Celtics/Lakers rivalry. But it was the Great Console War of the 90s that first drew me into that kind of corporate-manipulated madness.

As the new decade dawned, Nintendo had released the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (I got mine for making it out of the Fifth Grade without a single grade below a “C” – ah! the triumph of lowered expectations!) and with it “Super Mario World.” I still insisted on calling it “Super Mario Bros. 4: Super Mario World” until “Super Mario World 2: Yoshi’s Island” ended my hopes of seeing the series numbers climb into the double digits. I played the hell out of SMW, obviously, and while I loved those gorgeous 16-bit graphics, the expanded number of buttons, and Yoshi the Dinosaur most of all... I knew almost immediately that SMB3’s by then ironclad stature as my favorite game of all time was in no danger of being challenged. The Cape wasn’t as cool as The Tail, and I missed all the fun power-up suits.

But whatever. It was The 90s. Video games had “arrived” as the coolest ticket in popular culture (the Arcades were in the midst of a brand-new “boom,” driven largely by a new generation of more violent games aimed at teenagers), Mario and Nintendo were the acknowledged kings of video games, and Bob Chipman—formerly Bob The Dork Who’s Way Too Into

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His Dorky Video Games—was now Bob The Guy Who Knows Everything About The World’s Hottest ‘New’ Pass Time. “Why, yes ma’am! I CAN tell you the best place to build up your EXP in ‘Final Fantasy.” “What’s that, sir? You can’t quite make it through TMNT II?” Let me show you a code that might help.” Pathetic fantasies, even for a ten year-old, but that’s really how I figured things were going. Hell, maybe that’s how they were for just a moment.

But that moment – my moment – didn’t last.

The Sega Corporation had always existed as Nintendo’s principal U.S. rival. Others had come and gone (for a minute there we were all excited about the Turbo Grafx 16 – ask your parents how that worked out), but they were the constant; not so much a Pepsi as a “Brand X” with a small but loyal following. Their “Genesis” console had been out for a few years already, touting its 16-bit graphics versus the NES and dipping a toe into the waters of combative marketing with the “Genesis Does What Nintendon’t” campaign. But they never had a Mario (with apologies to Alex Kidd fans... no, just... no), and they never had any momentum beyond that of the Loyal Opposition. But when the SNES hit, removing the one advantage the Genesis had, Sega decided to go big or go home.

Sega declared war.

With the instantly-popular Sonic the Hedgehog as their new mascot, Sega marketing switched gears from passively lauding what their products offered to aggressively attacking what Nintendo’s didn’t. It was, I realize now, a brilliant strategy: while games had never been bigger, the generation of kids who’d made them big—my generation—were aging into double digits and soon their teens, where the pressure to cast aside childish things could’ve spelled doom the medium. Even though they were still mostly pumping out the same animal mascot, anime-styled adventure and scifi/fantasy curios that had dominated gaming up to that point, by positioning The Genesis as the cool (and, by extension, more “mature”) alternative to Nintendo and Mario, Sega was making it okay to keep your game console plugged in even as you started shoving your Ninja Turtles and G.I. Joes to the back of the closet (or the front of the yard sale).

Nintendo responded to the “war” by battenning down the hatches, taking almost no shots in their ads and relying on the potency of their longtime fans’ devotion to carry them. (This would become their definitive corporate behavior for years to come.) Sega’s campaign, on the other hand, was relentless and blunt in the way that only 1990s salesmanship could be. In Genesis commercials, sleazy storeowners tried to steer customers away from the sleek, sexy Genesis toward the disinteresting SNES; while a stodgy

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old maid “censor” mock-blasted Sonic while wondering “why can’t he be more like that nice boy, Mario?” In playgrounds and schoolyards across the country, young gamers chose sides and memorized their “talking points” - for a while there, I was able to rattle off the exact numerical superiority of the SNES’s onscreen color palette and the advantages of Mode 7 scaling and rotation capabilities.

But it didn’t matter. Sega wasn’t selling games, they were selling a label – a shoebox-sized hunk of plastic and microchips that said you were on the “cool” team. Nintendo, playing the long odds, did themselves no short-term favors by maintaining a strict “family friendly” image just as “violent” games were becoming the rage in Arcades. When it came time to port “Mortal Kombat” to home consoles, they handed Sega the mother of all P.R. victories when Nintendo opted for a bloodless, “censored” version while Genesis offered an authentic translation. Just like that, my life was the ending of a downer “Twilight Zone” episode: video games were “in”... and I was still “out” for a brand new reason.

In case you’re wondering, it would never have crossed my mind to try begging mom and dad for a Genesis, since they’d never go for it – in those days, having two game consoles was seen as an almost profane extravagance for a child, like having a “weekend bike” in addition to your everyday one. I think I had one friend who had both, and it was because his parents were divorced and his SNES “lived” at his father’s house. Besides, I was Team Mario. Sega wasn’t just his enemy, it was mine too. To a 12 year-old, that made sense.

HITTING THE WALL

Outside the gaming world itself, the cultural import of Mario and friends seemed to be waning. In 1991 a new cartoon based on “Super Mario World” came and went, and even my overly-forgiving eyes knew it was awful. Sonic had two series at the same time, both popular and one (running on Saturday mornings) that’s still remembered as one of the better cartoons of the 90s. Meanwhile, consoles were no longer exclusively driving the penetration of gaming franchises into the popular culture: arcades were in the beginning of what would be their last big hurrah, and mega-popular series like the aforementioned “Mortal Kombat” and “Street Fighter II” were enthraling the popular imagination. Video games had never been more visible outside of their original “niche”... but it was looking as though Mario might be slipping into the background – a bygone hero from a bygone age.

Unless, of course, he could be the one who conquered the one height of

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mainstream success that no other game hero had successfully surmounted: Hollywood.

In 1993 there was “Super Mario Bros: The Movie,” a live-action mess that barely resembled the games and that I prepared for with a zeal matching that for “The Wizard.” It was terrible - a generic 90s “junkyard scifi” dud in the mold of “Johnny Mnemonic” that failed so spectacularly at the box-office and so profoundly horrified Nintendo and Miyamoto that they are reputed to have turned down every American movie and TV offer since. These are things I know now, of course. When I first read an “official” confirmation of an honest-to-goodness Mario Movie in the pages of “Mario Mania” - an SMW strategy guide from Nintendo Power that included a 32-page character retrospective which I re-read often enough to qualify it as an unofficial precursor to this book - all I could feel was excitement. *Finally!*

That there would one day be a live-action Mario movie had been a dream and an inevitability as long as I could remember. He-Man had a movie. Superman and Batman both had movies. Hell, Teddy Ruxpin had a live-action movie! Great things got movies, Mario was the greatest thing, so Mario would get a movie, and I’d get to see the Mushroom Kingdom looking as grand and astonishing as I’d always imagined it. So when I read this official announcement from Nintendo Power—surely the only trustworthy source on such matters—I was elated not so much by discovery as by nearness: I was already waiting, and now my wait was almost over.

These were the days before the Internet, and thus there was no way for me to access any further news about The Most Important Movie Of All Time other than “it’s being made” in between first hearing about it and glimpsing the first trailers and stills over a year later. But that was okay. I knew Mario, and I’d grown up in the golden age of fantasy movies, so I knew what this movie of my dreams had to look like: a sprawling, colorful Mushroom Kingdom; Bowser’s Domain, all fire and brimstone; Mario and Luigi in their overalls and caps, charging through forests and tundra fighting live-action versions of the classic enemies; a beautiful flesh-and-blood Princess Toadstool (it would be another few years before Americans knew her real name was “Peach”); Toad... probably some kind of Jim Henson creation, or perhaps a little person in prosthetic makeup?

My mind was alive, at all times, wondering what form the characters, creatures and locations would take when finally rendered in the flesh. I couldn’t wait to see what kind of animatronic effects were going to be employed to create the Troopas - would they be animalistic, stomping around on all fours like in SMB1 and 3? Or upright-walking like in SMW? That second option might be best, I thought at the time. Upright-walking turtles

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had worked in the “Ninja Turtles” movies, and would be big for fight scenes. What about the power-ups? Obviously, the SMB3 super-suits wouldn’t be in the first movie; but surely they’d need to use Fire Flowers. Would Fire Mario be white and red like SMB1 and “World,” or the orange scheme from SMB3?

If only I knew...

It took over a year to see or hear anything else from it, and every tiny scrap of information that could be gleaned was less promising than the last... and only served to push me to further denial: the Mushroom Kingdom (or was it something else now?) was going to look like a modern city? Bowser/Koopa was just going to look like a human? No Troopas? The Goombas were big guys with tiny heads for some reason? Luigi with no mustache? Granted, these were the days before 2012’s “The Avengers,” where you had no reason to expect an adaptation of something like Super Mario Bros to look anywhere near close to its source... but this was ridiculous.

“No!” I’d tell myself. “It’ll work. It’ll be good. They have to change *some* things to make them work with real actors. This is *the* Mario Movie, and *the* Mario Movie will be great because it deserves to be – why would they make it if they didn’t understand that?” I read everything I could about it, which in those days meant magazine articles that recycled the same handful of publicity stills and self-serving quotes from the filmmakers. I convinced myself, in spite of the natural inclination toward skepticism that infused every other aspect of my life, that this was going to work. That in spite of all the revisions (was it really that different from the Koopalings having different names in the SMB3 cartoon ?) this version of Mario would simply be epic and awesome... just in a different way.

It had to be. It just had to be. That’s what I told myself as a friend and I headed in to watch it opening weekend... somehow managing to not register that neither the celebratory atmosphere that had surrounded “The Wizard” nor the large crowds for the same were decidedly not present. How could I notice anyone or anything else in the world that day? I was going to see the Mario Movie!

I was going to see “Super Mario Bros: The Movie!”

The film more-or-less follows the “lore” as it was generally understood at the time, with the details altered to make it A) filmable on a budget and B) able to ride the coattails of the dinosaur-phenomenon kicked off by “Jurassic Park.” Mario and Luigi are still plumbers from Brooklyn, but the Mushroom Kingdom is replaced by “Dinohattan,” a post-apocalyptic-looking version of NYC inhabited by the humanoid descendants of dinosaurs zapped there by the meteor that supposedly wiped the species out on Earth.

Bob Hoskins, respected British actor best known to Americans for “Who

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Framed Roger Rabbit?,” was Mario (and does a reasonably decent job of it), while then mostly-unknown (outside of the NY underground comedy circuit) John Leguizamo was Luigi. Samantha Mathis was Princess Daisy (named for the female protagonist of the “Mario Land” titles on the Game Boy), a Brooklyn archaeology student who turns out to be the exiled ruler of Dinohattan, and Dennis Hopper was “President” Koopa, who’s supposed to be an evolved T-Rex but doesn’t look like one until a few seconds at the very end.

It’s a horrible, horrible movie—stage bound, badly-acted, nonsensical, and cheap-looking even for 1993. Years later, it’d come out that the production was so badly managed that the actors threw out their scripts and everything just started getting worked out as they went. Hoskins and Leguizamo would go on to publicly trash the film, which bombed at the box-office, and it felt like Mathis’ career never fully recovered—as of this writing, she most recently featured in the box-office dud “Atlas Shrugged: Part II.”

Naturally, I convinced myself that it was good.

Not only good, but great. I reviewed it, positively, in much greater detail and to much more positivity than it deserved for the school paper. I zeroed-in on the good stuff: they (eventually) wore the right colors! Live-action Yoshi! That dinosaur-humanoid evolution business was kind of interesting... wasn’t it?? There was a Bob-Omb! The ending promised a sequel, but I didn’t wait around: I made my own (animated via D-Paint on my old Amiga), imagining how the plots of SMB2 and SMB3 might be adapted into the movie’s universe.

I *needed* it to be good, because I needed Mario to be as big and meaningful a movie franchise as he’d been in gaming. Getting a “The Movie” was forever, it meant that the character and the story mattered beyond being some brief fad. Mario was not a Pet Rock, damn it - he was my friend, the thing that was getting me through the misery of pre-adolescence. I needed him to matter so that the time and energy I’d invested into him mattered.

But the film was a flop; a bad movie that died a quick box-office death and heralded a run of awful video-game based movies (“Double Dragon,” “Street Fighter,” etc.) of which the so-so “Mortal Kombat” was the only thing close to successful (financially, anyway). The movies (and movie audiences) had spoken: video games—even Mario—weren’t ready for the big leagues... and eventually even I had to admit it.

It was a harbinger. Things were changing... and not in a good way.

THINGS FALL APART

High school (and junior high before it) was not quite the party that “Saved By The Bell” and John Hughes had promised my generation, to say the least. I was still locked into the Catholic School track (my brother would be in junior high before our parents figured out it just wasn’t worth it), but whereas my primary school had been an uneventful little place, my high school was another story: private and Catholic, but still very much “downtown,” mostly populated by Italian, Irish and Greek hoodlums whose families mainly paid tuition to keep them from having to go to the same schools as the somehow “worse” Black and Latino hoodlums.

In my memories, the Great Console Wars dragged on like my own private Vietnam, and it didn’t help that I was still constantly in trouble at school and in and out of therapy at the time for anger, attention and authority issues. However, it really only lasted a couple of years.

In 1994 the Sony Playstation came out. Unlike countless “third challenger” consoles before, it stuck around. The “war” was now more of a scattershot fracas, and since this was the booming Clinton Economy it was less unusual to see more than one brand of console to a household—particularly since “Generation NES” was speeding toward young-adulthood with pockets full of their own disposable income.

The “identity” conflict of the Mario vs. Sonic days gave way to a “maturity” conflict: Sony, the first successful challenger from outside the gaming-only business, built the Playstation (which, for reasons I forget, we felt obligated to shorthand as “PSX” at the time) to look more like a VCR or Stereo from a distance and utilize CDs instead of cartridges. That plus marketing campaigns emphasizing sports sims and other games targeted at older teens and college students drew a stark contrast between their machine and those from Nintendo or Sega with their candy-colored exteriors, toy guns and inescapable legacy as having originated as childhood playthings. The symbolism was unavoidable: Playstation gaming said “I’m a gamer, but I’ve grown up.” Still having your SNES plugged in? You might as well still be sleeping with a teddy bear.

What made it especially rough (not AS rough, I stress, as the more universal miseries of junior high and high school life) for me was how true that “symbolism” actually was. To be a “geek” about anything usually requires a level of investment that originates most often in childhood, meaning that “geek culture” is largely a culture of people holding on to vestigial pieces of their own childhoods. I still played video games because I still loved them,

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and I still loved them because I'd loved them as a kid and they allowed me to revisit that feeling - especially the ones, like Mario games, that were a direct connection to that Golden Age where I'd first discovered them.

Two Mario games released en-route to the waning days of the SNES, though, would have the whiplash-inducing effect of plunging me deeper into my fixation while simultaneously chipping away at my ability to view them as something beyond the diversions that they were: "Super Mario RPG" and "Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island."

Gaming culture had long since led me to the other stratas of Nerddom, and introduced obsessions like "continuity" into my psyche. In my mind, the Mario games had always had an epic saga playing out in the margins, but it was increasingly hard to ignore that such depth wasn't to be found in the games. "Super Mario RPG," however, finally delivered a Mario game with the kind of sprawling story and epic scope I'd always imagined was there. It was a standard Final Fantasy style "JRPG" (J for Japanese), but populated by Mario characters. The game sent its heroes (including Bowser at one point!) off on a quest to defeat a new enemy who'd swept down from space. It enthralled me and, however briefly, re-solidified my commitment to the series' "mythos." I hadn't "outgrown" Mario; he was growing with me—following my lead, but still there for me...

...and then came "Yoshi's Island."

The game that was initially advertised as "Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island" is today remembered as one of Miyamoto's masterworks—a triumph on every level of game design. The history of its production is legend: taken aback by a Nintendo boss's suggestion that he make the game's appearance less "cartoony" and more like "Donkey Kong Country" (a spin-off series that used pre-rendered 3D images as sprites to try and match the graphical power of the emerging CD-based consoles), Miyamoto doubled-down and ordered that the games visuals be tweaked to resemble children's crayon drawings. The result: a mega-selling, award-winning classic and a stern reminder to Nintendo not to question their Golden Boy.

While it was a game I loved then and adore today, at the time it was the Mario game that, well... that sort of "broke my brain" just a bit, and served as an early signal that my relationship with Mario and his world was fundamentally changing whether I wanted it to or not.

Like SMRPG, "Yoshi's Island" offered the tantalizing prospect of a more narrative-oriented Mario adventure and the irresistible idea of finally setting up a Super Mario Bros continuity. The game was a prequel, set long before the events of even Donkey Kong (presumably), wherein the wizard caretaker of a still-infant Baby Bowser foresees the coming of the Mario Bros

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and schemes to kidnap them as babies (from *The Stork*, since this is a Mario game) to change history. Things go wrong, and Baby Mario winds up in the care of Yoshi (whoa! They'd actually met before!?!?) on a quest to rescue his brother.

The idea of seeing Mario's "origin story" had me playing through this game like a man possessed, even though by that point a teenaged social-life was leaving less and less time for gaming. I knew the end, I figured: Mario and Luigi would find their way back to Brooklyn. Along with seeing their Earth Realm digs visualized for the first time in a game, I was intrigued to see if any indications would be made about how and why they found their way back to Mushroom Kingdom years later. The possibilities!

And so, after a climactic battle against a towering, Godzilla-sized Bowser (another image I'd always wanted to see!), I settled in to watch as the games' ending credits played out over an animation of *The Stork* flying Baby Mario and Luigi back home. Any moment now, I just knew, I'd see a 16-bit New York skyline come into view... but, instead, the closing text and final image tell a different story, as the Bros. are delivered to "...Where Mom and Dad live..."

"...THE MUSHROOM KINGDOM!"

...What?!

Mario and Luigi were born in the Mushroom Kingdom? That doesn't make any sense! How'd they grow up in Brooklyn, then? Were they sent there at some point, like Superman, unaware of their real origins? And how were they Italian-Americans if they came from a world with no Italy and no America? Oooh! Maybe that'll be the plot of the next game! Maybe...

I didn't have a "breakdown" or anything. It's not as though I was knocked into some kind of system-shock over this. But the dissonance stuck with me for a while. By now I had more important things to worry about in school and life to be completely consumed by this. College-prep classes, girls, sex, drugs and social-hierarchy were giving me my headaches—high school, after all. If I'd learned to keep my Nintendo worship (relatively) in check in the "Sega is cooler!" days, I could hold it back for the age of "everything but Playstation is for kids!"

Mario games had been "my thing," my refuge from everything else when I needed them. Now that refuge was tinged—ever so slightly—with doubt. It wasn't that "not from Brooklyn" changed anything fundamental, but it felt so... "cavalier." That it wasn't presented as a surprise drove home the reminder that most of what Generation NES considered "canon" for its games was often just hastily-composed faux-mythos for U.S. ad copy; and part of the story I'd been "devoted" to might've just been a narrative placeholder for

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Nintendo.

There's a moment—vitaly important in the development of any geek, nerd or whatever else you want to call it—when it finally sinks in all the way that the people creating whatever character or property you've let colonize a part of your imagination just aren't as “devoted” to it as you are – that, to them, it's a job. For me, this was it. How much sense did it make to be trying to work out the bigger relationships between the characters and the broader scope of their world? What was the point of keeping meticulous mental (and, yes, also physical) lists and chronologies of Mario's friends, enemies, worlds, abilities, all that? What did it matter if I could point out, on a moment's notice, that Nokobons (exploding-shell Troopas) were only found in Sarasaland and only in one game? Why should I put so much of myself into this... when Mario's masters couldn't even keep his origins straight?

It all happened so gradually (and in the background of so many bigger things) that it didn't register until much later, but this was probably a turning point for me as much as it was for Mario. Young adulthood now coming into full effect. It was the best possible time to free up some mental space now that school and life-choices were going to start counting for something. I had college to get ready for, and a career path to start actually charting. (I'd long since transitioned from filmmaking to game-designing as a dream trajectory.) It was time to move on—if only a bit—from Mario and Nintendo...

...just not all at once.

THE LAST STAND

In 1996 I was a sophomore in High School. Bill Clinton was dutifully pretending that Bob Dole presented any kind of challenge to his second presidential term. But for me and millions of other still-playing Generation NES gamers, the biggest thing happening was the Nintendo 64.

The path into this next generation of consoles had been an awkward one for the House Miyamoto Built and a trying time for their stalwart fans. After a series of fits and starts that included the disastrous “Virtual Boy” platform, Nintendo wound up skipping the 32-bit race entirely, getting by on the success of mega-hits like “Donkey Kong Country” and “Yoshi's Island” while bolstered by the aging SNES's stability in a market that was otherwise in total chaos. Sega's Genesis had collapsed under the weight of poorly-realized peripherals, and their two subsequent consoles (Sega CD and Saturn) en route to 1999's Dreamcast suffered from poor sales in North America. The Playstation was moving units but hadn't quite landed a “killer app” of its own.

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So it was announced with some fanfare that their next console would leap ahead into the 64-bit realm, and would use that new power to take video-games all the way into the third dimension... and, as ever, Mario would lead the way. Of course, 3D had a place in gaming from the very beginning. Vector-based arcade titles like “Star Wars” made shapes from glowing lines, PC fare like Wolfenstein and Dune sent players wandering down flatly-decorated hallways made from perspective-warped 2D surfaces, and SNES titles like Mario Kart and Pilotwings simulated three-dimensional space via “Mode 7” scaling and rotation.

But the early images of “Super Mario 64” (in those days, gamer-culture really was so insular that no one thought anything of naming a game after its bit-count) that were slowly creeping out from the pages of Nintendo Power and the primordial form of the Internet promised something more: a fully-realized Mushroom Kingdom, explorable by a Mario who existed as a “solid” digital being? Truly, this was hope for the future personified! Open exploration of a full virtual world, the dream of gaming from the beginning, would finally be realized... by a Mario game. As it should be. The future of video-games would remain in what I still, after all that time, felt were its rightful hands.

“Super Mario 64” was, of course, a thing of beauty. No challenger to SMB3 in my heart, of course, but a worthy successor - if Mario side-scrolling had peaked, for me, with The Tanooki Suit, then SM64 would be fine as the first lunge into a new era.

It was the first time in forever that a game was so aesthetically comfortable I was desperate to not finish it: just making Mario run and jump around the elaborately-constructed game world, exploring every cave and scaling every tower just to see what might be found... In my youth, I wanted nothing more than to spend hours simply inhabiting Mario’s world, and now I could. And if such a massive undertaking as this (the game world was unprecedentedly huge, for the time) was merely the first step, one could only imagine what might come next. Let the others have their (undoubtedly!) short-term fads of raiding tombs and crashing bandicoots - Mario was back; and this was, we were sure, the future...

But, in reality, it was the beginning of the end. No one, least of all Nintendo diehards awestruck by the experience of brawling with Bowser in 3D, could’ve guessed it at the time, but “Super Mario 64” would be the last, brief moment for at least a decade that a Mario game was the most important thing happening in video games.

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DESERTION

To date, I don't know that there's ever been a more perfect symbiosis of hardware and software in the history of gaming as "Super Mario 64" and the Nintendo 64; as though everything about the machine had been designed solely to optimize this *one* perfect game. As it turned out, that might have been part of what went wrong. The N64 was made to showcase Nintendo's self-developed first-party marvels, and everyone else was just going to have to fall into line. Unfortunately for Nintendo, while they were busily consumed with crafting Miyamoto's 3D masterpiece, the world had changed.

In the early 90s, the ability to store digital information on CD-ROM discs had revolutionized the home computer world. While PC Gaming couldn't match the ease of access or the install base of consoles, it was clear to everyone that CDs were the future of video games. Everyone, that is, except Nintendo.

Nintendo had always been partial to the cartridge/chip format, in no small part because of the control it afforded them over third party developers. Publicly, this was how they enforced quality-control so as to prevent market-saturating crashes like those that doomed Atari in the 80s, but behind the scenes it was how they strong-armed developers: the publisher controlled the manufacturing and availability of the storage medium needed to put your game on shelves. CDs, already manufactured by dozens of outfits, would mean the end of that control.

CDs also came with their own drawbacks: unable to write to themselves or access information without load-times, they would've been ill-suited for the sprawling worlds Miyamoto and company wanted to create, such as SM64. And so the Nintendo 64 became the last of the cartridge based consoles, a move that allowed for the creation of unparalleled masterworks like SM64 and "The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time" (itself often called the greatest game ever made by some to this day) but also ultimately doomed them.

Developers who had been aching to bring the power of PC games to consoles were aghast at this. Unlike times before, however, they had a viable escape option: Sony was only too happy to have them, and a sea-change was signaled when Squaresoft announced that Final Fantasy—a mega-popular RPG franchise that had always lived under the Nintendo umbrella—was jumping ship to Sony for its seventh installment.

For a time, veterans of the first Console War like myself tried to mount a vain, halfhearted defense (more out of nostalgia for the last conflict than

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passion for this one), but the writing was on the wall. “Final Fantasy VII” became an instant, generation-defining classic, more and more longtime Nintendo developers bailed from the Good Ship Mario, and it soon became clear that the hemorrhaging of games and gamers from Nintendo was not going to stop.

Instead of being the beginning of a new era, “Super Mario 64” wound up being Mario’s last big “traditional” game for a while—his only adventure title (outside of the offbeat RPG “Paper Mario”) on the N64. Mascot-multiplayer games would be his jurisdiction for the rest of the console’s lifespan: “Mario Kart 64,” three entries in the “Mario Party” virtual-board game series and—perhaps most importantly—“Super Smash Bros.,” a fighting game whose roster was comprised of Nintendo characters: an idea I was hoping someone would execute for as long as I’d been gaming.

But by then reality was crystallizing: my brother and I had a Playstation and even the ill-fated Dreamcast, and even I had to concede that the wait between worthwhile N64 games was just too long. Even for me, The Nintendo Age was over.

A DECADE IN DARKNESS

I don’t know that there was an exact moment in time when I effectively stopped playing video games, I just know that it happened. I don’t recall a single moment when I simply said “I’m done,” especially since I never really fully quit cold turkey. All I can say for sure is that at one moment the vast majority of my free time was spent playing, reading about, and thinking about video games... and then it wasn’t anymore.

Despite its place in the overall narrative, I honestly don’t feel like it was strictly a result of the First Age of Nintendo coming to a close for my Generation, though I imagine it helped. The first sign of it was that I was spending more time dwelling in the “gaming community” than I was actually playing the games. Reading about the launch of Nintendo Power’s America Online site was my introduction to the concept of internet chat rooms and message boards – and it spurred me (and, with some nudging, my family) to finally get a good internet connection so that I might use them. I devoured the world of the early Internet, particularly gaming sites. The hours once spent replaying my favorite games were replaced by hours of chatting and arguing about new ones. A new normal of gaming developed in my house: I learned about games, and my younger brother and sister did the playing.

Mostly, though, it was a semi-unconscious decision about time management: High school had me focused on my career prospects (soon

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enough I'd have my first job, clerking for a Blockbuster). My other Internet fixation, movie sites, had reawakened my other geek passion for filmmaking in a major way. For the first time I had a career path that seemed more attractive and more plausible than game design: get into the movies. Writing, directing, special effects, maybe even criticism—just get into the movies. With all this on my plate, something had to give... and somewhere along the line video games became that something.

Thing is, as much as I was leaving games behind it felt as though they were also leaving me behind. Gaming was rapidly changing from a geek subculture to something like the mainstream, and with more of my attention diverted elsewhere I recognized it less and less every time I looked. Even Nintendo wasn't the Nintendo I'd grown up with. They had a new cash cow, "Pokemon," which had crossed over into a mainstream phenomenon bigger and faster than Mario ever had; to a new generation of gamers, Pikachu—not Mario—was the face of the medium.

And so, that was that. My brother bought the GameCube, Nintendo's successor to the N64 – making it the first Nintendo console other than the Virtual Boy I didn't own myself. The Cube had Mario games of its own: Luigi's Mansion (where Mario's brother fought ghosts), Wario World, and (as a setpiece) Super Mario Sunshine, which upended traditional Mario gameplay by giving him a water canon weapon for cleaning up villainous graffiti (it's complicated) in a tropical setting. I played and enjoyed these games, but whether it was them or me the spell was well and truly broken—I just didn't have the burning desire to come back.

Instead, my college and film pursuits filled my time. Working at Blockbuster (and then Suncoast Video, and then Blockbuster again) helped me channel my growing film vocabulary into a useful job skill, but more importantly it afforded me the ability to make friends of coworkers. These turned out to be the most genuine and lasting friendships I'd had in my life thus far, and a particular assemblage of pals culled from that first Blockbuster job became a posse of like-minded movie buffs with whom I started an independent filmmaking outfit—today, several of them are frequent collaborators in the production of "The Game OverThinker."

A second collection of friends came from Suncoast, and it was through them that I wound up reviving a small sliver of my gaming life after several years going cold (or, at least, lukewarm) turkey. Hanging out with them, the frequent activity of choice was firing up one of the GameCube "Mario Party" titles (the series reached 7 installments during its time on the Cube) or the game that had turned out to be the system's most enduring title: "Super Smash Bros. Melee," an improvement on the original whose potency as a Nintendo

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nostalgia-injection was even effective on an abstainer like me. It was in this way that I discovered what had been happening to my old digital friends while I'd been away: the GameCube had failed to make a real impact in a market now dominated by a new Console War between Sony's Playstation 2 and Microsoft's Xbox (An American console?? What madness was this?), but it was thriving as the console of choice for party games like these.

I would come to learn that GameCubes were a common fixture of college dorm life. (I was going to a local state college and commuting from home to save money, so communal collegiate life was somewhat lost on me.) To a generation of younger gamers picking up the Cube habit from the college-age older siblings, Mario and company were becoming better known as the fighting roster of "Melee" than as heroes of their own games.

Meanwhile, my second Blockbuster job led me to what seemed at the time like a stroke of great fortune: an older gentleman (who will remain nameless) came in asking if he could leave some flyers—turns out, he was starting up a film criticism show for local cable-access television and was looking for on-air talent. Store policy said I had to tell him no, but it said nothing about me volunteering for the position myself. After a set of meetings and conversations, I was hired to do the show along with this person and a female co-host. The resulting show was... what you'd expect from local cable, but it was exposure and a chance to work on my "craft," such as it was. I was the colorful member of the team, the younger guy with the wild opinions and the deeper film knowledge. It was a fun time... while it lasted.

I'd never gotten much of a sense that anything was especially "off" about the guy running the show. I knew he was fairly conservative politically—ex-military and an ex-cop—but it had never come up in any kind of negative way. But upon the release of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ" and the controversy surrounding it something seemed to change in him. I was fairly certain both co-hosts knew that I'd seen the film and hadn't cared for it, and expected it would make a good show when we sat down to review it. Instead, I got a phone call, and an unnervingly scary life experience.

My employer (though, for the record, I wasn't technically being "paid" for my services on the show) summoned me to a "meeting" in his van, in an empty parking lot early in the morning. He did freelance security work (or he said he did, at least), and was "on the job." This set off more red flags than I could count, but I showed up to meet him. He presented me with a printout of a scathing blog review I'd posted after seeing the film the first time, and wanted to know what I had "against Jesus Christ." Unwisely, I offered that my objection was to the anti-Semitism in the film and was told "Those people had 'Schindler's List,' now this is our turn"... I was then told

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that he would be using the “Passion” discussion as an occasion to promote the film’s “positive message,” and that if I wouldn’t go along (by saying I liked the movie) my time on the show would be over.

And that was that. I never heard from the guy again, but I know his show didn’t last long without me. I’m told he’d behaved in a manner (because it’s hearsay I won’t get into specifics) that disturbed the production staff during the taping of the “Passion” episode, and that my name had come up, which had me walking around more than a little paranoid for a few weeks; but nothing ever came of it.

My time at Blockbuster (number 2) ended soon after that (around 2005, if I recall correctly), but my ongoing friendship with a coworker from the first Blockbuster was able to finagle me a job with him at Best Buy, where I soon found myself moved from a morbid grind in the appliances department (“Yes, we can swap the hinges on that fridge.” “Yes, the ice-maker needs to be hooked up to a water supply”) to the DVD, music and video-games department that was in those days the profit-driving centerpiece of any big electronics store. By then I’d been selling movies for almost a decade, and while my time away from the medium left me a little shaky on the names and faces (who were all these people and creatures on the Xbox and PS2 boxes?) the skill set translated to selling games pretty handily. As you’ll no doubt intuit, it was hard to be around video games – even as a salesman – and not be drawn back toward them. But, in truth, I’d been nudging my way back for awhile by then.

It had been, for sure, many years since there’d been a game console hooked up to my TV. The NES and SNES were sitting, along with stacks of their games, in a box somewhere in the back of a closet. The N64 was living in my sister’s room. My brother had the GameCube and PS2 at college. But gaming had changed in my absence, and one of those changes had been that the console in your room was no longer the sole home of the “serious” gamer... and this change had been led by some old friends.

I don’t think I ever came right out and said “I’m done with Mario,” but even if I had... it turned out he wasn’t done with me.

DAYBREAK

For most of my time between the Blockbuster #2 and Best Buy eras of employment, part of my regular schedule included weekend nighttime hangouts with my Suncoast-originating group of friends which almost always involved playing some video games. Halo and Halo 2 on the Xbox were the games of choice at first (not my favorite thing, but shooting is fun) but soon it

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was discovered that the GameCube Mario Party titles and Super Smash Bros. Melee were better compatible with half-drunken revelry. But as much I as enjoyed them in that context, I didn't rush out to get my own copies – it was something I did “over those guys' house.”

What it did spur me to do was start paying more attention to my own games department and spend more time browsing gaming sites online and game stores during mall walks. And it was during one such jaunt of casual browsing that something extraordinary caught my eye: boxes labeled “NES Classics,” with vintage-style cover art advertising that they contained direct ports of NES-era games for the Game Boy Advance. Their presence made me smile, but by then I'd gotten used to the idea of Golden Age ports on new systems. What I saw next to them, though, would've induced an honest to God spit-take had I been drinking anything at the time: a Game Boy Advance (Advance SP, if you want to be technical about it) painted and art-designed to resemble an NES.

I had to have it. Impulsive, yes—but I was unable to resist the opportunity to carry *The Good Old Days* in my pocket. Now... I needed games.

What I'd managed to miss during my “break” was that, while Mario and the rest of the Nintendo menagerie had slipped from the top shelves of the console scene, their power and influence had grown a thousand fold in the realm of hand-helds. The Game Boy brand had run the show effectively unchallenged for so many cycles that it still had potency in the age of Nintendo's newer handheld, The DS, and game stores were filled with used, low-priced GB and GBA games. I gorged myself on such games, discovering to my delight that the persistent tech limits of small handhelds meant that this particular gaming landscape was awash in polished continuations of my beloved 8 and 16-bit eras.

And there were Mario games—lots of Mario games. Re-releases of the classics, the two “Land” titles I still had from before, and even “Mario & Luigi: SuperStar Saga” which played like an even more satirical follow-up to “Super Mario RPG.” GBA (and soon enough a DS) was my constant companion, particularly useful for passing time sitting in the car after work, waiting for the rest of the house to go to sleep before heading home.

...I promise that last part isn't actually as sad as it sounds. You see, around this same time I had picked up another hobby: making silly videos on the internet. I'd acquired some basic editing software with a new camcorder at one point, and had gotten reasonably good at using it in my college film classes. Those days were the Wild West for web video – connections just fast enough to make it workable, legality just slow enough to make things wide open. Putting videos together scratched my filmmaking itch (a second

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movie project with my Blockbuster crew had blown up in my face somewhat) but still living at home meant the only times I could have enough quiet and computer access to actually make use of it was when everyone else had hit the sack.

I was getting pretty good at cutting together silly mock-trailers, but I had far greater amusement watching the more polished shows other guys were putting out. James Rolfe, another aspiring moviemaker, was transforming into an internet-age celebrity as “The Angry Nintendo Nerd” almost overnight, establishing “excitable Gen Xer rants about obscure stuff from his/her childhood” as the most popular web video genre going. A few years later, a British-born Australian gamer named Yahtzee Croshaw became overnight the first “superstar” video game critic when his hilarious, insightful and mercilessly objective animated review show “Zero Punctuation” was picked up by an online game magazine called “The Escapist.” Hm...

I’d like to say that I saw my future then... struck by visions of a new path forward by a beam of sunlight down from heaven. But the truth is, I didn’t have the slightest inkling that I might’ve stumbled into a useful career outlet for both my (thus far) useless multimedia and film studies degrees and my gradually-reawakening video game fixation. My mind was focused elsewhere, both at work and at play. I’d come back to Mario and Nintendo fandom, but as a nostalgia infusion—something to keep on the memory shelf with He-Man and Little League trophies.

And then, something started to stir...

WHAT’S OLD IS NEW

As it turned out, I wasn’t the only Generation NES twenty-something using Nintendo handhelds to reconnect with the burgeoning retro scene. Publishers were seeing the numbers: alongside re-releases, new games cast in the old-school style started to fill up the shelves. In 2005, Nintendo themselves got in on the act in a big way – though, surprisingly, it wasn’t Mario himself who’d lead the charge.

Instead, the first wholly new Mario-universe sidescroller in almost a decade (excluding the “Wario Land” sub-franchise, and even those releases had slowed to a crawl) would be 2005’s “Super Princess Peach” which, as the title implies, took the long-overdue step of having Princess Peach do the fighting herself to rescue a kidnapped Mario and Luigi. Then, one year later, the man himself returned.

“New Super Mario Bros” used rendered sprites (an upgrade of the

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similar technology employed by “Donkey Kong Country” on the SNES) and bumped the character models up to their present-day incarnations, but otherwise represented a back-to-basics approach: a classic side-scroller modeled primarily on SMB1. Linear levels, Mushroom/Flower/Star power-ups (though the Mushrooms now came in “extra small” and “significantly bigger” varieties), and Bowser Castles at the end of each level to conquer. And while it might not have blown the minds of longtime devotees (see below), it more than succeeded at its goal of giving both original fans and newbies who’d come up on the re-releases and “Mario Party” titles something that was at once new and familiar; and the sales spoke for themselves: It was one of the biggest hits ever released for the DS.

In all honesty, when judged against the rest of the series, NSMB probably falls in the “average” zone. It’s a solid game – how could it not be, with Nintendo EAD (the company’s top tier in-house development outfit) having had about 20 years to perfect the formula? – but I’ll admit to feeling a small tinge of “that’s it?” upon first playing through. It may have been an issue of expectations, i.e. me hoping for something that picked up where “World” and “Yoshi’s Island” left off” whereas Nintendo was looking to polish up the original diamond... but if you’d told me that this amusing, glossy revival game signaled the beginning of a full-fledged rebirth for Mario and Nintendo I would’ve written it off as wishful thinking.

I would’ve been wrong.

REVOLUTION

My reborn gaming habit had been focused almost exclusively on handhelds, so I hadn’t been paying much attention outside of work to the console scene. I knew the Xbox 360 and PS3 were en route and set to muck up the HD-DVD/Blu-Ray war that was already making a mess of my job, and I knew that Nintendo had a new console codenamed “Revolution”... but by now everyone knew the score on that front: maybe a new Mario and Zelda game, but otherwise Nintendo consoles were passé. Nothing exciting to see here... especially since, as late as 2005, they still hadn’t settled on a name for the thing and would only reveal that it would “re-invent” gameplay in some ill-defined way.

Re-invented gameplay turned out to mean a simplified, motion-sensing controller; introduced as the “Wii Remote” around the same time we learned that the final system would be called “The Nintendo Wii.” It had become customary, routine even, for new game consoles to primarily tout their numbers – size of onboard memory, speed of processor, size of chips

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and boards, etc; but The Wii came out touting unique features like consoles used to do back in the days of “Blast Processing” and turbo-buttons. Along with motion-controls, Nintendo was touting “The Miis,” mini-avatars of the player that could be inserted into games, and a “Virtual Console” for downloading older classic games – both things considered routine now but quietly revolutionary at the time.

The mainstream of gaming culture, of course, turned up its noses. “Silly gimmicks!” Nintendo? Nintendo was weary and out-of-touch. They didn’t know how to compete in the modern gaming market, the system itself was graphically underpowered, and the motion-sensing “gimmick” was a tacked-on trifle to make it appear worth owning. How could it be anything else when the Remote (resembling an Apple-esque version of an NES controller when turned on its side) was so clearly not designed for the multiplayer, online first-person shooters that had become the only game genre that mattered over the previous half-decade. This was the consensus, expressed loudly in the gamer culture and in more muted tones in the gaming press.

Of course, the story of not just how wrong but how spectacularly wrong that consensus turned out to be doesn’t need to be rehashed here: “traditional” game culture was skeptical and resistant to the Wii, but the moment the general public got a look at Wii Sports – essentially a pack-in game designed as a tech-demo for motion controls – the system was an immediate, massive success. Stock flew from shelves, and customers lined up in droves. The sales numbers climbed so high so quickly it soon became a statistical impossibility that any other machine of that generation would end up selling better. In the decade I ultimately spent working in retail, I never experienced anything like it.

The Wii was a full-blown phenomenon, captivating not just the gaming world but the rest of the popular culture to a degree that hadn’t been seen since... well, since the debut of the NES two decades earlier. As much as “hardcore gaming” would continue to deny it, all of the sudden Nintendo was back... but not necessarily the Nintendo I’d known.

Early on, it felt to me as though Nintendo wasn’t just looking to bypass what was then the mainstream of the gaming market to appeal to a broader audience but also to bypass their own devout fanbase. The Wii was a major attempt at rebranding, and part of that process seemed to be getting away from their known stature as primarily a delivery system for Mario, Pokemon, and Zelda titles. “Wii Sports” featured no licensed characters, and while the system did launch with some familiar faces ready to go in the form of “Super Paper Mario” and “Zelda: Twilight Princess,” the lack of a major Mario title stood out – particularly since the GameCube’s big Mario entry (“Sunshine”)

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had been received as an admirable but not entirely successful experiment.

Was that to be the end, then? Was Mario to go the way of Mickey Mouse – “star” of the company in name only? “Mascot Emeritus,” relegated to cheerleading for the new stars from the sidelines? Waving to the kids and their parents (or their grandparents, who might be old enough to recall when he was the reason people came to the park) as they dash by on their way to the hot new ride based on the hot new franchise? Were the Wii and its iconic Miis detached enough not only from traditional game culture and even the Nintendo legacy itself that they’d now subsist on their own? The idea of it seemed fairly plausible to me, and filled me with a sense of impending ironic dread: Nintendo makes the big comeback I’d wanted for them... but wind up in a form that in no way resembled my memory of them? And with no Mario? It would, I imagined, fit my luck at that time.

I was wrong.

TO THE STARS

One of the quirks that accompanies Shigeru Miyamoto’s position as an elder statesman of game development is that he holds the prioritization of interface (read: gameplay) above any other aspect of the process. No matter how much graphics improve, or how much the industry (and the audience) comes to prize narrative or visual innovation, one gets the distinct sense that he generally doesn’t want to do a game – even one starring his own creations – without the opportunity to try some new technique or fresh idea in the process. His penchant for canceling, upending, or drastically reworking entire projects when a new idea strikes his fancy are the stuff of industry legends: he’s said to have called the development team on a then-experimental SNES spaceship-combat title from his own honeymoon and told them to change the game’s power-up mechanism to diving under arches and to make the lead character an anthropomorphic cartoon fox. His reasoning? He had just wed in a traditional Shinto ceremony, which involves passing beneath an arched walkway en-route to standing before a statue of the fox-like god Amaterasu. (The finished game, “Starfox,” would become a best-seller and kick off yet another beloved franchise for Nintendo.)

In the time that the Wii was still only in the planning stages of becoming a console sales juggernaut, Miyamoto’s new fancy was to create a 3D platformer where manipulating and negotiating shifting forces of gravity was the main obstacle to completing levels and solving puzzles. And so it was decided that Mario would now travel to outer space.

The space-bound setting of “Super Mario Galaxy” may have started out

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as a way to visually and narratively explain Miyamoto's desire for gravity-fixated physics, but it turned out to be an ingenious way around what had become the nagging problem of platforming in 3D. The jump and dodge gameplay that had defined the majority of the Mario series existed because hurdles and chasms were the only forms of geographic obstacle one could place in on a path that could only be traversed from left or right; but being able to move in all directions through fully-realized worlds can't help but limit the necessity of Mario's signature moveset. The more exploration-oriented "Super Mario 64" had piled on the new innovations to accommodate this, but by the time "Sunshine" rolled around it was more than clear that Mario was built for jumping and stomping first... and everything else second by a good distance.

By moving the action to a version of "Outer Space" that was inspired less by science fiction than it was by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince" – with Mario traversing comically tiny planetoids and hitching a ride on shooting stars – "Galaxy" allowed the series to evolve into a kind of absolute-extreme version of the platforming ideal: Mario leaps from platform to platform above a literal black abyss on a path that is almost always fairly linear even if such straightforwardness is cleverly hidden by visual panache.

That "back to the beginning, but better" approach was punctuated by the revival of classic elements like oldschool enemies, SMB3-style "suits" for power-ups, Kamek (from Yoshi's Island) making his return, and the 3D debut of the Fire Flower... all punctuated by a bravura opening sequence wherein the Mushroom Kingdom is blown almost to ruin by Bowser's new fleet of SMB3-style airships. I remember the first time I saw that part, presented as an E3 trailer for the game... it was like revisiting a memory and, for a change, having it feel better with the passage of time.

That same sequence also introduces the first and most intriguing new element to the Mario "canon" to come along in... possibly ever. We learn that the Mushroom Kingdom celebrates a kind of High Holy Day around the appearance of a specific Comet, which turns out to actually house the spaceship/observatory of Rosalina – an enigmatic figure who behaves very much like a kind of Goddess and serves as mother to extra-terrestrial beings who grow up to become stars and planets. (That observation ultimately became the second episode of "The Game OverThinker," which I'll speak to momentarily.)

"Super Mario Galaxy" became a critical darling (the best reviewed Mario title in years) and one of the Wii's biggest sellers... though, perhaps tellingly, not quite as big as Wii Sports or the group/family-oriented "Mario Kart Wii." Still, it did well enough for Nintendo (and Miyamoto) to take the uncommon

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step of greenlighting an immediate, direct sequel based on the same engine, making 2010's "Super Mario Galaxy 2" the first direct successor installment in the series since the original Japanese SMB2.

THE CALLING

In 2008 I was spending a lot of time online, re-engaged with a gaming community that in many ways not only didn't resemble the one I recalled but seemed openly hostile to it – a mirror-image that hated its own original subject.

The feeling of inclusiveness that I remembered (perhaps in rose-colored exaggeration), born from gaming culture and nerd culture having originated as one and the same and thus sympathetic to misfits and the socially-oppressed, had been replaced by a culture of bullying: a crude, cruel horde dedicated to shunning not only the "old" iconography of gaming but any attempt to build a "new" one beyond the borders of the Online Multiplayer Military Shooter culture that had come to dominate. Whereas I'd recalled a culture that flaunted its own pseudo-multiculturalism given the sheer volume of the medium that came from the "alien" culture of Japan, I now found a rabidly xenophobic culture that would not only happily purge the "weird" Eastern influences of the past but also resisted the injection of any perspective that didn't align with that of a white/heterosexual/middle-class/male.

I was told – in feverish, excited terms – that gaming had "matured," but from my perspective it had merely aged... and even then only into adolescence. The childlike (and, yes, occasionally child-ish) innocence of gamer culture I remembered had morphed into the persona of an ignorant, hormone-fueled, id-driven teenage boy: violently resentful of women, fiercely protective of privilege, eager to prove machismo, and utterly contemptible. Of course, this culture despised the Wii – representing as it did a fusion of all that they sought not to be: a group activity where they cultivated detachment, colorful and exuberant where they prized darkness and edginess, and inherently foreign (it was easily the most proudly Japanese-feeling trend American Families had happily adopted since the Suburban Koi Pond) where they'd come to worship the digital-age version of "American Muscle."

I ended up dumping my frustrations with what the medium and its "public face" had become – crystallized by the reveal that the lead of the rebooting "Bionic Commando" franchise was to be transformed into yet another scowling, stubble-bearded lunk of a "Wolverine" knockoff – into a YouTube video about the declining standard of character design in games. I wound up titling it "Game OverThinker: Episode 1 – 'A Matter of Character'"

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at the end when I got a vague sense that I wound up having more to say and could maybe turn this into a series.

I wound up doing a handful more episodes, which earned a tiny but loyal following on The Tubes, but never did I entertain any serious thoughts of becoming “The Next Angry Nerd” or “The Next Yahtzee Croshaw” (“boy, that’d be cool though, huh?” thoughts, on the other hand, were of course common), though I did fire off a “hey, look at this!” link to the original to ScrewAttack.com – the Texas-based site that had famously discovered Rolfe’s AVGN series. Enough time went by that I honestly forgot that I’d even sent it... until one day I noticed that the viewer numbers had exploded all at once on YouTube.

ScrewAttack had posted the first TGO episode to its front page, and suddenly my YouTube channel, my email, and the blog I’d set up to “promote” the series were inundated with new visitors. My videos were being posted to blogs and feeds across the web, and all at once “The Game OverThinker” went from being one of my hobbies to being a “thing” I was now “in charge” of. Sudden e-fame, even of a type I wasn’t really able to “monetize” in any way, was quite a thing... but I could not have been prepared for what happened next.

Out of the blue, I got an email from EscapistMagazine.com, the games journalism outfit that had discovered “Zero Punctuation.” They’d seen my stuff on YouTube (I’d started posting movie reviews as well, just for fun) and wanted me to join the team. At first, I thought they’d be looking to pick up “Game OverThinker,” but it turned out they were actually looking to expand their horizons.

They wanted a film critic. Holy shit.

After a few test-runs to iron out the kinks, I officially joined the team as The Escapist’s movie critic, hosting my own series “Escape to The Movies.” In the exact same time period, ScrewAttack offered me the chance to enter “OverThinker” in an audience-voting competition to become an official part of that site. (I won, and the partnership endures to this day.) Both of these developments could not have come at a better time: in my “real” work life, I’d finally surrendered to take on a soul-sucking data entry job. (Grim irony: my assignment was to process the employee-termination paperwork of various large corporations.) That job didn’t last – I was fired for, frankly, not being very good at it – and I segued off into another part-time retail job, working the cappuccino counter at a Borders Books. But now... now I had a real career to build on the side and hopefully jump off onto full-time.

Bob Chipman (“MovieBob”): Film Critic and Video Game Culture-Commentator. ScrewAttack even flew me down to Texas to speak at their

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big convention, along with web superstars like James “AVGN” Rolfe, Noah “Spoonycy” Antwiler, and Brentalfloss. Was this really happening?

PEACE IN OUR TIME

I wasn't the only one going through the end of an era and an exciting new beginning.

The so-called “Console Wars” that had in part created the once problematic identity which Nintendo had now re-embraced to thunderous success (“The Disney of Video Games” versus Sega’s edgy upstart) had long since abated. However, their history remained a vital memory for both the industry and gamers: even fans who would’ve been too young (or not have existed at all) to have witnessed the “war” had managed to absorb, through pop-cultural osmosis, the idea that for some reason Sonic the Hedgehog and the Super Mario Bros were enemies – or, at the very least, they weren’t friends.

In 2007, this last cultural remnant of the Console Wars was put to rest.

Gamers may have dreamed of seeing Mario and Sonic team up (or fight!) in some kind of grand game devoted solely to that event – perhaps a mix and match of their respective game styles – but whatever anyone had in mind, few could’ve predicted the out-of-the-blue announcement in 2007 of a Mario/Sonic crossover in the form of... an Olympics-themed mini-games collection. If nothing else, “Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games” was an above-average game of its type, but however noteworthy and nifty it was to see the two icons standing together, the game wasn’t quite the climax the iconic rivalry might’ve deserved in the eyes of many.

That would come later.

“Now that’s more like it!” nicely characterized the reaction of gamers to the subsequent news that Sonic would appear alongside Mario (and everyone else) in “Super Smash Bros. Brawl,” the Wii installment of the mascot fighting game that had become one of Nintendo’s biggest series in the GameCube era. In addition to its famous multiplayer mode, “Brawl” featured a single-player story mode that placed the game’s roster of classic characters in a side-scrolling platformer adventure through what could only be called an orgy of retro-gaming fanservice titled “The Subspace Emissary.” In the final moments of the game, when players face off against a mysterious final villain named Tabuu, none other than Sonic the Hedgehog appears out of nowhere to mortally wound the enemy (and unlock himself as a playable character) and allow for the story to conclude.

To say that playing through “Subspace Emissary” was close to a religious

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experience for me in general (Link meets Yoshi! R.O.B. Stormtroopers! Kirby blowing up Bowser and Ganondorf's giant space-cannon!) would be putting it mildly, but even after that seeing Mario and Sonic together in a "real" game – and able to fight one another, no less! – felt more like real, genuine closure than it had any right to for a grown man.

Thus, at long last ended the rivalry of Mario and Sonic – onetime enemies of the Golden Age, now united as avatars of said age as it fights against its own fading... and thus far keeps winning.

THE NEXT LEVEL

And so we come to the present... or at least close enough.

In 2009, Nintendo released "New Super Mario Bros. Wii," a console-sized update of the NSMB formula from handhelds with one key difference: 1 to 4 player cooperative multiplayer. It looked, at first, like a quaint symbolic gesture: a fusion of The Wii's party-gaming soul with Golden Age nostalgia, Nintendo and Mario's two audiences made one. Sure, there were some quibbles to be had – it's kind of lame that Players 3 and 4 have to be a pair of palette-swapped Toads rather than the two Princesses, or even Toad and Toadette – but it was a marked improvement over its DS predecessor in challenge and polish, and it featured the return of not only Yoshi but the Koopalings too!

I bought it. I enjoyed it. In fact, playing it got me through what felt very much like an intermittently over-stressful Holiday Season that year... and I sort of figured that was that. Retro-platformers, after all, were a niche genre – especially on consoles.

But then everyone else bought it.

Everyone.

In a turn that I would love to have seen coming, NSMBWii turned out to be one of the biggest releases ever on the system. It wasn't just retro gamers and nostalgic fanboys buying it... it was kids. Parents. Families. The side-scrolling Super Mario Bros. formula was as addictive as ever, and now its new multiplayer form had pulled a whole new generation (and their parents and grandparents, evidently) into the fold. All told, it sold well over ten million units – becoming the fastest selling single-console game in history. After all this time... my old friend, and the form in which he was almost most comfortable, was still The Gold Standard. Deservedly so.

In the wake of NSMBWii's success, the Mario merchandise market exploded in a way it never had when I was young enough to have "justifiably" gorged upon it. High-quality Mario toys are a common sight all over, and I

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won't pretend I don't have a few choices decorating my home right now. Oh, speaking of homes...

As Mario was settling back onto his throne, things were turning around for me as well. My hard work for *The Escapist* and *ScrewAttack* had started to pay off in numbers that allowed me to quit my retail work entirely and devote even more time to my criticism and video-making. I'm now what's called an "E-Celebrity," of sorts... though the idea of it still feels strange to me: at any moment, I expect someone to leap from the shadows and cry "That man is no professional commentator! He's fraud!" I speak on panels at PAX East. I went to Seattle for the Independent Game Developers Conference. I trekked to North Carolina for *The Escapist's* debut Expo; and I'm now making plans to head back to Texas for *ScrewAttack's* revived convention.

I even made enough money – sustainably – to finally move out of my family's house into a place of my own: a life-transition that spurred me to buckle down and write the "play-through" portion of this book. So, it's not just a retrospective of "Super Mario Bros. 3," but a record of my last time playing it from start to finish in the home where I'd played it for the first time.

Moving into a home of my own (well, an in-law apartment in Revere, technically) was a mildly chaotic experience, not in the least because Evangeline ("Vange"), my beloved last living grandparent, passed away only a few days before my move was scheduled. I was determined not to draw the process out – to get as much of my "gear" (particularly my bed and the video-making equipment for what were by now 4 – 5 separate webshows) installed in the new place as possible on the first day, which ultimately led to a set of nigh-sleepless days worth of furniture-assembly, shelf-construction, equipment-testing, and general "new life building."

Part of that meant frequently heading back home to dig out as many usable items as I could from my closets and drawers. I found a lot of suddenly-useful random items (extension cords! USB cables! Twist-ties! Batteries!) but also a lot of "lost" keepsakes to take with me because, well... you know. During one such plunge, I retrieved a set of large but not-very-heavy boxes and felt a powerful sense of what they contained before opening a single one. But open them I did, and inside I found my childhood.

The games. My games.

The boxes contained nearly everything that had "survived" from my earlier days of gaming: stacks of NES, SNES, N64, and Dreamcast games, plus the corresponding consoles, controllers and other equipment. At the very bottom, in true dramatic fashion, was my original NES – a little faded for the wear, but otherwise as immediately recognizable as the day I'd first hooked it up. In a separate area I found (this time very intentionally) my worn and

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well-read first issue of Nintendo Power, which turned out to be an omen of sorts as the sad announcement that the magazine would cease publication for good came only a few months later. (Issue number one now hangs, framed, on my wall.)

But the games... I resolved immediately that those devices would live again, and immediately put the rest of my homemaking on hold while I set about doing just that. With the half-constructed skeletons of seemingly more important accoutrements of living leaned against walls, their construction on hold, I spent a night cleaning cartridges and connections with rubbing alcohol and q-tips and a day teaching myself how to disassemble an NES to replace its connector-pins (the SNES and other machines did not, thankfully, require that level of repair.)

I tested every game and, afterwards, played my original copy of Super Mario Bros. 3 on my original NES... and just like that, my new apartment became home.

As of this writing, Nintendo has just released the WiiU, an HD follow-up to the Wii, once again based around a new type of controller: an oversized gamepad with an onboard touch-screen. The system's launch – a major event, given that its arrival marks the start of the Eighth Generation of consoles – was built around two flagship Nintendo-published titles: one is “Nintendoland,” a theme park game built to demonstrate the versatility of the gamepad. Good game, even great in spots... but it's not the one they're using to sell the system in ads.

No, that task has fallen to “New Super Mario Bros. U,” which is exactly what it sounds like it is. It's been over 25 years since the original “Super Mario Bros.” turned the original Nintendo Entertainment System into a worldwide phenomenon that changed the history of entertainment and my life in particular... and, 25 years later, a 2D Super Mario Bros side-scroller is the carrying the banner for the New Generation.

Mario is still here.

So am I.

I'd like to think that – if possible – we would thank one another for that.

EPILOGUE

Believe it or not, The WiiU I purchased on launch day was defective. Not great news, but we deal with what we must. I decided that it would be faster to track down a new one than to send it for repairs and spent the next few days showing up at electronics stores early in the morning hoping they'd been re-stocked. I eventually won out by joining up with a Black Friday line

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and – frankly – being lucky. However, on one of the non-eventful days I had an encounter that stuck with me and probably will for awhile...

I was standing in the November cold outside of a local Target whose website had listed WiiUs as being “in stock.” Having worked in retail for so long, I knew that could be misleading – more likely than not, they’d mis-scanned the pre-orders they were still holding for customers (this was only two days post-launch) as general-stock. That turned out to be the case, incidentally... but it was still worth a shot.

After about 20 minutes of waiting, I was joined by another pair of early birds: a young mother and her two children. One was a boy of about six or eight, and the other was a toddler whose gender was undeterminable as he/she was wrapped in a solid cocoon of winter-wear and cradled against their mom’s shoulder. I got the sense that we may have been there for the same thing – they likely picking up a pre-order, me hoping there was stock beyond the pre-orders – and I could tell this despite the fact that we only said “hello” to one another...

Not by some psychic intuition, I stress, but because the boy was making it pretty clear: he was excitable to the point of bouncing, and his attire told the rest of the tale: Mario t-shirt, Mario baseball cap, Mario backpack, even Mario sneakers. The kid was a walking advertisement for NSMBWii-era Mario. I looked down at him, smiled, nodded. He looked up at me, realizing (before I did, honestly) that I also happened to be wearing a Mario shirt – one from my era (SMB2 character-select screen, to be precise) with a look of quizzical surprise: “this big older guy knows Mario, too?”

Yes I do, kid. Yes I do.

Suddenly, I felt better about the likelihood I wouldn’t find a WiiU of my own that day. Part of that “phantom stock” waiting inside could well have been this kid’s pre-order, and between me getting mine and him getting his... he can have it. Mario belongs to him more than he belongs to me – even if I’ve “known” him longer – because Mario, and games, and the very act of “play”... fundamentally belong more to the young. That’s not to say they can’t also be part of an adult life, it’s simply to say that what is... is.

I am the man I am for many reasons: because of my parents, my grandparents, my friends and family. But also because of Mario, whose adventures filled my lonelier hours, fueled my dreams, gave me a not-inconsequential sense of stability, and in a manner I never would’ve expected led me on a twisting, roundabout path to my own career and prosperity. I wouldn’t dream of denying that kid to possibly have the same grand adventure, and I can only hope that Mario is as good a friend to him as he was to me.

And so, in addition to writing this book for myself, for people like me,

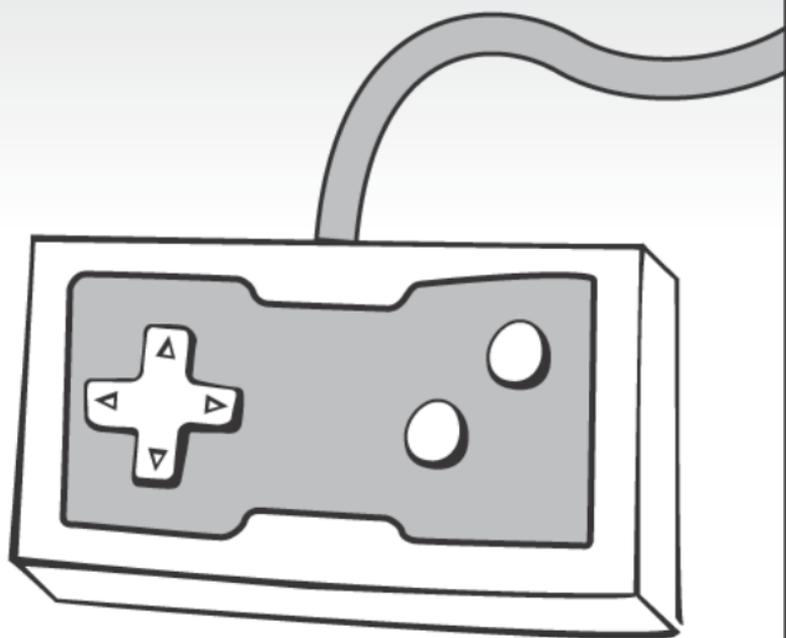
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for game designers and developers and journalists and anyone else who'd been looking – as I was – for a book that looked at a game (and at gaming) in this way... I also write it for that kid. For all the kids like him, who know Mario and games now and might find interest, intrigue, or benefit in knowing what came before.

I'd like to imagine that someday, somewhere, a copy of this book will be picked up by a young Mario fan who had never considered that their "hobby" could hold deeper truths, or be looked at as an object of art and meaning... and that it will let them appreciate it all the more.

PART III

THE GAME



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It's my intention that the main "play-through" portion of this book read as much as possible as a narrative instead of a strategy guide checklist. As such, while there will certainly be digressions into certain elements of particular note (important characters making a first appearance, the first use of certain mechanics or design styles), it's simply not feasible to take time (and space) to explain the appearance of each block, enemy and sound effect as they each first appear – otherwise, roughly the first half of the analysis would be a nightmare of constant asides and footnotes; no fun for me to write and certainly a chore for you to read.

On the one hand, that's perhaps not something I should be too concerned with since the "target audience" for a book of this type can be safely assumed to have a comfortable familiarity with the subject, i.e. if you've read this far you probably don't need to be told what a Goomba is. However, since keeping everyone on the same page and having a solid on-hand reference is unquestionably a good idea, that'll be the purpose of this section: to name, identify, and describe the various "pieces" that make up "Super Mario Bros. 3."

THE BASICS

"Super Mario Bros. 3" was developed as a first-party title by Nintendo EAD ("Entertainment, Analysis and Development") with Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi credited as its primary designers and Koji Kondo as the composer of its score. It was first released in Japan for the Nintendo Famicom console in 1988 and then in the United States for the Nintendo Entertainment System ("NES") in 1990, with a European/PAL release one year after that. All three versions were originally published on game cartridges designed to interface with their respective consoles.

THE STORY

From the original NES game manual: "The Mushroom Kingdom has been a peaceful place thanks to the brave deeds of Mario and Luigi. The Mushroom Kingdom forms an entrance to the Mushroom World where all is not well. Bowser has sent his 7 children to make mischief as they please in the normally peaceful Mushroom World. They stole the magic wands from each country in the Mushroom World and used them to turn their kings into animals. Mario and Luigi must recover the royal magic wands from Bowser's 7 kids to return the kings to their true forms. 'Goodbye and good luck!,' said The Princess and Toad as Mario and Luigi set off on their journey deep into

the Mushroom World.”

“War & Peace” it isn’t, but just-the-basics storylines were par for the course in this era of gaming. Even still, it provides a bigger picture of the Mario universe than had previously been established: this is the first mention that the Mushroom Kingdom is only one part of a larger world, primarily, but it also establishes that the starting point this time around has not quite settled into the “Peach always gets kidnapped” groove it would in subsequent games – while the Princess does indeed wind up abducted at the beginning of World 8, the main story of the game has her in the role of commander, dispatching the Mario Bros. to the Seven Kingdoms to deal with Bowser’s assault.

In fact, given that both sides of the conflict are delegating the war-fighting to subordinates this time around, SMB3 marks the first clear delineation of the Troopa/Mushroom conflict as a long-term military conflict rather than mere isolated attacks by Bowser. Left unmentioned in the written story but implicit in the game itself is that Bowser has amassed a mechanized military force for this particular engagement, outfitting his children with heavily-armed Airships and protecting his own Kingdom with tanks, jets, and battleships.

THE CHARACTERS

Interestingly, the original manual for SMB3 refers to all sentient creatures in the game (including enemies) as “characters.” While you’ll find a list of said enemy characters further ahead in this section, these are the players whose presence is vital to what exists of the game’s narrative:

- **Mario:** Assuming you haven’t skipped ahead to this part, he should be rather familiar to you by now: the main character of the series, Mario is a plumber (possibly native to Brooklyn, NY) who has traveled to and become a hero in the alternate universe of the Mushroom Kingdom. Depicted in the game (and elsewhere) as a husky-built Italian-American man with a large mustache, wearing a red hat and blue overalls over a red shirt.
- **Luigi:** Mario’s brother, Luigi is depicted outside the games as being taller than Mario with a slimmer build but appears in the game-proper as looking identical save for swapping green for red clothing choices.
- **Princess Peach** (aka **Princess Toadstool**): The main (though, as of this game, no longer sole) female figure of the Mario franchise, Peach is the ostensible ruler of the Mushroom Kingdom. Depicted in outside-game media as sporting long orange hair, she here appears as a brunette in SMB3 owing to the re-use of a sprite from the second game. Prior to

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1997's "Super Mario 64," western translations referred to her surname as "Toadstool."

- **Toad:** Princess Peach's perennial assistant/sidekick, Toad is taken to be typical in appearance to the other Mushroom People populating the kingdom. In SMB3, such figures appear multiple times throughout the game – though it's not made 100% clear if each appearance is meant to be Toad himself or multiple Mushroom Persons.
- **Bowser:** The principal antagonist of the Mario franchise, Bowser is the leader of a race of antagonistic turtle-like creatures called Koopas apparently at perpetual war with the Mushroom Kingdom and Princess Peach in particular. Bowser is larger than the rest of his species; with bull-like horns, a mane of red hair and a spike-covered shell. Though he doesn't display propensity for it in this game, he (and his children) are described elsewhere as magic-users in addition to a natural ability for breathing fire.
- **The Koopalings:** Bowser's 7 (later 8) children, mother officially unknown. They bear familial resemblance to their father but have distinguishing features, primarily in the area of hair color and clothing/jewelry. Full descriptions of each are included here as part of the "play-through" section proper, but their names - Larry, Lemmy, Iggy, Roy, Morton, Ludwig and Wendy O – are predominantly puns on the names of famous musicians and/or celebrities.

VERSION SPECIFICS

For the purposes of writing this book, the version of the game played was a port of the original NES version downloaded to a Nintendo Wii through the Virtual Console download service. It provides a version identical in graphics and programming to the original NES release, save for the fact that the Wii can be switched off and the game resumed later so long as you "exit" the game in-progress before turning the system off. Otherwise, it is a faithful port of the game's original 1990 US release, played using a Wii-Remote turned on its side, a style which effectively mimics the basic setup of an NES controller.

BASIC VISUAL TERMINOLOGY

SMB3 is an "8-bit" game, which refers to the programming and space limitations available to the programmers in terms of graphics and sound. The NES and its games were designed to output audio and visuals primarily to the standard-definition analog television sets of the day (circa-1989). The game

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screen was a grid made up of tiny single-color squares called “pixels,” which were used to render all of the visual elements in the game. All individual elements and objects made from said pixels are technically called “sprites” though, for purposes of clarity, non-moving or non-interactive elements are sometimes referred to separately as “scenery” or “backdrops.”

BASIC GAME TERMINOLOGY

The sprite controlled by the player (Mario in the context of this single-player analysis, Mario or Luigi in a two-player game) is typically called the “Player,” though for purposes of this writing may alternately be referred to as “Mario” or as a personification of the player/author himself (read: me). Sprites representing creatures meant to serve as living obstacles to the Player achieving his goals are “enemies.” Sprites representing objects that are useful or beneficial to Mario once acquired are called “Items,” while items that cause a beneficial physical change in Mario are separately designated “Power-Ups.”

LAYOUT

The game is divided into eight “Worlds,” each containing a set of numbered “Levels” and other destinations. Each World is named either for its dominant geographic or aesthetic feature (the names of each World differ from version to version, here the names associated with the original NES release are used), while each Level is identified by the number of its World and then its own numerical designation (e.g. Level 4 of World 3 is called “Level 4 – 3”). For the purposes of this playthrough, destinations which are not specifically numbered levels are referred to by the number of their World and said destination’s actual identity (e.g. “Level 2 – Fortress”).

GAME MODES

“Super Mario Bros. 3” has three separate modes of play and/or interaction. The main mode is the actual playing of the levels (see: “Gameplay,” below), and the secondary mode is the “Map Screen,” an overhead map of levels and other destinations viewed from overhead that the player uses to navigate from one point to the next. The third, “Battle Mode,” is accessible only in a two-player game and is a recreation of the original “Mario Bros.” game; occurs whenever the two players occupy the same spot on the Map Screen and decides which player will take the next turn. The third, “Battle Mode,”

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is accessible only in a two-player game and is a recreation of the original “Mario Bros.” game. It occurs whenever one of the players choose to stop on the other player’s spot on the map screen instead of choosing a normal level. “Battle Mode” allows the players to steal Mushroom, Flower, and Star cards from each other, which are acquired from beating levels. The winner of the “match” gets the next turn.

GAMEPLAY (LEVELS)

SMB3’s primary gameplay builds on the foundation set down by the original “Super Mario Bros” in terms of genre referred to as a “2D side-scrolling platformer”: Its visuals are presented in two dimensions (all sprites can either move up, down left or right under various circumstances but not “into” or “out of” the background in any meaningful way). The illusion of movement and/or travel is created mainly by having stationary scenery and visuals scroll left or right with Mario remaining more-or-less in the center. Also, the ability to jump either over pits or onto platforms at higher or lower levels of the screen is a fundamental mechanic.

The very bottom of the game screen is occupied by the Status Bar, which displays the following information clockwise starting from the top-left: the number of the current World, the Speed Meter (aka “P-Meter”), the number of Coins collected, the Time remaining in the current play session, the Total Score, and the remaining number of Lives.

All interaction is based on the control of Mario or Luigi by the player using an NES Controller (note: in the case of this writing, the game was played using a Wii Remote, which is fundamentally analogous to a standard NES Controller.) When using said controller(s), the cross-shaped “D-Pad” controllers horizontal, vertical and (where applicable) diagonal movement, while the “A” button (“2” on a Wii Remote) causes Mario to jump.

The “B” button (“1” on a Wii Remote) is multi-functional: Holding it down while moving left or right makes Mario run rather than walk and will enable him to “grab” certain items and stunned enemies (primarily Troopas or Buzzy Beetles who’ve retreated into their shells) and carry them. In addition, “B” is used to fire projectiles when powered-up as either Fire Mario or Hammer Mario. Holding the “down” button will make Mario crouch when in his Big or “Super” form and is also used to enter Pipes, while “up” is tapped to enter doors. Additionally, the “A” button is used for swimming (except when using a Frog Suit) whenever Mario becomes submerged in water above his head and for flying while using the Raccoon Mario or Tanooki Suit Power-Ups.

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Within each Level, Mario begins (in whichever form he entered from the Map Screen) with a set amount of time to reach the Goal at the end, which is represented by a space of black backdrop. Said goal also contains a block that displays rapidly rotating “cards” of either a Flower, Mushroom or Star icon. If Mario collects a matching set of three cards, he is rewarded with a fireworks display and a set of Extra Lives (“1-Ups,” which we’ll get to in a moment).

While traveling through levels, the objective is to reach the goal without being killed and sent back to the Map Screen – such deaths coming from collision with an enemy, enemy projectile, lethal hazard (spikes, lava), or falling into a pit. “Death” is instant from hits while Mario is in his standard or “small” form, while most hits taken while Super or otherwise “Powered-Up” will simply revert you to the next less-powerful form. Lava and pits, however, are instant-killers no matter what form you are in.

Items found inside Blocks within Levels are exclusively of the “Power-Up” variety. If Mario in his Small form, the power-up will always be a Mushroom first, while the contents of blocks otherwise are fixed—a block programmed to house a Flower will always house a Flower, unless it is struck by Small Mario in which case it will yield a Mushroom. The exception to this rule is the “Star Man” Power-Up, which can be used by either Small or Super Mario and will occupy its designated Block regardless. Also, some levels feature Blocks which will produce a Star Man only when struck by Mario when he is already “using” a previous Star Man. Items found inside “Treasure Chests,” whether encountered in Levels or otherwise, are sent to the player’s Map Screen Item Inventory. (See below.)

GAMEPLAY (MAP SCREEN)

The layout of each World and it’s Levels are represented by a Map Screen, which presents said World in a stylized overhead view of its terrain. Each area, level, and/or scenario that can be entered is represented on the Map by an icon, which typically disappear or change shape when they have been explored, used, or cleared. These icons are connected by set paths, the arrangement of which governs the whole of the player’s movement on the map. In a two-player game, Level Panels (see below) become either an “M” or “L” logo when conquered, depending on who completed the level.

The Status Bar from the Levels remains at the bottom, but pressing the “B” button causes the bar to flip over and reveal an Inventory that stores Items and Power-Ups retrieved from Treasure Chests, won in games of chance, or gotten from a Mushroom House. From this Inventory, the Player can either

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utilize Items on the Map Screen itself or arm themselves with Power-Ups before heading into a Level.

MAP SCREEN ELEMENTS

- **Airship:** Airship Levels (the final Level of each of the first seven Worlds) start automatically after Mario visits a Castle. If he fails to bring the Ship down on the first attempt, an icon representing it will become visible on the map and fly to a different location, moving again after each attempt until it is conquered. If it retreats to a path blocked by a previously undefeated Level, said Level must be beaten first.
- **Boulder:** Large lumpy rocks, usually tan/orange in color but sometimes recolored to the theme of an individual World's Map, that block Mario's way through a path. Typically, they are placed to obstruct shortcuts or areas of desire such as Red Mushroom Houses or Warp Pipes (see below). They can be destroyed with the "Hammer" item.
- **Castle:** The goal of each World is to reach the Castle, wherein resides that World's transformed King. Despite their size, the Castles are not levels in and of themselves (we only ever see the throne rooms) but rather serve as the "trigger" that begins the Airship Level.
- **Hammer Bros:** Worlds 1 through 6 feature icons of Hammer Bros (sometimes referred to as "Wandering Hammer Bros") that travel the Map Screen's paths in semi-random patterns. Colliding with them while on the Map Screen triggers a single-screen battle against one or more Hammer Bros (played like a level) for which Mario will earn a Treasure Chest containing a pre-set Item. The Music Box item, when used on the Map Screen, puts the Hammer Bros to sleep and allows Mario to bypass them safely for a time. In certain worlds, a secret trick can be executed which will transform Hammer Bros into Treasure Ships (see below).
- **Level Panels:** As viewed from the Map Screen, Levels are represented by numbered Panels. The majority of each World's Levels must typically be cleared in order to gain access to a World's Castle (which initiates the Airship Level that concludes each World, save for the World 8). However, owing to the arrangement of paths on a given Map, some levels can be bypassed.
- **Locked Gate:** Huge golden doors with large keyholes on them that block your path much the same way that Boulders do, save that there are no items which can destroy a Gate. Instead, they vanish once a certain area elsewhere on the Map (usually a Fortress) has been completed.
- **Mushroom House:** Also called "Toad Houses," as there is some

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lack of clarity as to whether each Mushroom Person Mario encounters in this game (it's never more than one at a time) is supposed to be Toad the individual character or different folks of the same species. In any case, these are depicted as large mushrooms with doors and come in either Yellow, Red, Blue, or White. Yellow, Red, or Blue Mushroom Houses contain a set of three identical Treasure Chests containing three different Items, from which Mario is invited to choose one upon entering. White Mushroom Houses contain the game's rarer items and are invisible on the Map Screen, appearing only when certain numbers of coins are collected in certain levels.

- **Piranha Plant:** In World 7, large, stationary Piranha Plants take the place of Wandering Hammer Bros as the Map Screen Enemies. They don't move from their set spot, and touching them triggers a short level in which Mario must cross a vast field of plant-infested pipes. The Music Box can put them to sleep, as well.
- **Spade Panel(s):** White panels with a black playing-card "spade" symbol. Touching one takes Mario to a casino where a Mushroom Person (generally assumed to be Toad) gives you a chance to play a slot-machine-style picture-matching game with 1-Ups as the prize. In addition, there are "N-Spade" Panels (identical to the normal ones, but with a letter "N" emblazoned on the spade) which appear every time you earn 80,000 total points and lets you play a card-matching memory game. There are eight possible arrangements of cards, and once you've begun turning over the cards correctly (you get two turns) that arrangement will remain in place each time you visit again until you've completed the whole thing.
- **Treasure Ship:** The rarest occurrence in the game, Treasure Ships appear in the place of Hammer Bros on the Map Screens of Levels 1, 3, 5, or 6 if a Level is completed with the Coins Total as a multiple of 11, the "tens place" of the score matching said multiple of 11, and the timer stopped on an even number. The ships appear on the Map as pure white sailing vessels with the Japanese Kanji character for "Treasure" on their sails, but resemble Airships filled with coins when played through. They are captained by a pair of Boomerang Bros.
- **Warp Pipes:** Pipes appearing on the Map Screen are used to navigate from one spot on the Map to another. Usually, one or both Pipes are blocked off by a Boulder or Gate, but since removed obstacles remain gone after Game Over these Pipes can often be useful in avoiding having to play through every Level again.
- **Miscellaneous:** In addition to these Map Screen constants, certain screens

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feature elements (like the Pyramid and Quicksand areas in World 2 or the Tower in World 5) that are unique to those areas – World 8, Bowser’s Kingdom, has only two “traditional” levels and is otherwise populated by unique elements such as these.

ITEMS

“Items” in Mario games refer to any collectible object or icon that can change the Player’s status, grant them in-game abilities, or allow them to perform tasks not otherwise possible. In SMB3 they come in two distinct forms: Power-Ups that grant Mario temporary enhanced abilities (either in the form of a physical transformation and/or power-granting suit) and single-use Tools made to be used on the Map Screen.

- **1-Up:** A green Mushroom that instantly grants an Extra Life.
- **Anchor:** Activating an Anchor while on the Map Screen causes the Airships to remain in one place rather than traveling across the Map after each failed turn.
- **Fire Flower:** A staple of the Mario Franchise since the first SMB, Fire Flowers enable Mario or Luigi to throw fireballs from their fingertips. The color/design of the Flowers and the color-change of Mario’s clothing signifying that a Flower is in use change from game to game, usually involving a red and white color-scheme, but in SMB3 the Flowers are blue/green and the Player Sprite turns fiery orange, red and yellow.
- **Lakitu’s Cloud:** Used only on the Map Screen, a commandeered Lakitu Cloud allows Mario to skip over a single level without playing through it. This is the first Mario game where the Clouds can be used by the player. (In “Super Mario World” it would become possible to do so in Level Gameplay.)
- **Leaf:** Also called the “Super Leaf,” “Tanooki Leaf,” or “Raccoon Leaf,” the Leaf causes Mario to sprout the ears and tail of a raccoon, which gives him the ability to slow his descent after a jump, swat enemies and blocks with the tail, and to fly short distances by running until the Speed Meter is full. This is the signature Power-Up of SMB3 and arguably the most iconic Mario Power-Up outside of those originating in the first SMB (re: Mushroom, Flower and Star).
- **Frog Suit:** A frog costume (Mario’s head sticks out through the “mouth” of the head) that grants high-jumping abilities and allows for multi-directional and more-powerful swimming while underwater, but impedes walking somewhat while on land. The more common of the game’s two

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animal-themed Suits.

- **Hammer:** Not to be confused with the Hammer Suit, the Hammer is usable only on the Map Screen for the purpose of smashing Boulder obstacles.
- **Hammer Suit:** A set of armor in the style of the Hammer Bros that lets Mario throw a volley of hammers and become effectively invincible while crouching. The most rarely-found Power-Up in the game, it also marks the first time that Mario was able to adopt the weapons/powers of an enemy.
- **Mushroom:** Also called “Super Mushrooms” and “Shrooms,” the original and most iconic by far “Super Mario Bros.” Power-Up transforms Mario from his default (aka “small” or “mini”) form to the larger Super Mario form. Depicted as yellow with red spots in the original SMB, it appears here for the first time with visible eyes in the red/white colors first seen in the U.S. SMB2.
- **Music Box:** A item that, when activated on the Map Screen, puts Wandering Hammer Bros to sleep for a short period, allowing the player to pass safely.
- **P-Wing:** The most powerful and sought-after of all SMB3’s Power-Ups, the P-Wing (despite its name and visual-depiction as a white bird’s wing) gives Mario the same abilities as the Leaf but with unlimited flying ability, making it the only way to explore every inch of every Level in the game. If you re-start a new game after defeating Bowser without resting or powering-off the NES, you’ll start World 1 with your inventory completely filled by these.
- **Star Man:** Also called “Super Star,” “Invincibility Star,” or simple “Star,” Star Man has been part of Mario lore since SMB and was originally the only Power-Up to be depicted as being in some way sentient. While Stars have taken on multiple other roles in later Mario installments, here it works the same as it did in the original: granting Mario temporary invincibility. New to this game, it also increases his relative speed and changes the “jump” animation to an aerial somersault.
- **Tanooki Suit:** A Tanooki costume that grants all of the powers of Raccoon Mario but also the ability to transform into an immobile but invulnerable statue. Discussed in greater detail in the playthrough-proper, Tanookis are raccoon-like mammals native to Japan (in Japan, both this form and Raccoon Mario are both referred to as Tanooki) that figure prominently in traditional Shinto folklore. Their iconic presence here represents the most explicit of the rare instances in which the Mario games have openly-embraced iconography of the Japanese culture from which they originate.

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- **Whistle:** Also referred to as the “Flute” or “Recorder,” this is a woodwind instrument that summons a magic tornado that takes Mario to the Warp Zone island, from which he can skip Worlds in much the same manner as similar hidden Zones in the previous SMB titles. Three whistles can be found throughout the game, and if a second Whistle is used while Mario is already at the Warp Zone he will be transported directly to World 8. Of special note, the Whistle’s design, the tune it plays and the tornado it summons are references to a near-identical totem found in the original “Legend of Zelda” game, making this both the first instance of self-aware humor and comic reference to another game in a Mario title, which later became a staple of the franchise.

BLOCKS

While the terrain and background designs from SMB2 onward are often rendered to disguise this fact, the Level layout of the “Super Mario Bros.” side-scrollers essentially takes the form of a loose grid, with almost all interactive sprites being measurable in terms of “Blocks,” which are used as the building-materials of almost every structure in the game save for the ground terrain.

While some blocks are found sitting on the ground, the majority hover in mid-air. In addition, Blocks will often be invisible until struck from below. Whereas the first SMB built its world from only a handful of Blocks, SMB3 introduced the greatest variety seen in the series to that point. This game is also the first to allow Mario to directly strike Blocks from the side by using the Raccoon or Tanooki tail attacks.

- **Bricks:** Also called “Brick Blocks,” in many ways Bricks – and Mario’s ability to smash them from below with his fists – are one of the signature aesthetic devices of the series. Along with the rudimentary elements of puzzle-platforming they introduced (if you destroy them, you can’t use them as platforms anymore), the simple visual of breaking bricks is the first and most basic visual indicator that Mario and Luigi are possessed of superhuman strength. Bricks can only be broken by Mario when he’s in Super or some other “big” form; “small” Mario will bounce right off of them. However, some Bricks conceal Items (and transform into Used Blocks once the item has been revealed) which can be triggered in any physical form.
- **Cloud Block:** Stationary Clouds, the approximate size of most other Blocks, which are visually identical to Lakitu’s Cloud but remain fixed in

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the air to be walked on. Unlike most other Blocks, while they are solid on top Mario can pass through them from the underside.

- **Cloud Platform:** A rare piece of sky-terrain seen only in a few areas, slightly longer than a Cloud Block and rendered to look more like a “natural” cloud.
- **Directional Lift:** Orange metal platforms, three blocks in length, adorned with arrows. When stood on, they produce a translucent copy of themselves that moves in the direction of said arrow. Multi-directional versions, with exclamation points instead of arrow icons, change their movements when Mario jumps on them.
- **Donut Lifts:** Blocks with holes in their center and rounded bottoms. When stood on too long, they fall off the screen.
- **Ice Bricks:** Also sometimes referred to as “Silver Bricks,” these are silver-colored Bricks that cannot be smashed but instead can be picked up, carried and thrown like Shells. They can also be used as thrown weapons by Buster Beetle enemies.
- **Ice Block:** Solid Blocks of ice. Cannot be broken, smashed or otherwise manipulated, and are slippery to walk on. Some Ice Blocks contained frozen enemies or coins, which can be freed by melting them with Fire Mario’s abilities.
- **Metal Block:** Blocks of either gray or blue hue, made from four inward-facing triangles. The primary building material of Fortresses.
- **Music Block:** White blocks decorated with black musical notes, programmed with elastic physics-response that allows them to be used like springboards when jumps are timed properly. There are also rare Pink Music Blocks, which send Mario zooming off to coin-filled cloud areas (aka “Coin Heaven”) when he jumps on them.
- **Question Block:** The signature Block of the “Super Mario Bros.” franchise, also called “Mystery Blocks.” Metal blocks decorated with question marks, they always contain some kind of item: usually just a coin, but often an Item or other useful object. Once struck, they transform into Used Blocks.
- **Used Block:** A metal block, left as the remnant after either Question Blocks or special Brick Blocks have been struck and relieved of Items or Coins.
- **Wood Block:** Wood blocks are as solid and un-movable as Used or Metal Blocks, but some of them are secretly “bouncy” in the manner of Music Blocks when struck from the sides, and they may also contain Items.
- **Wood Platform:** Elongated Wood Blocks, three blocks in length, often used as platforms or lifts.

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ENEMIES

“Super Mario Bros. 3” featured the largest and most varied enemy roster of the series to that date, and impressively only one of these enemies (Bob-Omb) is a carry-over from SMB2. Instead, the roster is filled by variations (mutations?) of enemies from the original SMB and original creatures making their series debut here.

With rare exception, enemies in this generation of Mario games are broken up into four classes of movement: the majority either move in whichever direction is forward for them until they encounter an obstacle (or a pit) or move in a pre-set pattern, while others possess rudimentary AI in that they “chase” or “aim at” the player sprite.

Note: Because translations of Japanese games and game-characters were often not closely regulated by the original creators, many of the enemy characters of SMB3 have had multiple western names throughout the years and subsequent releases. As this retrospective of the game is framed around a replaying of the original NES version, the names utilized will generally be those attached to a given character either by the original game manual or other official Nintendo documentation, except where otherwise noted.

- **Blooper:** A small, white squid known for inconvenient placement and unpredictable movement patterns, first appearing in the original SMB. While airborne versions made appearances in Japanese SMB2 (“The Lost Levels”), SMB3’s Bloopers remain confined to underwater levels.
- **Blooper Nanny:** Female Bloopers (the majority of enemies are presumed to be male or asexual, typically referred to by male pronouns) who tow behind them a set of four Baby Bloopers, whom they then dispatch projectile-style if/when Mario strays too close to them.
- **Boo:** A ghost, typically found in Castles and Fortresses. Notably, Boos are the first appearance of an explicitly “spectral” creature in any Mario games. While relatively few of them are encountered in this game they’ve gone on to become one of the most prominent enemy types in later installments. Unlike Dry Bones, it is not known what (if anything) Boos are the ghosts “of,” though their signature behavioral characteristic of only being frozen in place if Mario is looking at them (later presented as outright “shyness” in “Super Mario World”) is similar to that of various mischievous-spirit figures in colloquial Japanese mythology. In the first U.S. release of the game, the manual and promotional materials referred to him as “Boo-Diddly,” in reference to an American musician.

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- **Boom-Boom:** The default “boss” of most Fortresses, Boom-Boom is a large, bald Koopa with a spiked shell and muscular arms (some varieties sprout wings in place of arms after the first hit). Boom-Boom bears a familial resemblance to Bowser and the Koopalings, though it’s not explicitly stated what his place is in the Koopa hierarchy, or even if there is only one of him or there are multiple Boom-Booms controlling each Fortress.
- **Boomerang Bros:** A variation on Hammer Bros (see below) armed with a Boomerang. While they maintain the “Bros” designation of their hammer-throwing relations, they generally appear only one at a time.
- **Bob-Omb:** The first (and, for a time, only) character from SMB2’s “Subcon” universe to appear in the Mushroom Kingdom, Bob-ombs are living bombs whose fuses become lit when they are struck/stunned by Mario. While they had arms and legs in SMB2, this game begins the tradition of depicting Bob-ombs as having only feet and a wind-up key in their back – suggesting that they may be at least partially mechanical, rather than magical – in keeping with a subtle theme of Bowser as a newly-mechanized threat running through SMB3.
- **Bullet Bill:** One of the series’ most popular and iconic foes dating all the way back to the original SMB, “Bullet Bills” are living bullets. While promotional artwork had always depicted them as having cartoon-like eyeballs near the front of their shell, SMB3 is the first time that detail was explicitly rendered. Like Bob-ombs, they seem to be only partially-mechanical.
- **Buster Beetle:** A faster-moving, bipedal version of Buzzy Beetles (see next entry) who are killed by stomps instead of being stunned. They are the only enemies capable of picking up and throwing Ice Bricks like Mario does.
- **Buzzy Beetle:** The “Beetle” family of enemies are an enigmatic presence in the Mario series. While Buzzy’s in-game sprite, with his head and feet being the same color(s) as his shell, looked something like a conventionally-insectoid beetle, his appearance here and in promotional artwork depicts him as being (or at least looking-like) a Koopa-style turtle who happens to have a hard, smooth shell... so precisely why he’s called a “Beetle” is anyone’s guess. Functionally, he behaves the same as a Koopa Troopa save for being impervious to fire.
- **Cannon Ball:** While Bullet Bills have been part of Bowser’s arsenal since the first game, SMB3 marks the first time he made use of conventional cannons (the first non-living munitions in the Mario series were motorized cannons in SMB2.) Cannon Balls are fired either in straight or diagonal

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lines, though some canons dispense Bob-ombs instead.

- **Chain Chomp:** Another enemy that may or may not be mechanical in origin, “Chain Chomps” are large iron balls affixed to the ground (or walls) by lengths of chain, which they strain against like similarly-bound guard dogs. (They also bark, making them the first non-Boss Mario enemy to make any kind of vocal sound.) Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto is said to have based the character on a vivid memory from his childhood, wherein he was attacked by an angry dog and “saved” only by the dog’s chain being just short enough.
- **Cheep-Cheep:** Fish. That’s basically it. Cheep-Cheeps are the main “fish” enemy in the Mario series, first showing up in “Super Mario Bros” and a near-constant ever since (save for SMB2, where there was no swimming and “Troutier” was the sole fish nemesis). As in their initial appearance, Cheep-Cheeps come in red and green and are most often found underwater, but sometimes attack by jumping into the air in the manner of flying fish.
- **Dry Bones:** The first “undead” figure of the Mario universe, Dry Bones are animated, possibly mummified skeletons of (presumably) dead Troopas. Found in Castles and Fortresses mainly, they crumble into dust when stomped but will reassemble, differing from the “stunned” state of living Troopas in that Mario can pass through the remaining dust-pile unharmed but can’t kick or carry it. It’s unknown what gives Dry Bones their “life,” but later games in the series would introduced similarly undead versions of Goombas, Piranha Plants, and even Bowser himself.
- **Fire Bros:** Koopas of a similar appearance (and armor) to Hammer Bros, though they attack with fireballs (expelled from their mouths) instead of throwing weapons. Like the Boomerang variety of this type, Fire Bros. mostly appear alone despite the plural form of their name.
- **Fire Chomp:** The airborne version of a Chain Chomp, which flies through the air with a “tail” of fireballs behind it which depletes by one each time it spits fire at Mario. When the tail is gone, Fire Chomps flash red before exploding in the manner of a Bob-omb. Fire Chomps are the only enemy sprite apart from Bowser himself whose animation gives the appearance of three-dimensional movement, with its face disappearing to the rear when it “turns” mid-flight.
- **Fire snake:** One of the Mario franchises’ more bizarre creatures, this is a set of fireballs of varying sizes that leaps around more in the manner of a nimble caterpillar than any kind of “snake.”
- **Flame Jet:** Also called “Rocket Engines,” these are less enemies than they are physical hazards: intermittently-ignited jets of flame found

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positioned throughout Airships. They're occasionally in areas where Mario cannot even go as "decorations" meant to suggest part of the mechanical apparatus of the ships themselves.

- **Goomba:** Likely the most iconic enemy of the SMB franchise, Goombas are mushroom-shaped creatures (it is unknown whether they are themselves some kind of mushroom in the way that Piranha Plants are meant to be venus flytraps) with two feet and no other limbs of any kind. The first enemy ever encountered in the series back in Level 1-1 of the original SMB, they return here after having been absent from SMB2. Extremely easy to kill, they generally move forward after spawning offscreen until they collide with an object or fall into a pit.
- **Hammer Bros:** Bipedal Koopas who wear armored helmets and throw volleys of hammers as weapons. The "Bros" designation refers to the hammer-throwing variety (which debuted in the original SMB) almost always attacking in pairs, though it is also applied to the new species appearing first here (Fire, Sledge and Boomerang) who often appear alone.
- **Hot Foot:** A sentient candle flame that will leap from its wick, sprout feet, and pursue Mario in certain fortresses. It behaves much like Boo-Diddly, in that it will freeze in its tracks so long as you are facing it.
- **Jelectro:** Electrified jellyfish, deadly to the touch.
- **Koopa Troopa:** Turtles, and the foot-soldiers of Bowser's army. They come in two varieties, distinguished by the color of their shells: Green Troopas move forward at all times the same way Goombas do, while Red Troopas are cogniscient enough to turn around when they encounter a pit or the edge of a platform. Both colors also come in "Giant" varieties in Giant Land (World 4) and behave much the same way. "Koopa" (the name is a riff on Kappas, mythological beings of turtle-like appearance in Japanese folklore) is presumed to refer to the whole of the enemy turtle species in the Mushroom Kingdom, with "Troopas" specifically being Bowser's first-line troops.
- **Koopa Para-Troopa:** Troopas with wings sprouting from their shells, it is unknown whether this variation on the species is meant to be "natural" or if somehow the result of magical augmentation by Bowser. Green-shelled Para-Troopas have limited capacity for flight, mostly "bouncing" from place to place, while those with red-shells tend to hover in place. When struck from above, they lose their wings and revert to the more familiar Troopa state.
- **Kuribo's Shoe:** A Goomba riding in a large, mechanized boot which can be taken over by Mario after defeating the driver. Found only in World

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5-3, making it one of the rarest enemies and items in the entire game. “Kuribo” is actually the original Japanese name for all Goombas, so it is not known why only this one was retained for the first Western release of SMB3. (Later versions changed the enemy’s name to “Goomba’s Shoe.”)

- **Lakitu:** A bespectacled Koopa with a black-and-red shell who attacks from the air, “piloting” a smiley-faced cloud from which he drops Spiny Eggs (see below) onto Mario. Red eggs hatch into Spinies, while Green eggs remain as eggs.
- **Lava Lotus:** Large flower-like plants found growing underwater. It has translucent leaves through which deadly plasma balls can be seen growing before they are expelled. It is not specified whether Lava Lotus is a sentient enemy or merely a floral obstacle.
- **Micro-Goomba:** Also called “Baby Goombas,” these are tiny Goombas who are usually seen being dispatched by “Mother” Para-Goombas (see below), but they also take the form of Pile-Driver Goombas (ditto). They don’t do damage to Mario, but rather swarm around him and impede his jumping and running abilities.
- **Mini-Blooper:** “Baby” Bloopers who follow around their mothers and are launched the same as “Baby” Goombas – save that Mini-Bloopers do inflict damage on Mario.
- **Missile Bill:** An upgraded form of Bullet Bill which can reverse-direction in mid-air to track Mario in a manner suggesting heat-seeking capability.
- **Muncher:** Small, biting plants, presumably related to Piranha Plants but differentiated by being indestructible, black, and possessing what appear to be eyes. Munchers are primarily located in World 7, where they often serve the same function as spike-hazards in other areas.
- **Nipper:** The white cousin to Munchers, Nippers can hop around on their own without being tethered to a specific surface. Certain varieties spew fireballs in wide arching streams. Unlike Munchers, they are not invulnerable.
- **Para Beetle:** Winged Buzzy Beetles. Unique among the game’s enemies, they do not behave with hostility toward Mario and jumping on them won’t kill or stun them – Mario can stand on their backs while flying, which will cause them to gradually lose altitude. In this respect, they behave more like sentient, erratic Blocks (see above.)
- **Para-Goomba:** Goombas with wings. Unlike Para-Troopas, Para-Goombas fly in a manner more reminiscent of birds. Some varieties even “chase” Mario, while still others tow swarms of Baby Goombas who inundate Mario and limit his jumping ability (see above).
- **Pile-Driver Goomba:** A small Goomba who hides inside of a Brick

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Block, leaping into the air to attack Mario. Until they move they are indistinguishable from an ordinary Block.

- **Piranha Plant:** Carnivorous plants similar to venus flytraps, these creatures have been mainstays of the Mario series since the first SMB. They typically grow inside pipes, popping in and out unless Mario stands on or next-to a pipe in which case they stay hidden; but SMB3 introduces other varieties (see: “Ptooie”) which walk around on their own. In addition, there are super-scale versions found in Giant Land who are not as timid about staying inside their pipes.
- **Podobodo:** Living balls of fire (at least according to the eyes typically drawn on them in official artwork depictions) that leap up from Lava Pits in Fortresses and other dangerous areas.
- **Ptooie Plant:** A Piranha Plant that is capable of walking (using its base-leaves as “feet”) and bounces a Spiked Ball into the air off its lips. Debuting in this game, Ptooie is the first of two SMB enemies (Thwomp being the second) whose English name is an Onomatopoeia.
- **Rocky Wrench:** Rocky Wrench appears to be a kind of hybrid between a mole and a Koopa (its features are mammalian, but it has a shell like those of the Hammer Bros) that serves as the main non-mechanical enemy on the Airships and Bowser’s military arsenal in World 8. Apparently serving as both pilots and engineers, they stay concealed in holes topped by lids (which they wear as hats), emerging to throw wrenches at Mario.
- **Roto-Disc:** A flashing ball (possibly meant to be crystal in composition) that spins in a circular orbit around a grey spherical “anchor” as a hazard in fortresses. Amusingly, it resembles nothing so much as a disco-ball.
- **Sledge Bros:** Larger-scale, overweight versions of Hammer Bros who throw larger hammers and can stomp the ground to cause mini-earthquakes which stun Mario, an ability also used by some of the Koopalings and Bowser. They are the only enemy sprite other than Fire Chomp to be drawn from a three-quarter-turn perspective, rather than in direct profile.
- **Spike:** Small, fast-moving creatures whose shells indicate they belong to the Koopa family; so named for their ability to expel spiked balls as large as their whole body from their mouths and throw them at Mario.
- **Spiny:** A subspecies of Troopa with spike-covered shells, making them impervious to attacks from above (though they are not fireproof like Buzzy Beetles). They primarily hatch from Eggs dropped by Lakitu (see above), but in SMB3 they can be found on their own with no Lakitu origin in sight. They also appear underground, with the ability to walk on ceilings and drop down – their shells becoming spinning projectiles when they hit the ground.

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- **Spiny Cheep-Cheep:** Purple Cheep-Cheep's with spikes on their backs. One of the rarest enemies in the game, they are found only in Level 7-4 and would not appear in the series again until "New Super Mario Bros. Wii" two decades later.
- **Stretch:** A gelatinous (ectoplasmic?) form of Boo that appears to be a solid white platform until its ghost form extends out from its borders (which are otherwise safe to touch).
- **Thwomp:** Huge, living blocks of spike-lined stone that drop from above (or move side-to-side) to crush Mario in fortresses. In at least one instance they are also seen to make diagonal moves, but varieties that are unmoored from a singular path or space were not seen until "Super Mario 64."
- **Venus Fire-Trap:** A subspecies of Piranha Plant that spits fireballs, generally at an angle.

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And so, here we are – the “main event” of this book: my complete, comprehensive, level-by-level, brick-by-brick play-through of “Super Mario Bros. 3;” conducted and chronicled over a period of three months (primarily in the evening) between April and June of 2012.

Given that video games are, above all else, an interactive medium; both the dates and (where worthy of mention) brief details of my circumstances and/or mindset while playing have been included, and should rightly be considered part of the chronicling/evaluating process of this particular critique.

MONDAY, APRIL 23 2012

I have no great artistic rationale for why I choose to begin writing up my play-through tonight (morning, technically, as it's 2:30am at present, but I have never been able to accept darkness and nighttime as not being one and the same). I am here – that is to say, my bedroom where the Wii is kept – because the wind and rain outside have inspired our family dog, Sprocket, to behave in the manner one expects of a dog during such weather; rendering “work” conditions untenable in my usual office (also known as “The Living Room After Everyone Else Is Asleep”). And so, my thinking goes, if I'm to move my workspace to my room anyway, it's as good a time as any to stop procrastinating on this “Super Mario Bros. 3” project.

Thus, here I am. Here we are. Pathetic excuse for an air conditioner rattling in the background, “bedtime cocktail” of Jack Daniels, Captain Morgan and Schwepps at my side, room lit only by the glows from the television and from my laptop. So, we begin.

THE BEGINNING

“Super Mario Bros. 3's” title-screen opens with a silent animation, utilizing sprites from the game, and contains a plethora of visual details as subtle clues to the game to come: we see Mario and Luigi (reverted once more to red and green palette-swapped copies of one-another after having appeared as unique sprites in “Super Mario Bros. 2”), a set of enemy/object sprites from the game, and our first glimpse at the new mechanics of shell-grabbing and flight via the Raccoon powers granted by the Leaf.

The title screen also introduces the odd “stagecraft” motif that recurs throughout the game, the graphics suggesting that the game's action is taking

place as a kind of theatrical production: the animation is preceded by a huge red curtain being raised, and the oddly-textured fauna in the background casts a solid black shadow on a cream-colored “sky” backdrop (the glowing number “3” casts a shadow, too – in the shape of the all-important Tanooki), as though we’re looking not at a video game abstraction of a natural world but at theatrical scenery. Mario even exits the sequence by pausing to dash behind an object, a “skill” which is itself a clue to one of the game’s more important secrets.



WORLD 1: GRASS LAND



SMB3 is the first Mario game to feature a World Map, with all levels and paths laid out in overview. The map’s theme music is a jaunty little toe-tapper, the easygoing “jam” style music that was the sonic soul of the NES Mario titles. Appropriately, the anthropomorphic bushes dotting the landscape dance in time to it. Six Levels are visible (at the time a surprising break from the “three levels and a boss level” structure of previous games in the series) plus two Mushroom Houses, a Spade Panel, a Hammer Brother on patrol, and two castles; one small and located at midpoint, the other large and highlighted by a comic-strip word-balloon calling for help.

From the game’s instruction booklet, we have already been informed the scenario: Bowser’s seven evil children, the Koopalings, have stolen magic wands from seven kings of seven kingdoms, and we are to retrieve them. Clearly, that larger castle belongs to said king, and is our destination...

LEVEL 1-1

The first level of a Mario game is traditionally designed to teach you by trial and error how the rest of the game is to be played (Shigeru Miyamoto is said to have postponed the design of the first game’s Level 1-1 until the team built the rest of them, so they would know what skills it needed to impart) and to highlight what new has come to pass since last you visited the Mushroom Kingdom. As is customary, you begin as Mario in his miniature form, and are met by a Goomba, which is the weakest of Bowser’s endless canon-fodder army: essentially a scowling mushroom with oversized shoes, easily dispatched by jumping on it.

You then encounter four Question Blocks (the fourth contains the Mushroom to become “Super” or “Big” Mario) and get your first glimpse at a new variation on a classic enemy. A Piranha Plant that spits fireballs?

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Madness! (Actually, it's called a Venus FireTrap; our introduction to SMB3's recurring penchant for puns.) You also encounter your first chance to try a new form of enemy/object interaction: picking up the shell of the first Koopa Troopa you encounter and using it to whack a Question Block situated on the ground, the first instance of such block placement in the series history. Providing you are still Big Mario at this point, the block will yield a Super Leaf, and you will become the iconic Raccoon Mario for the first time.



THE TALE OF THE TAIL



The English translations of the game call this form “Raccoon Mario,” but in the original Japanese the tail and ears are specified as those of a Tanooki: a raccoon-like animal (also called a “raccoon dog”) common in Japan and significant to Shinto folklore. We’ll discuss them in more detail when we come to a different Power-Up that the English translation does preserve as the “Tanooki Suit.”

Raccoon Mario marks the first time a Mario power-up fundamentally changed the way a player interacts with the game world, as opposed to simply granting projectiles like the Fire Flower or invincibility like Star Man. You now have a close-range attack (smacking the enemy with your tail) and can flap said tail to slow your descent after a jump. And, of course, you can fly – an action which the game’s ingeniously subtle level design encourages you to try (providing you survive your encounter with a winged Goomba, another new mutation of the enemy menagerie) by positioning a line of hovering Coins leading up into the sky, diagonally, at the end of what amounts to a runway.

Taking flight into the sky (I still remember what a thrill it was to pull it off the first time, the game brilliantly understanding how much more satisfying it is having to get a “running start” to execute the move) you’ll find hovering blocks, smiling clouds and a 1-Up (“Extra Life”) for your trouble. Back down below, the familiar Para-Troopers (winged Troopas) make their return to the series, and after traversing a pair of pits and two more plant-inhabited pipes you come upon a stack of bricks that – when struck by a well-tossed shell – produce a P-Switch (read: Big Blue Button) which, when pressed, briefly transforms all bricks in the area into coins; an effect which will form the basis

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of more elaborate puzzles in levels to come.

A few more jumps, a few more enemies, and the level concludes – short and not terribly challenging, but we’ve now been introduced to the essentials of SMB3 gameplay: most notably the fact that Bowsers minions have developed new strains since last we saw them, and that the ability to fly under the right circumstances means that the sky beyond the visible screen may hold secrets of it’s own. The level itself holds quixotic secrets, as well: the “stage” motif from the title screen is here repeated, with the large colored blocks casting shadows and seemingly “bolted” the backdrop, and the jarring transition into a stark-black shadow-space to mark the end goal. You may also take note of the lone white platform among the other more colorful examples – should you choose to crouch down on it for a few seconds, Mario will actually fall into the backdrop and be able to move behind the scenery, a graphical “trick” glimpsed on the intro and soon to become quite vital...

LEVEL 1-2

Back when this game was new, the first big surprise about 1-2 was that it had different music than 1-1; traditionally Mario games had only three or four main themes: Overworld, Underworld, Boss, Final Boss. (SMB1 also had an Underwater theme.) Commonplace today, to be sure, but in 1989 a tantalizing glimpse at just how far SMB3 was going to push the NES’s hardware in the pursuit of variety for it’s own sake.

This is also the first appearance of inclined planes in the series – the first time Mario walks up or down a sloped hill as opposed to hopping up blocks arranged as steps. Should you attempt to crouch on a particularly steep slope (one is immediately provided, following a Goomba-producing horizontal pipe) Mario will slide down the hill on his bum, the visual effect of which still induces me to smile to this day. This, I think, is the secret to the character’s enduring appeal, especially to each new generation of children: the sneaky sense that Mario’s adventures, however perilous, are as much a game to him as they are to you.

Incidentally, if you’ve kept (or re-aquired) your Raccoon Tail here, the second of the Goomba producing pipes is your first big chance to pull off the classic Mario Infinite 1-Up Trick: by jumping on enemies one after another without touching the ground in between, the points awarded increase with each kill until they begin to automatically award an extra life. Using the endless supply of Goombas, proper timing and the Raccoon Tail to slow your descent, it’s possible to rack up nearly-limitless 1-Ups here... and you will need them.

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Over the next rise, a chance to put some skills you learned in 1-1 to practical use: A pipe hovers, seemingly out of reach, in mid air. A row of coins placed curiously adjacent to it. Directly below, two bricks. Does one brick contain a P-Switch? It does. Might the P-Switch turn coins to bricks as it previously turned bricks to coins, thus creating a platform by which to reach the pipe? It might indeed... or, if able, you can just fly up there – among the greatest virtues of SMB3 is that there is seldom only one way to solve a puzzle.

Entering the pipe yields a secret room filled with coins... and our re-introduction to a re-mixed version of the classic Underworld Theme from SMB1. Beyond that? Your first chance to try out the Music Blocks – white boxes adorned with musical notes which bounce like springboard when landed-upon and can add oomph to your jump. Beyond that? Victory.

THE ROAD DIVERGES

The completion of Level 1-2 reveals another series-redefining moment for Mario history: For the first time ever, there is a fork in the road. Apart from Warp Zones, the games had always progressed with rigid linearity; now, here, the World Map offers multiple paths. You can go to Level 1-3 OR Level 1-4, both of which are effectively “blocking” your path to the first of those Mushroom Houses. You can even go right down to that strange Spade marker, on your way to... wait, what’s this!? You can just go right into that Fortress!?! What new devilry is at work here?

I’m trying in vain to recall what my choice was when I first played the game those many years ago – what sort of child had I been? Cautious and linear-minded enough to insist on going ahead to 1-3? Daring enough to defy the Gods Of Numerical Sequence and skip to 1-4? Or did I summon the nigh-suicidal bravery to march straight into the Fortress? Granted, since my purpose here is to play each and every level, the clear choice is to go to 1-3... but I’d like to think the Bob of 1989, flush with the thrill of the game in and of itself, thought to make the bolder choice.

LEVEL 1-3

1-3 is a strange-looking level, especially if you take flight and discover an essentially empty yet vast and traversable sky. It’s also short and flat, with only one new enemy (a Boomerang Brother, which means that unless the wandering Hammer Brother from the map screen made his way into your path already you’ll be encountering this new mutation before the “classic” variety)

and only one new skill to impart – namely that colliding with wooden blocks will sometimes yield a Power-Up (or annoyingly bounce you backwards into a pit, one or the other). But this is a Mario game, which means that mundanity is your cue to hunt for secrets.

The first secret is found by using a Troopa shell (or a Tail, if you've got it) to knock away all or most of the bricks stacked up near the start. Standing to the right side of the exposed center and jumping will reveal the first of the game's invisible Pink Music Blocks, which serve a separate function from the normal white ones: jumping on them sends Mario flying upwards, offscreen and into "Coin Heaven," an auto-scrolling cloud world filled with coins (referring back to the "beanstalk bonus-worlds" from SMB1).

The second secret? A simple matter of range: At the end of the level, just before the goal-area, if you fly straight up you'll find a Warp Pipe to a coin-filled cloud area in which flying even higher yields a 1-Up. And the third? The third... is a literal game-changer.

You will find, shortly before the exit, another plain white platform looking curiously out of place among its rainbow-hued brothers. Crouch down on it, drop into the background, and run behind the blacked-out goal area, and you will be transported to a secret room where perennial supporting-player Toad (he's also the guy waiting for you in those Mushroom Houses on the map) will give you a Magic Whistle.



WAY OF THE WHISTLE



The "Whistles" of SMB3 are clearly actually Recorders (aka "fipple flutes") - likely another relic of the Japanese-to-English translation issues that so memorably plagued video games of the Golden Age – and their appearance here is a tiny yet era-redefining moment in the development of the Nintendo corporation's public identity: If you use the Recorder on the map screen, a decidedly un-Mario-like melody will sound, and a small whirlwind will sweep you off the screen. Both the melody, the whirlwind, and thus the Whistle/Recorder/Flute itself are transplants from "The Legend of Zelda," the second most famous Nintendo franchise after Mario himself. It's the first time outside of re-used sprites or sound effects that a Nintendo game has made explicit, intentional reference to another video game and thus its own identity as a game. Comic self-awareness – a trait which would soon become central to certain

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iterations of the Mario franchise – here enter the series for the very first time.

The whirlwind deposits you on an island-bound Warp Zone, a set of pipes allowing you skip ahead by whole worlds. Using a whistle on World 1 will let you go to Worlds 2, 3 and 4, using it on any world after that will open the path to the pipes for 5, 6 and 7. Using it in World 7 will take you to World 8... unless you have a spare. Using a second Warp Whistle while already “at” the Warp Zone will skip you all the way to the final level; and since there are two Whistles to be found in World 1 (the second one is in The Fortress, a third is found in World 2) it is wholly possible to skip directly to the end after completing only three levels.

I actually debated leaving that detail out. I couldn’t, since this is supposed to be a comprehensive overview and also since every other guide, walkthrough and let’s-play of this game doubtless mentions it at this point. But I distinctly remember figuring this trick out purely by chance one afternoon as a kid – still not having “beaten” the game and suddenly given to wonder what might happen if I used what I then only thought to call The Flute on the Warp Zone itself.

I was so pleased with myself I actually sent a “tip letter” to the late, lamented Nintendo Power Magazine about it and would spend months afterward scanning each new issue (yes, I was a subscriber) to see if it had been published - me being too young at the time to appreciate the difference between an exploitable-glitch and a “secret” that the company who made the game would have to have known about – and showing it off to anyone who had a copy of the game like a magic trick or some great feat of strength.

TUESDAY, APRIL 24TH 2012

It’s 4:00am. I should be asleep, the better to wake at a reasonable hour and get day-work out of the way – I did a 3000 cal routine at the gym today thanks to the welcome distraction of a DVD full of old Transformers cartoons, and it felt good enough I’d like to repeat the process today if more vital commitments can be dispensed with in a timely fashion. But it felt like I’d be getting off on the wrong foot for there to be a day-long “gap” in this project right off the bat. Also... I really did want to get back in and play

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through at least Level 1-4. Good video games are addictive like that, and good Mario games are practically crystal meth in that regard.

So yes, one more level. Just one more level before bed. I try not to imagine I'm eight years old again, begging that same question of my mother as I now beg it of myself...

GAMES WITHIN GAMES

The Mushroom House now open to me, I choose to enter there before my next official level. This is the first “shop” mechanic in a Mario game, though it’s arranged more like a game of chance: Toad presents me with three treasure chests, and I can only pick one. My prize is a Mushroom, which goes down into an inventory menu you can use to save items and juice yourself up before heading into a level (a feature I’d like to see make a full comeback in the modern iterations of the series).

My appetite for gambling now whet, I opt to pop down into the Spade Panel – another game of chance – before the level. The cartoon renderings of Mario and Toad here are an amusing reminder of how straight-up fat Mario used to be rendered. The modern Mario is “round-bodied” in a Mickey Mouse sort of way, but 80s Mario was visibly obese. The game is a horizontal slot machine, your goal being to form a complete picture of either a Star Man, Mushroom, or Flower for 1-Ups. I get two pieces of the Star before blowing it on the bottom row. I tell myself it’s the screwdriver I’ve been nursing, as opposed to the loss of my gaming reflexes with age...

LEVEL 1-4

Another level, another Mario History first: an auto-scrolling level. As though traversing a series of sky-bound platforms beset by enemies wasn’t maddening enough, the screen continuously moves from right to left on its own – forcing you to move at a pace that once upon a time felt unnaturally hurried for a Mario game. Previously, your only incentive not to lollygag was traditionally the time-clock. I remembering perishing right away here on my first try back in 89, having not yet realized that the non-stationary wooden long-blocks dropped away when you jumped on them. I remember there’s a 1-Up in the first blocks you can hit from beneath... but fail to acquire it. Blame the booze, Bob. Blame the booze...

Ah-ha! After the two L-shaped sets of bricks, at last a Leaf. Deviously,

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the game places a Trooper right next to you here – daring you to take your platforming frustrations out on it with a hasty tail-strike and risk missing and losing the power-up. I keep it, and use it to get the next 1-Up (positioned in such a way that you really do need the tail to get it) and feel rather pleased with myself. A pipe at the very end spits me out right beside the goal, though I can't resist pausing to attack the Boomerang Brother guarding the exit. He's too quick for me, and I lose my tail. Bastard.

I also fail to trigger 1-4's "big secret" – namely that if one can collect 44 or more coins within the level itself a White version of the Mushroom House will appear on the map. Within said house, Toad will gift you with the first sample of the "P-Wing." This is SMB3's "game-breaker" item; a variation of the Raccoon Tail that grants unlimited flight for one level. It essentially turns Mario into Kirby – able to avoid danger and explore a whole level by simply flying over it.

4:45am. I should go to bed before The Fortress. The Fortress will take time. I should sleep. I'm not going to sleep. I'm going to do The Fortress.

WORLD 1 FORTRESS

The Fortress (aka "smaller castle") is designed to evoke the Bowser Castles that ended each level of Super Mario Bros 1 with stark-black backgrounds, ominous music, gray block surfaces, and pits of bubbling lava. "This was the end of a level in the first game... and here it's just the middle!" the game is telling us. "Just imagine what the real end will be!" The lava now has animated bubbles instead of just being orange water-texture, and the Podobodos – living fireballs – have a little "splash" animation when they leap in and out. It's the little things.

The first block yields the first Fire Flower of the game. In almost every other Mario game, the "Fire Mario" form is indicated by his pants and shirt changing into various combinations of white and red. In SMB3, however, Mario's entire sprite changes to various shades of feiry red and orange - giving off the impression that Mario is actually "glowing" somehow. The white/red look is "classic," I accept that, but I've always liked this approach to the color-scheme better.

Amusingly, the fireball weapon is useless against most Fortress enemies – including the strange Roto-Disc obstacle (it looks like a "disco ball" spinning in fixed orbit) next encountered. This replaced the "fire-arms"

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obstacle from the first game, and is itself replaced by spinning maces in “Super Mario World.” Up ahead, the “ceiling” of gray blocks gives way to open space – hm...

I’m going to ignore that obvious invitation for now.

Instead I head through the door, emerging into a room where a spike-covered ceiling rises and falls on schedule to try and crush me. An amusing context-shift now, a terrifying “what do I do now!?” moment when I was younger. Finally, the end room and our first battle with Boom-Boom, the recurring mini-boss easily dispatched with three stomps to the head (later variations jump around or sprout wings, but he’s a mid-world enemy for a reason).

Dueling with Boom-Boom, however, is not the only way out of The Fortress – or even the most beneficial...

THE WARP AND “THE WIZARD”

Within the first room of World 1’s Fortress there’s a secret just out of “normal” reach but available to those currently packing Raccoon powers: At the very end of the room (after the second set of lava-pits, just before the door) is a stretch of open floor that’s just long enough to take flight from providing you do your running while Dry-Bones is disabled. Fly straight up and to the right above the question-block (up onto the out-of-visibility “ledge”) and you’ll find a secret room that contains a Warp Whistle. If you’ve already grabbed (or plan to grab) the other Whistle in Level 1-3, you can now execute the previously-mentioned Warp Zone trick and go right to World 8.

Unlike the other two Whistles, whose existence was hidden from most players on the game’s initial release, this one was actually revealed to movie audiences three months before the game debuted in the U.S. – the 1989 film “The Wizard” (discussed in greater detail earlier) climaxed with child video game prodigies in a live gaming competition called “Video Armageddon” where SMB3 (“a game they have NEVER! PLAYED! BEFORE!”) is the surprise final challenge, which the film’s hero wins by finding and using this whistle... even though in the film the players are competing for total-points and whistle-use doesn’t actually get you any.

Oddly, he does so on the shouted advice of his friend in the crowd (who calls it “The Flute”), though it’s unclear how she knew it was there or could even have guessed since “flutes” had had no presence in Mario games up to that point. Anyway, it was hard to notice that at the time since he uses it to go to Giant Land (World 4), and the revelation of macro-scale enemies in a Mario game was far too exciting to worry about cinematic logic.

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In any case, with The Fortress crumbled, I decide to take out the map-wandering Hammer Brother before bed. It's just one of them this time (the "classic" mallet-tossing variety), and his defeat earns me a Star Man as a prize.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25TH

Another late night. Another long day. Vovo (my Grandmother on my father's side) was hospitalized again yesterday; an ongoing (although, I am assured, not at this point "serious") problem that has almost become routine, though not enough to keep me from feeling uncertain. It's not lost on me that I'm currently "coping" with this and other uneasy aspects of my present-day life in precisely the same way I did as a child – playing a video-game. Playing THIS video game.

LEVEL 1-5

The entry into this level never fails to make me smile. While every other level of a Mario game up to this point (save the famous "mid-air-fall" cold-open from Super Mario Bros. 2) has opened with Mario's feet planted squarely on terra-firmer, when 1-5 opens I find myself sliding down a cliff into a cave, coming to rest at the lip of a subterranean pool and plowing through four Buzzy Beetles (smooth-shelled, fireproof turtle-like foes that have been with the series from the beginning) as I go.

It's a fun change of pace, and once upon a time I was blown away that Mario began to swim upon sliding into that pool rather than dying instantly – which is what hitting water in anything other than a designated "swimming level" did in previous Mario games and most other games of the era.

The path "forks" soon afterward. From memory I take the "high road," leading to a surface-exit and a hidden Pink Music Block, a bounce upon which teleports me into another Coin Heaven. Luckily imbued with the Raccoon tail, I take to the sky and find a 1-Up before popping down into the exit pipe, which spits me back down to the exit of the second (lower) path. I like that the "exit pipe" would've been readily visible to me had I taken this road to begin with, a clue/incentive to risk going back to find its entrance.

Backtracking from memory, I find and snag a Fire Flower... immediately regretting my decision, as I would almost always rather be Raccoon Mario just in case. It doesn't matter – I slide for the fun of it down the next hill, and

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collide with a Pirhana Plant, losing the power-up and feeling a bit silly for it. I feel even sillier when I try – by instinct – to enter the next two pipes and am bitten by plants both times: my first death of this playthrough. I don't repeat the mistake a second time.

I'm realizing I'd neglected to keep track in the prior four levels of my goal card. At each level's goal you leap up and try to stop a rotating star/mushroom/flower symbol to collect cards of each. Collecting three identical in a row rewards you with 1-Ups and a fireworks display. At the moment my tally is one flower and one star, for what it's worth.

LEVEL 1-6

The last “regular” level before the Boss Level is another run of elevated platforms, some attached to zig-zagging motion-tracks to make jumping extra difficult – particularly as I've entered as nigh-powerless Small Mario and missed my first shot at a Mushroom (though it does make a precarious mid-level “drop and land on a single block” moment feel easier somehow).

The main thrust of the level is leaping in open air from block to block, timing being the key element to success – you have to “time-out” the back-and-forth movements of the blocks and platforms on your own.

As an extra-nasty surprise, a Troopa actually waits INSIDE the usually safe “goal space,” the designers clearly intuiting that players would get used to doing a “victory run” into the goal and take a hit here. It almost works.

CASTLE KEEP

The path is now clear to The Castle, but having not a power-up to my name it's best to hit up the last remaining Mushroom House first. I take the left chest, hoping for a Leaf. I get a Flower. Onward to the castle, then...

Here, the game once more schemes to toy with our expectations: we're to expect another Castle Level, but instead we find ourselves immediately in the throne room of Grassland's King... who has rather hilariously been transformed into a dog with the loss of his wand. The dog looks pretty content with the situation, really, but the Mushroom Person (Toad again?) at his side is apoplectic: “Oh, it's terrible! The King has been transformed! Please find the Magic Wand so we can change him back.”

Well, alright. But if we're not to fight the boss in the castle, then where?

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WORLD 1 AIRSHIP

The Airship is an awesome reveal. Mario runs along the ground, snags a ship's dangling anchor, and is pulled into the sky aboard the first of what serves as SMB3's "Boss Levels" – huge, flying Pirate Ships. Everything about the Airships is wonderful, particularly the grim, percussion-backed theme music.

Alongside two cannons, Bullet Bill – a living missile and another returning classic enemy – makes his first bow. It's fun seeing what was an odd addition to the original game (a bullet in the otherwise medieval-looking Mushroom Kingdom?) here appropriately arranged as part of military munitions. Bill has found his place.

Maneuvering across the deck of an airship (it's another auto-scrolling level) dodging hails of bullets and cannonballs was, at the time, entirely fresh for a Mario game – and it's still a great equilibrium shift today. Bowser isn't just waiting for you to come fight him this time; he's militarized his operation, and he's taking the fight to you. The previous games were adventures... "quests" – this time, it's war.

I drop down the pipe at the end to do battle with the Ship's captain, Larry Koopa... who immediately kills me. Shame. Disgrace. Disgust. I'm out of practice. Back on the map screen, the Airship changes it's location. This is your incentive to clear all the levels even though you don't have to – you don't want the ship popping itself behind an unfinished level and slowing you down.

Going back in, this time I take the Flower with me. It won't hurt the cannonballs or Bills at all, but if I can keep it to the end I know it will hurt Larry. It does. Larry goes down, dropping his wand. You don't have to catch the wand in mid-air, but I like to all the same. Mario falls from the sky, delivering the wand back to the King (who's rocking quite the neckbeard) and earning a letter of advice from Princess Peach (here still credited as "Princess Toadstool," it being 1989 and all), which warns me not to turn away from Ghosts and gives me a welcome P-wing.

I really love the presence of the "Princess Letters" in the game, as it gives a much greater sense of what Mario's (and Luigi's) place is in this world: men on a mission. Knights – in overalls – questing and battling at the behest of royal decree.

BEYOND THE GRASS

Despite the name, there really isn't a lot of "grass" on display in the now-completed Grass Land. The name seems almost arbitrarily chosen to evoke the most peaceful/banal sort of terrain in a game where geographic features indicate the entire personality of a World.

Grassy or not, Grass Land is the first and last World to feel like a comfortable return to the formula of SMB1 and the Japanese SMB2: mostly-flat, mostly-linear levels with enemies as obstacles and power ups plentifully-placed to help you along. From this point on more and more levels will take the form of either large, exploration-oriented puzzles or gauntlets of aggressive enemies and fiendishly-placed hazards.

The easy part is finished – ahead lies the desert.

WORLD 2: DESERT LAND

SATURDAY, APRIL 28, 20012

Did not expect to already have a three-day gap in these entries, but life does that. Vovo had a pacemaker put in, and we're told she's feeling better. Either way, that and other situations of life made it necessary to back-burner this project for a few days – making me much happier that I chose to power-through and complete World 1 last time...

It's 3:30am. Tonight's libation is Pabst (don't judge me) and a shot of Jack. The desert awaits...

I love the eye-searing bright orange color that's supposed to indicate “sand” in this game. Desert Land's map is expansive, covering more than a single screen (you can't even see the castle at first) with a low-pitch percussive beat for a musical score. Incidentally, the second level of Super Mario Bros 2 (U.S. version) was also desert-themed.

I've always enjoyed the repeating visual-cues games of this era used to identify different kinds of terrain: Desert = palm trees, sand (typically realized by adding speckles or a gradient-pattern to the ground), pyramids, cacti, etc. SMB3 takes this another interesting step, though – it actually makes it's desert barren. The levels are largely flat stretches, with a lot less detail to the backgrounds than was seen in Grass Land. In terms of simple, lo-fi ways to convey a sense of empty sun-bleached flatness it's remarkably effective.

LEVEL 2-1

Right off the bat, two pyramids in the background. In the video-games of the 1980s, pyramids were a naturally-occurring element of any desert; no different from cacti or sun-bleached animal skeletons. More surprising is that a brick-block jumps up and attacks you, revealing a miniature Goomba hiding within: the Pile-Driver Goomba, another new foe making his debut. Because I paused to write that down, he kills me. I feel like I should lie and say that it didn't happen that way...

I make it a point to kill him right off as payback, even though this species is pretty easy to avoid as “jumper” enemies go. It's uniquely satisfying

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to hear the “you killed a bad guy” sound and the “brick-smashing” sound simultaneously, moreso on the next two or three of the little buggers that show up. A free-floating Question-block hides a Star Man, which I remember comes in handy versus the Fire Snake (literally a serpent made of fireballs) that shows up for the first time directly afterward.

The “snake” stands guard before a “maze” of steel-pipes ahead – a strange-looking feature in a desert level. I shrugged their presence off as a kid, but seeing them now I’m given to wonder if – this being a desert – they’re supposed to be reminiscent of a Middle-Eastern oil pipeline. Getting “inside” the first piped-off area requires some brick-breaking, but there’s a 1-Up in there.

Just before the goal is a pipe that leads down into a seemingly empty room with a Blue Switch. Pushing it then heading back up top reveals bricks changed to coins... but I remember a trick to this place that – lacking a Raccoon tail – I’ve failed to activate. So I feed myself to the plants and give it another go, this time activating the Princess’s p-wing before I do. HAH! I was right, and I didn’t even have to pull up a map. This *is* a “big sky” level, and the point of that blue switch is to coin-ify some bricks that are blocking off a sky-bound Warp Pipe. But since all versions of Raccoon Mario can smash bricks with his tail, I don’t need it to. The result: a secret room. Its contents: Silver Coins. My card at the goal is even a Star – tonight is looking up.

My performance in 2-1 has caused the N-Spade Panel to appear, so I head on over to play the mini-game. It’s just “Memory” with Mario-icons. I decide to cheat – just this once – and look the pattern up online. I’ve never actually seen the whole thing “cleared,” and I figure why the hell not? ... somehow, I managed to screw it up. Nintendo Karma, clearly.

LEVEL 2-2

Quicksand – another perennial feature of every desert level in video games. It was first introduced to the Mario franchise via SMB2, but here with the added bonus of concealing Piranha Plants. Clearing them is easy enough, save for a nasty little “gotcha” trap of a bouncy wood-block that knocks you back down but also releases a Power-Up (a Leaf if you’re already big).

The main feature of 2-2 turns out to be a lengthy stretch of water, teeming with Cheep-Cheeps (fish) and patrolled above by Para-Troopas. I like how the water is a funky sea-green color, almost as though to suggest that it’s stagnant and/or cloudy, which it would likely be as either a rain-pool or a spring in a desert area. Come to think of it... the whole layout suddenly makes an unnerving amount of naturalistic sense: there would need to be a

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body of water nearby for quicksand to occur, and of course Para-Troopas would hover above the water – hoping to snack on the fish if they got close to the surface.

Naturalism aside, the point is actually to cross over the water on the wooden platform that moves once you set foot on it. The second of two blocks contains a Blue Switch, which turns the bricks into coins – which you want, because getting 30 or more coins here triggers a White Mushroom House on the map. Good luck with that – I don't know that I've ever intentionally pulled it off.

WORLD 3 FORTRESS

I really like the starkness of the pitch-black backdrop and the shiny gray sandstones in this place – it's appropriately moody. Also, three Dry-Bones are waiting for you right at the start – if you're Raccoon Mario, you can do the “infinite 1-Ups” trick on them if you time it out right.

Up ahead: a spike-covered block with a face that drops down to smash you if you get too close. This is Mario's first-ever encounter with Thwomp, who has gone on to become a mainstay of the series. Not long after, another big first – the ghost the Princess warned us about: Boo (credited as “Boo-Diddly” in the manual, a reference I did not get as a child) who hovers perfectly still if you're facing him but gives chase when you turn away. Boos turned out to be so popular that in the next game (“Super Mario World”) they got whole Haunted House levels to inhabit.

Next, a pit of spikes, a Thwomp covering a narrow platform, and two Boos. The lone brick-block near the end can be a pain to hit with the attacking ghosts around, but if you're big there's a Leaf in there. There's nowhere to fly, though the running-start most will instinctively try to hit once their all Raccoon'd up turns out to be the best (or at least most satisfying) way to pass the next gauntlet of Thwomps. This is what intuitive game design looks like.

Next up, an entire room of rising/falling spiked-platforms, and more Boos. Can you fly in here? Yes, but don't: there's spikes on the ceiling (I forget this, try, and nearly impale myself). After all that, Boom-Boom is a relative cakewalk.

Beating the fortress clears a path to the first Mushroom House (I got another Flower!) and the largely-superfluous pipe that takes you to a different though readily-accessible part of the map. Its main purpose seems to be triggering the position-shuffling of the Hammer Bros should you want to try and nudge them closer to you.

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LEVEL 2-3

Another ingeniously designed little level, to the point of deviousness – the traversable blocks making up the “pyramids” are sized just right to trick you into jumping up on them (and into enemy path) without wanting to, using Mario players’ tendency to constantly jump against them.

Aside from survival, your “goal” here is to use the Star Man in the second question block atop the second pyramid to clear out the fire-snakes, then go Raccoon via the multiple other power-up blocks and fly up to the first set of floating bricks, as they conceal a blue switch that will transform the Brick Pyramids below into a treasure-trove of coins.

On my way through the goal, I get my third Star. Success! A star-shaped fireworks display fills the “sky,” and I get five more lives. If ever there was a sign to call it a night, that’s it.

SUNDAY APRIL 29TH 2012

Things have calmed at home, leading to a more productive than usual Saturday. Prep-work for the episode due on Monday? Done. Editing? Done. Gym workout? 1700 cal cardio routine – solid. Even had time to take in a movie (“Safe,” the umpteenth “Jason Statham badass ex-cop/soldier/whatever saves innocent person with much punching” installment, it’s okay) and just for kicks slip into another theater to watch a fresh audience react to the ending of “Cabin In The Woods.”

LEVEL 2-QUICKSAND

This is a strange level, beginning with the fact that it’s represented by an animated “quicksand” panel on the map instead of being numbered like the others and continuing through... well, everything else.

At first the most distinguishing feature is the cartoon-faced Angry Sun hovering in the upper lefthand corner of the screen. For a while, hanging there is all he/she/it does as I try my best to time the leaps over wide quicksand-filled chasms and smash rows of earthbound bricks with my Raccoon Tail. I forget, almost too late, that this is the first level where a Tornado appears to try and mess with your flight attempts, but I remember the true “what the hell?” feature of this place all too well: the Angry Sun eventually dives down

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out of the sky and attacks you, turning the home stretch of the level into a gauntlet and the Sun itself into one of the most memorably-strange enemies in the Mario Bros canon.

After this the road on the Map forks once more, allowing the option of skipping either level 4 or level 5 en-route to the Castle. I'm heading to 2-4, stopping off at a Mushroom House and scoring a Leaf.

LEVEL 2-4

Ah yes, this one. This is about the point where SMB3 begins to merge the timed-footrace level design of the first game with the exploration-oriented, multi-path experiences of the American SMB2. It's a two-path level: a lower path that's a mostly straightforward run-and-jump through enemies and an upper level with a walled-off pool and a lot of coins. Right at the start you can just barely make out that part of the "ceiling" is breakable-bricks, and flying up through them puts me up top.

The "point" of this level is teaching you how to use the flying technique to do things other than reach higher places. There are two blue switches up here – the first in the third block of the second line of bricks above the water, the second in the third block in the third row of floating bricks right at the end (the trick is to get the regular coins first, then trip the switches and grab the transformed bricks). Flying underneath the row of bricks between them will yield a slew of hidden coins as well.

The "below" path is less exciting – just some turtles and two more Boomerang Bros. I backtrack and take them out, for completion's sake. A third Boomerang-tosser is hiding at the goal, the bastard...

LEVEL 2-5

The Chain-Chomp – possibly the most enduring Mario enemy other than Boo and the Koopalings to originate in this game – makes his first appearance in spectacular fashion, lunging at you right at the start of this level. Essentially an animated ball-and-chain with gnashing sharp teeth that tugs at its bolted-down chain like an attack dog, he guards two temptingly-placed question blocks.

Everything about Chain-Chomps is awesome, and their conception is one of the all-time great illustrations of how Shigeru Miyamoto's mind works: he maintains a vivid childhood memory of being attacked by an angry dog, only to be saved by the animal's leash causing it to stop-short – its jaws snapping just inches from his face – and combined this memory

with the classic cartoon image of the ball-and-chain prisoner-restraint. Their movements are more fierce and animal-like than any other enemy in the franchise up to that point. The animation of the chain itself is fantastic for the 8-bit era, as the “visual-pun” of the creature’s appearance is instantly identifiable. Oh, and if you let it linger onscreen for more than 160 seconds on the timer... it WILL break off the chain and come after you.

The tiny one-block-length sliver of water at midpoint is another great example of “show, don’t tell” level-design. The bright, inviting blue in an otherwise earth-toned desert level draws your attention to what would otherwise be an empty crevice – it says “do something with me.” There are two Troopas nearby, why not toss a shell in and watch it get stuck “bouncing” in a tiny space. Fun, sure... but it’s a clue that you should do that again in the NEXT bit of space, where a well-placed shell can strike an otherwise-inaccessible block, which sends a beanstalk sprouting up into the sky.

Another of the Mario series’ oblique fairytale visual-references, this is the first appearance of “hidden” beanstalks since the first game (in SMB2, they grew out in the open). The beanstalks have always been a fun bit of extra graphical effort – why have a boring old ladder when a Jack and the Beanstalk cue is so much more “cool?” Climbing it leads to clouds, coins, and a warp-pipe to a roomful of switch-triggered treasure.



STOP! HAMMER TIME



The map is now – seemingly – cleared of regular levels, and my attention turns to the wandering Hammer Bros; the first of which triggers a Boomerang battle whose reward is a Music Box (it puts enemies on the map-screens to sleep) while the second scores me my first Hammer.

The Hammer is a map-screen tool used to break the boulders that occasionally obstruct paths... but here, the trick is to go all the way to the upper right-hand corner of the screen and use it on the boulder next to the lone palm-tree; which clears a hidden path to a third map-screen and some fantastic secrets: the Mushroom House gives you your first Frog Mario power-up (save it!) and that last Hammer Brother (actually a pair of Fire Bros, a royal pain-in-the-butt enemy that shows up here first) is protecting the third Warp-Whistle!

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WORLD 2 – PYRAMID

In another “huh?” moment of map design, the last level before you reach the Castle isn’t a numbered level but a Pyramid that otherwise functions just like an underworld level. I get killed with humiliating quickness by a Buzzy Beetle who drops down from the ceiling and turns into a whirling-dervish of a spinning shell when he lands – I’d forgotten that this was the first time we seem them use that skill here. Despite their name, ceiling-walking is the first remotely insect-like thing Buzzy has done in the series, and they’re still typically drawn as mostly Turtle-like in the licensed artwork. “Turtle,” in the Mushroom Kingdom, seems to encompass any creature that can be drawn with a shell on it’s back; and we’ll see stranger variations soon enough.

It’s best to think of the Pyramid as another “training level,” in this case a crash-course in the “maze”-style levels that will become more common in later levels; with false dead-ends and most paths blocked off by a column of bricks – you’re supposed to negotiate using the nigh-indestructible Buzzy Beetles constantly respawning all over the place to smash them, though it’s much easier to just enter and exit the door at the beginning of the level to re-set the question blocks and get Raccoon powers. If you keep the tail all the way through, you can use it to fly up over the wooden blocks protecting a pipe in the upper chamber and reach another switch-block treasure room (it also has a 1-Up at the top, so the trick is to not smash all the bricks or get all the coins at once.

WORLD 2 AIRSHIP

Another imperiled Castle, another transformed King (into a spider this time, amusingly hovering on a thread above his throne), and another trip into the sky to conquer another Airship – this one colored a darker shade of green and set against a gloomier sky.

The “new” issue of this Airship is an increased amount of up and down movement in addition to the auto-scrolling, which threatens to drop or crush you offscreen particularly at the midpoint where you have to climb down, then up a stack of crates separated by a wall while under fire by a stack of three Bullet Bill cannons. I went into this level as Fire Mario, but I exit that particular trap busted back down to mini-Mario.

At the tail end of the ship we meet another new enemy type: Rocky Wrench – another hybrid of a turtle and something else, in this case a mole – who pops up out portholes (wearing the hatch as a hat) and throws wrenches

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at you. The wrench (as opposed to some other projectile) is such a great visual touch: it gives the Rockies a hint of personality (a mole workman is a fun image), suggests a reason for him to be there other than enemy placement (now we know who crews/maintains these ships!), and makes the Airship concept itself feel like a more tangible thing – so much accomplished with so few pixels.

The Koopaling waiting at the end is Morton Koopa Jr: the first (obvious) instance of the detail that the Koopalings are all named as puns on musicians (Bowser himself may or may not have been named for the lead singer of Sha Na Na, additionally) or celebrities – Morton Downey Jr. in this case, and (supposedly) Larry Mullen Jr. in the case of Grass Land's Larry Koopa. Music is the other great passion of Shigeru Miyamoto's life, and the musical allusions bleed into the designs of Bowser and his family, who are typically depicted sporting spiked collars, wristbands, and neon-colored manes of hair associated with hard-rock acts of the late-1980s (which is also as close as the Mario games come to grounding themselves in any specific place and time in terms of pop-reference).

DRY SPELL

For whatever reason, Desert Land doesn't seem to be among the more ubiquitous of "Super Mario Bros. 3's" regions – you seldom see its surfaces appearing in merchandise, and it's not associated with the presence of a particular Power-Up like later areas are – but playing back through it reveals one of the more eccentric sets of levels in the game.

If Grass Land is all about acclimating players to what's new among the old, Desert Land is about assaulting you with newness in the form of strange new enemies and quixotic design choices. Multi-path levels, enemies that give chase, scenery that comes to life, levels that aren't "officially" levels, etc. It's the first drop on the roller coaster – a warning of bigger surprises yet to come.

It also does a strangely good job of conveying the "feel" of its topographical theme: Appropriately for a desert, levels tend to be sparse and wide with seemingly less clutter and available power-ups than before. It's also twice as large as Grass Land, which can yield a certain amount of "am I still here?" fatigue to the Map.

But, for me it's done. Next comes the water...



WORLD 3: WATER LAND



APRIL 30, 2012

Just had a creepy yet utterly banal pre-bedtime moment: A box of cereal I vividly remember opening and eating from a day or so ago is sealed shut – it has never been opened. I am not sure what this means or implies – either about me or the cereal.

Did I hallucinate eating cereal? Of all the things to conjure, why that? And if so, why not a cereal I liked more than Special-K Redberries? If I was going to dream of cereal, I'd have preferred it be something more potent like Fruity Pebbles. Or BooBerry.

Whatever. Time to play some of the water levels.

“Tropical” settings were another popular mainstay of games in this period; usually typified by the combination of visual elements from “water” and “jungle” imagery paired with a palette of lighter colors and jazzy music.

SMB3’s aquatic-themed world hits most of these same notes in its Map Screen, dominated by turquoise blue water and music that evokes a breezy, laid-back beach atmosphere. The map itself is laid out with an amusing degree of “logic” in its design – the levels and fortresses are clustered around a coastal landmass etched with canals of water leading out to a wider ocean dotted with a few smaller islands. The islands are accessible only by a canoe you can’t immediately access. If you squint a bit it does end up looking like a “coastal civilization” would have to look in the Mushroom Kingdom. There are a total of five Mushroom Houses, three of which (all except the one alone on the furthest canoe-accessible island) have Frog Suits if you pick the right chest. The first one you’re likely to encounter has only the Frog Suit.

An interesting feature of World 3’s map is the presence of drawbridges, which open and close paths – changing position as you enter and exit levels either by completion or by dying. If you time your level-order correctly (or have extra lives to spare) it’s a new twist on shortcut-triggering. The most noteworthy aspect of this map, however, is that it’s the first time the placement of the level-markers acts as a heads-up to what kind of level you’re entering: levels placed in the water will be dominated by swimming, levels on land will be overworld-based with intermittent water obstacles, and levels situated on coasts or water-adjacent land will be some mixture of the two.



THE LIFE OF A FROG



Since Level 3-1 is situated out in open water, I opt to don the Frog Suit I picked up from the hidden Toad House back in World 2.

Aside from the obvious benefit that the image of Mario's face sticking out the mouth of a cartoon frog costume is instantly endearing (this is the first Mario power-up that grants a full change in attire rather than clothing color); Frog Mario is an awesome power-up, and the first terrain-specific item in the Mario canon: it changes the whole nature of how swimming levels work in the game. Traditionally, Mario sinks slowly toward the bottom when in water and must continually mash the jump button to stay afloat while moving slower than on land; wearing the Frog Suit lets you navigate water simply by pushing the D-pad. On dry land, the Frog Suit gives you a higher/longer jump but impedes your running controls since Mario now moves in short hops unless he's carrying a shell or an Ice-Brick.

LEVEL 3-1

After the (intentionally) sparse palette and background detail of World 2's levels, 3-1 is a visual stunner: an ocean of water that couldn't be any bluer rippling under a turquoise sky, pink coral towers and big chunks of orange ocean-floor terrain. Large pipes stab down into the water from above, while smaller ones are on the sea-floor and most push you away from them with a force meant to suggest that water is flowing out of them (some kind of filtration system?): a twist on the watery-pits that pulled you DOWN in the first game.

Right off the bat there's a space where you can swim straight down to a hidden Question Block, but since the Power-Up turns out to be a Flower I don't take it – I like being a Frog too much, and the added swim-control makes it that much easier to cope with the Bloopers (squids, making their first post-SMB1 appearance) waiting up ahead.

3-1 is a big level, and the wide expanses of water to move around in along with the multiple paths really do convey the spatial freedom of deep-sea exploration despite being a 2D side-scroller. Diving down past the Bloopers and arriving on the sea floor I discover an enemy I'd forgotten first

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appeared here: the Lava Lotus. It's an eerily-pretty variation on a Piranha Plant: a bulgy flower with translucent petals that let you see the cluster of lava-bombs welling up inside it before they are released. The design looks out of place in a Mario game, honestly – it looks a bit like a Metroid creature.

Crud. There was a second one up ahead the water opens up, and it's rising projectiles take my Frog powers. At least I recall where to power back up: You can jump up out of the water, and off the screen to get “on top” of some wooden blocks, then run to the left to find a question block. Now I'm bummed – I didn't get to use the Frog Suit on land yet.

Back in the water is another Blooper, this one trailing a school of babies like the Mother Para-Goombas. I know I should keep swimming ahead to the exit, but for old time's sake I drop back to the depths where a minefield of music-blocks are arranged to shoved you into the path of another Lava Lotus. I want my Frog back. At the very least, I end the level 2 for 2 on “star cards” at the goal.

LEVEL 3-2

Water the color of the sky, a sky the color of a vanilla yogurt – the light spectrum in the Mushroom Kingdom is weird. This is another “platforms in open-sky” level, except theres water all along the bottom of the screen so you won't instantly be killed if you fall... instead, you'll probably be killed moments later by one of the Cheep-Cheeps swimming around down there. This level also introduces the Donut Lift blocks, which fall away after you stand on them for a few moments.

You can use a pair of on-track moving platforms to ride out most of the level, but like an idiot I jump off mine to try and go back for some coins. Now I'm stuck leaping from individual block to block, trying not to fall in the water. I picked up a Fire Flower near the start, but aiming is an issue here, particularly when the Cheep-Cheeps start jumping. When the next moving-platform comes up, I take it and start blasting away at the fishies below – briefly turning the level into a primitive version of the “man the turrets!” section of every modern-day shooter.

The pipe at the end (theres a plant in it, of course) spits you out at the goal, but you may want to try for the Leaf waiting in the question block just beyond said pipe – use it to fly straight-up before the goal and score more coins and a hidden 1-Up in the far-left of the sky.

Heh. Star-card number three for me – five more lives to be reckless with.

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The road ahead forks between Level 3-3 and a Mushroom House. Inside the house are the usual three chests, but in this instance they all hold the same prize: a Frog Suit, as this is where you'd get it for the first time if you didn't go to the hidden screen in the previous World. (You can get Frog Suits at the other shops in this world by always picking the chest on the right.)

Do I suit back up? Of course I do.

LEVEL 3-3

Boss Bass. We meet again.

Boss Bass is a giant-scale Cheep-Cheep, and it patrols the water along the bottom of this level like... well, like a giant hungry fish. He can even swallow Mario whole, and it doesn't help that the entire level is a series of small blocks of land bobbing up and down in the ocean. In retrospect, this was not the wisest level to equip a Frog Suit, as it makes you walk awkwardly and prevents running unless you're carrying something.

There's a blue-switch inside the second brick from the end of the first row of bricks above the long island in the middle of the level, which can be triggered by tossing a shell – unless you're suicidal (and mini-sized) and want to try running underneath to hit it from below. I... am not suicidal tonight.

Ahead is our first Propellor Lift – a platform that intermittently spins around like a pinwheel to fling you away. You will come to hate them, as I have hated them for so long. Ahead, another first: the shiny white bricks are Ice Bricks, and can be picked up and tossed like Troopa Shells. Using one to hit the normal brick next to them gets you a switch that'll turn the rows of coins up ahead into a temporary bridge of bricks, making the rest of the level easier to cross...

...or, rather, it would have were I not wearing speed-impeding amphibian cosplay. I barely make it to the pipe at the end intact (there's a 1-Up just beyond there if you want to brave open water, for what it's worth) but succeed in my goal of getting to the, er... goal still dressed like a Frog.

The sun is coming up outside, and ahead lies a Fortress that is rather infamous in Mario lore. It will be saved for tomorrow.

MAY 1, 2012

Today is May Day, also known as International Workers Day and (here in the U.S.) as Law Day, Loyalty Day and Americanization Day at one point or another. Seems as good a moment as any to briefly consider Mario's distinctly working-class character aesthetic.

WORKING CLASS HERO

By now it's common knowledge that Mario's character design, as far back as when he was simply called "Jumpman," came about mostly from graphical necessity: He wears overalls so that you can better see the animation of his arms moving. He has a large mustache so that his nose can be better discerned. He wears a hat because hair would have been problematic to render.

But by happenstance or not, it can't be ignored that these visual details (when combined with the original "Donkey Kong's" building-construction setting and sledgehammer weaponry) added up to a character who fit into a very specific pop-culture archetype: a working-class Italian-American, presumably from New York or some similar large Eastern U.S. metropolis. Intentionally or not, I would contend that Mario's connection to this archetype and, by extension, the powerful cultural feelings it stirs in America and elsewhere is a big part of why the character has become so enduring.

Granted, simply having a hero (superhero?) who goes about the business of slaying The Dragon and rescuing The Princess in the inherently proletariat "uniform" of overalls, boots and a cap is a pretty powerful image in and of itself, especially when you consider his specific career as a plumber means he typically labors mostly out-of-sight often in dealing with less-than-pleasant but incredibly necessary mechanics of modern infrastructure. But making the Mario Bros Italian-Americans adds yet another layer to the symbolism: they aren't just laborers, they're the children (or grandchildren) of immigrants. In an amusing sense, their unlikely second life as heroes of another world serves as an extension of that metaphor; they are now once more a pair of workers trying to make their way in yet another New World.

WORLD 3 – FORTRESS 1

The first of World 3's two(!) Fortresses is the first "puzzle dungeon" in the game – another gauntlet of Thwomps and Boos with the added feature of nine seemingly identical doors along the way. One door takes you to Boom-Boom, the another takes you to a 1-Up, the remaining six drop you into open-space above a huge interior pool. I'm still wearing my Frog Suit, so let's see how long I can keep it – I don't think I've ever beaten a boss while wearing one...

Immediately, you can tell this Fortress is different – the usual empty black backdrop replaced by a pattern of stark onyx brickwork, towering vertical windows, and huge Greek columns. The floor is black and white checkered tiles, identical to the one seen on the Title Screen. The ornate décor makes the fact that I'm still dressed like a cartoon frog even more absurd.

The just-different-enough controls for the land-bound Frog Mario makes negotiating Thwomps that much more difficult as I come to be first of the doors. I figure the best way to refamiliarize myself with the layout of the place (other than looking up a map, which I don't feel like doing yet) is to just go in...

Splash. Right down into the water. The first time I came here, this whole area tripped me out, and I immediately fixated on the two pipes hanging down just above the waters surface – oh, so that's how the water got in here, or maybe how it gets out? A fortress on an tiny island like this one probably gets a flooded basement pretty often, and my father wrestling with our own basement's sump-pump was a fixture of my youth.

The only exit takes you back to the beginning, but a quick swim gives me my directions: it's door number six I want, but door number nine has the bonus stuff...

Damn it! Should've just gone for number two – I time a Thwomp incorrectly and lose my precious Frog powers, again. I get the treasure room, at least... and it's just coins. Phooey. Time to head back for the right door... only to forget my own mental-snapshot of the layout, try a hard turn back and die at the hands (beak?) of a Dry-Bones. For shame, Bob...

Back on the map, a Hammer Brother slips in to block my return to the Fortress. For the first time, the Hammer Battle triggered is the old-fashioned kind: Twin Bros tossing hammers while jumping between two rows of bricks. The reward is a hammer.

Now, back to the bloody Fortress: Thwomps, Boos, Dry-Bones, door number six, Boom-Boom. This is the first Flying Boom-Boom – you'll see

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his arms morph into wings after the first stomp. I don't give him time to take off. From hell's heart I stab at thee, Boom-Boom of the irritating water Fortress...

MAY 2 2012

Only doing the one measly Fortress yesterday bugs me. Hopefully want to squeeze in two levels today, at least.

The road splits again after the Fortress: You can go down to a pair of pipes (one drops you back at the start, the other leads to the second Fortress but is blocked off at this point) or up to 3-4 or 3-5. Both levels lead to the same next slice of the map. The “trick” here is entering/exiting the levels in an order conducive to making that pair of bridges up top lower so you can access the Mushroom House.

LEVEL 3-4

Green hills, blue water, pink sky. The second hill wants to teach you a fun new trick: you have to slide down and then use the momentum coming off the short ramp up at the end to jump high enough to clear the pond. If you can't make it, though, there's a pair of hidden blocks adjacent to the cliff-face you can use to climb up manually.

Three Troopas on the next downward slope. I go for the slide-kill – unnecessarily – and pay for it when my finger slips off the D-Pad and I take a hit. Two Para-Goombas protect a spot below a Pirhana Plant where a Switch waits, yielding a quick buffet of Silver Coins. A Question Block gives up a Fire Flower, which feels odd – the one just before had a Leaf. A queasy, familiar feeling creeps up in me, and the open-ness of the field ahead doesn't help...

...it's as I feared. A few steps later, Lakitu appears in the sky above. Damn it to hell.

Lakitu is yet another Mario-verse mainstay, the bane of many a level in SMB1. A bespectacled Koopa who rides a smiley-face cloud across the sky, he drops Red Eggs which hatch into Spinys – similar to Buzzy Beetles and Troopas save that they have spikes all over their back and can only be hurt by protecticles – although this particular level's variation merely tosses Green Eggs that roll about like deadly bowling-balls rather than hatching. Still, he's a nuisance – and this meandering little level is now a gauntlet.

The first opportunity I have to jump onto a block and meet Lakitu “head-

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on” I take it, bopping him on the head and taking him out for what I know will not be long. It doesn’t need to be – I’m already at the goal – though, before that, I make a quick stop for another 1-Up trick...

Here’s the idea: Near the endpoint of the level there’s a small area where a pair of bricks hover just off the ground, rimmed by a pair of Wood Blocks, a green pipe poking down above the whole scene. The trick is to set a Troopa shell bouncing between the Wood Blocks, stand on the bricks directly under the pipe and let Lakitu throw down eggs (they’ll bounce off the pipe, avoiding you) which the perpetually-bouncing shell will smash into points and lives.

LEVEL 3-5

The level panel is in the middle of the water again, so before heading in I make it a point to go get a Frog Suit from the Mushroom House while the bridges are both down. 3-5 is another “big ocean” level, this one filled with many more obstacles.

The Jelectros (electric-jellyfish) are lethal to the touch, but at least stationary. The Big Bertha (female counterpart to Boss Bass, a giant mama Cheep-Cheep whose mouth conceals a baby that lunges out at you in cartoon mimicry of some species of real fish) and other assorted fish are not, and just like that my Frog Suit is gone. A real bummer, since the level’s main secret is a pipe (the second one on the ocean floor) that only Frog Mario can enter by swimming against the current, leading to a treasure room.

Beyond that it’s a standard “survive the enemies” level, though I maintain that the color-schemes of these water levels are some of the prettiest visuals in the game.



WITHOUT A PADDLE



Right next to 3-5 on the map is a boulder which, if you have a Hammer, you can break and get the small pier on the other side, where a Canoe floats in the water. I’ve got a Hammer, so I take it.

The Canoe is another fun little “because we can” graphical change-up to the World Maps, allowing you access to a pair of islands housing (in total) three Mushroom Houses and two Spade Panels. You can even go all the way over and see the island where the Castle is... but there’s no pier to dock at. Only a pipe...

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LEVEL 3-6

An autoscrolling sky-platform level, and a nasty one at that. At first most of the platforms are either donut lifts or propellers, and then it's multi-path solid walkways with walls set up to crush you against the side of the screen.

As soon as you reach the first walkway, there's a Troopa next to a grounded block to temp you down into a dangerous position, but it's just coins. Directly after that, however, is an Ice Brick you can pick up and ride down to a lower where you can then toss said Brick into a block and grab a Power-Up. If you're already big, it's a Leaf – which will come in handy since the next few jumps are over wide gaps.

The last set of walkways have a cruel trick on the lower level – a set of three Ice Bricks, two of which are above open-air and will drop you to your doom should you accidentally move to pick one up while standing on it. The “safe to grab” one, however, you can use to reveal a nearby Blue Switch to turn the surrounding bricks into coins and a set of coins near the end into bricks. That second part is extremely helpful – otherwise, your only path to the exit-pipe is a deeply untrustworthy propeller.

MAY 3, 2011

Had a productive day earlier (yesterday evening). Impromptu meet-up with my brother led to knocking some key location-shooting off of the Game OverThinker itinerary, and some beer and burgers were shared. I'm a private “handle your shit” guy most of the time, but the chance to hang out with the family members I don't see every day helps “center” me – keep me able to see my own life from the outside where it all looks less casually-apocalyptic.

BRIDGEWORK

Depending on what order you've got the drawbridge-schedule triggering on, you may have to option to skip right to 3-8 here. I don't at the moment, not that I'd be skipping 3-7 anyway – both for writing purposes and because I really like 3-7.

LEVEL 3-7

Suddenly, newness: big blocks of a shape and color not yet seen (two shades of green and a “pattern” of grass-drawings, once again calling up the “theater scenery” allusion) and Spike, a new-to-this-game enemy.

Spike is a great design: a squat, upright-walking green turtle with a black shell, stubby arms, and a puffy, white-lipped mouth that pops open to cartoon-proportions to disgorge spiked balls, which he then throws at you – and since he tips his head straight-up to do so, jumping on him becomes a matter of timing. He also marches straight-ahead like a Goomba, but much faster.

At about midway I come upon a bunch of bricks arranged oddly (for a Mario game) in a solid hovering cluster. Strange brick placement is, of course, a clue that there’s a switch in the area, and that I should resist smashing them all at once in order to get the coins. Just after that, a Troopa and a Spike wandering between two wood blocks – a classic Mario trap (the shell will just bounce back-and-forth between the blocks, turning a minor hazard in a major one) which I fall for. Beyond that, more strange bricks – two rows arranged in horseshoe shapes one above the other. In the far left “tip” of the upper set is a hidden block that triggers a Beanstalk.

I scale the stalk (one thing I dislike about this game is that the “climbing” physics are much too slippery) to a backtrack-running strip of clouds and coins. A block contains (called it!) the illusive switch, and I take a certain satisfaction in falling back down through the cluster of now-transformed bricks (the top left-of-center of which turns out to be a 1-Up).

FYI, if you hop up onto the block where the beanstalk stops and take a flying leap to your right, it’s possible to land on a different, smaller strip of clouds. A hidden Music Block just above it will take you to a Coin Heaven sub-level that gives you a Cloud (a Map Tool that lets you skip a level once) as a present.

WORLD 3 – FORTRESS 2

Ocean Land is the first map to feature two fortresses, this second one being mostly-submerged. Depressingly, I’m all out of Frog Suits...

The first chamber features a pool and a lone pipe, which immediately spits me into a the fully-submerged main area. Nothing too challenging – some spinning orbs, Cheep-Cheeps, and a Flower power-up – and I’m thankful it’s not another puzzle-palace.

The second chamber has a creepy new enemy: Stretch – solid white

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platforms whose surfaces morph into Boo-faces that slink around the edges. It's a nifty idea, playing with the ectoplasmic-origins of Boos, but it must be said that it's one of the few graphical ideas that the 2D 8-bit sprite limitations keep from fully getting the point across. The extra line of white surrounding them, though, helps the effect tremendously; and whatever they look like they make for a surprisingly effective obstacle, forcing you to forgo the "huge the walls" strategy of video game swimming in this era.

The Boom-Boom of this Fortress is another flyer whose room comes with two mid-air blocks just to mess with you. I kill him too fast to find out if it would've made a difference.

There's a Spade-Panel right after the Fortress, and without trying particularly hard I actually manage a complete Mushroom picture for a 2-Up prize. I'm struck by two immediate thoughts: 1) That whole sentence must look ridiculous out-of-context, and 2) That's a happy enough ending for me to call it a night...

MAY 6, 2012

5:09 AM. Looks like I actually called it several nights. The release of "The Avengers," and the subsequent need to see it multiple times with various groups of friends (and on my own, and at pre-release critics screenings) both for work and for pleasure have claimed a few evenings by now.

Having a movie I've been anticipating for about as long as I've been able to form conscious thought just happen is amazing enough – that it's actually a terrific film and something that seems to be really popular with everyone else (it's looking like a REALLY big hit) is a special kind of awesome... I'd always hoped I'd see Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and The Hulk sharing the screen at some point, but I never dared dream that "regular audiences" would be cheering it on as much as I was.

One more "Avengers" observation, since I'm getting the sense that this will end up being one of those "where were you/what were you doing?" pop-culture moments: at this point I've seen the movie five times, and I still have to take everyone else's word for it that Hulk says "Puny god!" after beating up Loki – all five times, the entire theater was laughing/clapping/cheering so hard that I couldn't actually hear the line...

LEVEL 3-8

Another Boss Bass level, only this time the terrain sinks considerably lower into the water and there are narrower platforms and more places to get stuck or exposed. I make the mistake of heading in as Small Mario, and while trying to set a shell up to hit some bricks I slip into the water and get swallowed whole (the “swallowing”, incidentally, makes Boss Bass the only enemy who kills Mario without triggering the classing “fall off the screen” Mario animation). Out of practice, clearly...

Full disclosure: I make two more tries at the level, going in already powered-up as Fire Mario both times – and both times I manage to get swallowed just the same right at the start. I want to blame the slippery climbing physics of the vines (the first groundlocked bricks hides one), but in my heart it feels more like rustiness and distraction – the younger me would be disappointed in himself.

Fourth try, going in just as Super Mario. Dodge the fish, up the vine, get the Fire Flower... immediately stop in my tracks and blast Boss Bass with fireballs (“Smile, you son of a bitch!”) just to show the bastard I can. Take THAT, stupid fish! Granted, he’ll be back moments later... but for those moments, you feel as close to “bad-ass” as one can feel when acting out the digital adventures of a cartoon plumber fighting magical turtles.

This strikes me as one of the rare instances in a Golden Age platformer where the “hazard” of a level is premised more on frustrating the player emotionally and/or psychologically instead of cognitively – it’s actually NOT all that hard to avoid Boss Bass, get to the end of the level and be done with it... but, dammit, Boss Bass is such an annoying enemy, and killing him is so deeply satisfying, that you almost can’t help but put yourself in mortal peril to do it.

Right near the end is a spot where you can either take the high or low road marked by a wooden platform that – in a nice little graphical touch – is animated to “float” on the water. Taking the below road leads to a blue switch, the purpose of which is to turn the levels bricks into coins as this is another “get 44 coins to trigger the white mushroom house” level.

A short “did I miss anything?” trip to the web informs me of a trick I honestly don’t think I knew before: you can also take final revenge on Boss Bass by sending a Troopa shell into a bouncing loop between the switch and the wall, racking up points and 1-Ups as it repeatedly kills the endlessly respawning fishy bastard. I decide to backtrack and give it a try... and am gobbled up three more times for my hubris. Obviously, this is not my night.

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Honestly, at the start of this project it wasn't Water Land that I thought would end up taking up a big stretch of time (in terms of days). I almost don't want to think about how many day-marks will be logged on the more complicated/difficult areas to come...

LEVEL 3-9

3-9 begins, deceptively, in a standard Overworld level designed in the same manner as most of those in Grass Land but with a more punishing layout of enemies – right away I'm confronted with a downward-lunging Piranha plant opposite a Bullet Bill cannon with a row of bricks laid out above that A) impedes your ability to high-jump the bullets and B) eggs you on to jump up seeking hidden treasures. As a final jab, a Mother Para-Goomba hovers overhead, dropping her little ones which can only be shrugged off by more hazardous (given the bullets) jumping – the idea being to let her land on the bricks then smash her from below.

One step beyond this precarious bottleneck (the power-up is in the sixth block from the left, if you so dare) though, is the true “legacy” moment of 3-9 – a moment where Super Mario Bros canon (such as it is) changes forever...



THE DREAM IS ALIVE



Encountered early in Level 3-9 are Bob-Ombs – walking cartoon bombs that “arm” when jumped upon and begin to flash red before exploding, though they can be picked up and thrown like a Troopa shell before that. Their appearance in this level is of tremendous importance to the Mario Bros canon, as it makes them the first new characters to return from “Super Mario Bros 2” (the American one) and for a short while the only tangible thing that linked that game to the rest of the series. (ShyGuys, the main “foot-soldier” enemy of SMB2, would not rejoin the series until “Yoshi's Island” several years later.)

As mentioned before, the American/Western “SMB2” began life as another Miyamoto-developed Famicom game called “Doki-Doki Panic” whose player characters were re-skinned into

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Mario and friends because the original Japanese SMB2 (released to the west much later as “The Lost Levels”) was deemed unfit/too difficult for U.S. audiences at the time. The story of SMB2 has the action taking place in a “Dream World,” but with various indications that it may not be entirely a dream. Now, here in 3-9, the Bob-Ombs make it as official as it’s going to get: whether originating in SubCon (dream world) or Mushroom Kingdom, Bob-Ombs (which have joined Troopas and Goombas in the ranks of iconic must-have Mario enemies) exist in both worlds. It was also, at the time, the most famous example of a supporting character making the jump from one game to an entirely different franchise, as Bob-Omb was created for the Doki-Doki “universe” but is now a fixture of Mario’s. (Previous instances included Data East’s franchise-hopping pseudo-mascot Karnov and enemy sprites being shared by Taito’s “Bubble Bobble” and “Fairyland Story” games.)

Noteworthy as their appearance may be, these first few Bob-Ombs are here mostly to give you a chance to familiarize yourself with the timing of their explosions. Just beyond them, however, is one of my favorite “infinite 1-Ups” spots: two ground-level Cannons fire Bullet Bills toward one-another, separated by a column of bricks. The idea, clearly, is to bring the Troopa shell from the start of the level to smash the bricks, but if you can do so then immediately hop onto the overhead platforms so that the shell doesn’t vanish off the screen it will become trapped between the canons, repeatedly killing bills and quickly racking up points and lives.

Clearing the brick column grants access to the pipe, which drops you down into 3-9’s great secret: a subterranean lake that runs below most of the level. Linear instinct says to keep going right, but memory tells me to go left... yes, there is a pipe, and it drops me down into a room of metal walls and coins – wait! An opening to the right! I steer my fall into it and am confronted with another plus-size Question Block. Striking it shakes the room, and my prize is... a Frog Suit! Happy day!

The exit pipe deposits me back into the water, halfway to the Level’s end (there are only some ice blocks and a 1-Up in the overworld above this part, but if you want to go the next upward-leading pipe will take you) and I resolve to make it out with my last Frog Suit intact. A pair of patrolling Cheep-Cheeps don’t make it easy, but for a change my stealth does not betray me.

SUCCESS! I will, at last, get to take Frog Mario onto the Airship...

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SUNDAY, MAY 13

Yup. Almost an entire week without coming back to the game. So, here's what happened...

Honestly, this week was going to be sparse because bigger things had to take precedence – yesterday, my sister graduated from college, and along with taking up a whole day it required travel and preparations that pushed all my deadlined projects into even higher priority than usual. But the length of the delay? That's all on me...

MISTAKES WERE MADE

That part about being excited to bring a Frog Suit onto an airship you read a moment ago? Well, in my excitement (and under the influence of a generously-portioned beer/Bacardi cocktail) I managed to turn off the console without properly pausing (the Wii effectively holds your place in Virtual Console games if you go back to the main menu before powering down) which means I'd effectively ended my game and deleted my progress.

Aside from being mildly annoying, this left me with a conundrum: Since there's no "leveling" system in SMB3 – Mario has no "stats" to be raised or altered over the course of play – I could easily get back to that point in relatively the same state I was and just keep going as though nothing had happened, but would that turn this whole exercise artificial and pointless?

Ultimately, since the whole point is to chronicle my playthrough mistakes-and-all, I've decided to acknowledge it here. After all, accidentally powering-off and having to start over again was a common problem in the youthful gaming circumstances I'm attempting to replicate here...

WORLD 3 – AIRSHIP

At first glance Water Land's transformed King looks like another Koopa variant (green skin, white shell), but on closer inspection he's something slightly different: his pronounced white "beak" and messy ring of black hair betray him as a Kappa – a water-spirit of Japanese mythology typically depicted with concave "bowl"-shaped skulls that fill with water and let them breath on land. This makes him one of the Mario series' relatively few explicit references to it's own Japanese-produced origins (the other being the

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later presence of the Tanooki Suit).

Already, taking the Frog Suit with me pays off as it's hilarious to see Frog Mario speed-hopping to catch the anchor to the Airship, which this time sails against a pink sky (probably a reference to its captain, Wendy O. Koopa, being the game's sole female boss). Wendy's Airship is easily a major jump in challenge-level from the previous two, combining the hail-of-gunfire hazards of the first with the crush-you-with-autoscrolling layout of the second. Since I'm trying to keep my Frog powers, it's doubly-difficult.

First up, a row of Rocky-Wrench's flanked by a Bullet Bill canon. The thrown wrenches are actually a more potent hazard, as they are small and slow-moving enough to hang around like semi-permanent impediments at times. Beyond them, a trap – you have to go down and under a row of three two-directional diagonal-firing canons, with the tease of a Question Block up above at the end with a Bullet Bill trained right at you. After the canon, a gauntlet area with canons firing from above AND below, but if you time a bounce off of a cannonball correctly you can hop up above this killing-box and have an easier time of it.

So far, so good – I even still have my beloved froggy pajamas. But up ahead is the spot I've been dreading: the first appearance of Fire Jets – which spew out a jet-engine-style burst of flame on and off – as an obstacle. Above them is stretched a “screw pole” with a strip of blue Bolt Lifts hooked to it. By jumping up and down on said bolts you can make them turn and move the strip across the pole. The animation used to give the spinning-bolts the illusion of 3D looks great, but the actual mechanic is a deathtrap – stand there even a moment too long and you'll be spun right down into the path of the flames.

After the bolt-jumping it appears my “above path” is blocked by a tower, but I remember this part – unlike an earlier tower that did go all the way up, this one you can jump offscreen and “clear” if you can get enough height. Fortunately, I'm still dressed like a frog...

Hah! I made it – time to see if I can kill Wendy O. Koopa and keep my frog suit!

...I can't. Candy ring got me. Forgot about those. Wendy is the first of the Koopa Kids to attack with something other than wand beams – she tosses candy rings (one for each time you hit her) that bounce around the room as an additional hazard. She also tends to dodge backwards after a hit, which can throw you off if your strategy is to immediately re-attack like you were fighting a Boom-Boom.

Wendy O. Koopa's design (the name is yet another rock-music allusion, this time to 80s cult-rock icon Wendy O. Williams) is another instance where

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8-bit graphical limits don't quite hit the mark, unfortunately: depicted in the official game art as a sassy evil-girl caricature (loud makeup, comically big lashes, a massive hair-bow, and balancing on tiny high-heels) the in-game sprite of Wendy looks more like an angry old lady with a bouffant hairdo.

So, then, I don't get to see Wendy fall to a Frog, but I beat her all the same. The restored King of Water Land appears to have Mario's head, but with orange skin. One more world saved, one more letter from Peach: "the White Block contains magic powers that will enable you to defeat your enemies." Say what? Is she talking about Music Blocks? Ice Blocks?

DISTANT SHORES

It's appropriate that Super Mario Bros 3 devotes an entire level (the largest yet) to water, since the presence of separate "water levels" was one of the groundbreaking features of the original SMB. The water and the presence of other terrain-altering hazards like Boss Bass inject fresh twists into the platforming, and the Frog Suit – as I may have mentioned a few times – is incredibly fun to use..

Beyond that, the "change the game, just add water" formula of World 3's level design is a further indicator of just how much variety the game is planning to squeeze out of the Mario formula. Somewhere in the distance lies Giant Land, where every "rule" of physics and spatial-relation you've come to rely on will be turned on its head...



WORLD 4: GIANT LAND



The actual mechanics of World 4 – that it features enemies, obstacles and portions of scenery blown up to giant size – are meant to be a surprise (“Holy crap! Why is everything big!!?”) that jumps out at you upon entering Level 4-1. But once you’re aware of that fact you might notice that the Map Screen does subtly tease the truth: You begin on a peninsula cut off from the main island, with pipes (instead of a direct walkway) your only way of traveling there. The peninsula is decorated with three of the palm trees you’ve been seeing since World 2... but the already-visible “trees” of the main island are in fact enormous flowers.

Apart from that detail, the World 4 map is deceptively conventional looking, though it does keep with the area’s general theme of messing around with the sense of scale and spatial-relations you were just starting to get the hang of by reversing the “flow” of your travel route: this is the first map where the “order” of levels and castles proceeds right-to-left instead of the other way around.

LEVEL 4-1

I first glimpsed Giant Land, briefly, while watching “The Wizard;” but at the time everything else was so much sensory-overload that the curiously-larger enemies didn’t really register. The first time I entered Level 4-1, though? Mind. Blown.

Giant Land is all about giving now-familiar elements of the game a “tweak” by making them bigger – the giant-scale Goombas and Troopas have the same weaknesses and physics as their normal-sized cousins, but having them dwarf even big Mario changes the whole dynamic. Even today, a plus-sized Troopa shell careening toward me at high-speed throws me off my rhythm, and it’s still kind of delightful seeing Mario leap into the mouth of gigantic pipe, or comparatively-tiny Power-Ups being released from HUGE blocks, or brick-blocks the size of a house being smashed with a single jump.

There are actually only a handful of “inflated” images on display – Goombas, Troopas and Piranha Plants are the only enemies to get wholly-new giant-size sprites, while “terrain” sprites like blocks and ground are simply upscales of the normal sprites. Elsewhere, the “giant” theme is carried through by the presence of the naturally-massive Sledge Bros. in the place of Hammer Bros, or lakes stocked with Big Berthas instead of just Cheep-

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Cheeps.

4-1's main layout is a learning-course for Giant Land's enemy-interaction tricks: the chance to practice stomping Giant Goombas, negotiating Giant Troopas, and learning the hard way that Giant Piranha Plants don't hide in the pipe just because you stand near it like the regular-sized ones do. Mid-level is another strange new feature not related to gigantism: Two pipes sticking down from above pouring a waterfall into two pipes below. Swimming through the water, I notice a cute animation detail of water splashing on Mario's head.

"Mystery water from nowhere" is, of course, a clue for investigation: using the Raccoon Tail to smash some bricks up ahead and clear some room to take flight, I (re)-discover that the waterfall pours down from a lake floating in the sky – one you can swim up the waterfall into. On the left hand of this lake is a pipe that leads to a treasure-chamber where two Big Berthas guard 1-Ups and coins.

Beyond that it's all a matter of block-jumping and plant-avoiding (gotta love the one normal-size Piranha Plant living in a giant pipe) to the end.

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It bothers me that I was only able to scratch the surface of Giant Land last time, owing to the extra time it took to re-start for World 3. My plan is to make it up to myself for playing through as much of World 4 as I can from this point out.

ROCK BLOCKED

Right next to Level 4-1 on the map is a Toad House that is blocked by a boulder, meaning that you can only get to it if you've brought a Hammer with you. I have not, and as there's nowhere in World 4 to get a Hammer I am now saddened – that Toad House, I remember, contains the rare and wonderful Tanooki Suit...

LEVEL 4-2

Two levels in, and Giant Land continues to play around with the "rules" of its own game's level design – the whole run is made up of giant pipes and blocks (plus the occasional bridge) rising up and down out of the water... but instead of Boss Bass it's regular sized Cheep-Cheeps bobbing along the surface waiting to strike. They also make flying leaps out of the water, a

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throwback to the infamous “Flying Fish” levels of the original SMB.

If it hasn't already “sunk in” that giant Piranha Plants don't conform to the “stand by the pipe and they won't come out” rule that the smaller ones do, it will after running this gauntlet. The ice-blocks covering up the “mouth” of the fifth pipe make it seem like you can go down it, but they're really there so you can hit the Question Block up ahead and get better at tossing stuff at Cheep-Cheeps.

At mid-level there's a floating vertical strip of bricks stuck between wooded-blocks adjacent to a Switch – identifying this as another “get a certain number of coins (24, in this case) to get the White Mushroom House” level. Grabbing as many as I can, I dash through the final barrage of leaping fish (man, was I not thrilled to see this level-style make a comeback back in '89...) and wind up with a Star Card for my bonus.

STRANGE AND WONDERFUL

...Holy hell, I did it! Back on the map and “poof!”, out of nowhere comes the White Mushroom House. “Hello! You've found my shop of strange and wonderful things!,” exclaims the Toad inside before gifting me with an Anchor. Not necessarily my favorite rare item, but it's still fun to finally trigger one of these damn things.

FAT CHANCE

Entering and exiting the White Toad House has caused one of the wandering Hammer Bros to land between me and 4-3, so it's time to engage. This being Giant Land, my opponent is a Sledge Brother: a taller, fatter Hammer Brother (the artwork of it's sprite is delightfully chubby-looking) and the only “giant” enemy who functions different from his normal counterpart – in addition to hammer-tossing, he can stomp the ground to cause a tremor that momentarily freezes Mario in place. This move would later be christened “The Ground Pound” and become a staple maneuver of both heroes and villains in subsequent games in the series.

Beating the first Sledge Bros encounter wins me a cloud, and a subsequent visit to the nearby Toad House nets a fire-flower. Onward to 4-3...

LEVEL 4-3

A loud, familiar stomping sound rumbles as I enter the level. The ground shakes beneath my feet, and I am briefly unable to move. A few steps ahead

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the culprit lurches into view: another Sledge Bother. Though I've already encountered them on this playthrough, 4-3 is clearly meant as the general "debut" of the character, and it's a grandly-staged reveal: The stomp, the inexplicable earthquake, and finally the monster – all very reminiscent of the way Bowser's fire-breath would precede his appearance in SMB1.

The first Sledge I dodge by running under his jump, but the second catches me off-guard and kills me with a shower of hammers. No big deal, plenty of lives...

...Damn it! Now the first one gets me when I hesitate for just a moment while trying to dash beneath him. Alright, no more mister nice guy – I arm up with a Fire Flower this time, and it's greatly satisfying to see the big oafs brought low by a single fireball. Ahead is a pipe, leading to the cavern which comprises the bulk of the level.

This time around it's the space that's giant-sized. Previous cavern/underworld levels have emphasized a claustrophobic tunnel-crawl feel, but this one is all about high ceilings and platforms hanging above wide-open chasms – with sloped inclines leading to pits as the main new "now learn to deal with this" design-feature. Early on the annoying ceiling-walking Buzzy Beetles make a return appearance, which is as close as you're going to get to a "beware of falling objects" sign in this game.

After the second chasm is a "runway" with just enough space for me to take off and fly (there was a Leaf in the first "lone" Question Block) but a falling Spiny (that's new!) steals my power away. Ironically, his placement is meant as a subtle hint that there's probably something worth flying up there to find (coins, it turns out). After that, a narrow passage which aims to steer you into Spiny-related injury with a 1-Up that glides along the upper level once released.

The exit is preceded by four triangular mounds above an open deadfall, one of which has a pair of those "bouncy" Wood Blocks positioned so as to bounce you into the abyss if you rush into them hastily. Overall, this is the "hardest" cave level the game has yet offered... but it won't stay that way.

WORLD 4 – FORTRESS 1

Climbing up a flight of stairs, I find a narrow walkway lit by two candles. As I pass beneath, the tiny flames sprout legs, hop off, and begin to chase me! Hot Foot (who stops in his tracks if you face him, just like a Boo) makes his first appearance. It's a great, simple retro-cartoon throwback visual that reaffirms the Mario series' pop-cultural ties to the golden age of animation. The Fortress's other new hazard (horizontal-attacking Thwomps)

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are significantly less delightful...

Midpoint is a row of pipes. By what feels an awful lot like muscle-memory at this point, I duck down the center one and land in a narrow underground passage. There's a power-up in a row of Blocks – a Fire Flower. Amusingly, all the enemies down here with me (several Dry Bones and a Boo) are fireproof. Two invisible blocks lead the way out, leaving me at what I sense is near the end of the actual Fortress. For completion's sake, I opt to backtrack just in case there's anything interesting or useful I missed.

Good news: my backtracking earns me a Super Leaf. Bad news: trying to get back past the last horizontal Thwomp trap takes it away, leaving me relatively offense-less against Boom-Boom. At least this one doesn't fly, for a change – though he's a jumper, and the platform in the middle of the room makes my own jumping difficult... but I manage to take him down.

LEVEL 4-4

World 4 is a different kind of world, and 4-4 is a different kind of swimming level: another big, open ocean, but with movement impeded by huge wood blocks and coral growths. Instead of being filled with aquatic life, your main enemies are Spiny Eggs (and, thus, Spinys) being rained down from above by Lakitu. It's effectively the first time in a Mario game where surface enemies follow you into the water – the 2D side-scroller version of that scene in “Saving Private Ryan” that made a big point of reminding audiences that ducking under water won't protect you from gunfire.

Diving to the bottom straight-away, I find two pipes at the far-left of the ocean floor – one facing down and another facing up - “blocking” the way to the first with a powerful upward-running current. Clearly, something good is hidden on the other side of the down-facing pipe, but only the Frog Suit will let you swim through the current to get at it (this is one of the only points in the game that can only be accessed in one way requiring a specific Power-Up), and I'm fresh out. So I'm not getting in there... unless an exploitable glitch from the original NES release has been preserved in the “Virtual Console” port I'm playing...



BENEVOLENT BUGS



Yes, in the first NES release of the game, it was possible to slip through the water-jet “barrier” here without Frog Power: Up and to the right just below the surface is a single question-block. The “trick” was to stand on this and then walk off, falling diagonally down and to the left toward the two pipes. Timed and positioned properly, you’d slip through the water current and be able to reach the “blocked” pipe.

This is another relic of the Golden Age: back when you couldn’t just “patch” a game, a significant bug, flaw or programming error would slip through into final release. In some cases, these could be “game breakers” that could ruin a title, but in most cases it was either a mild annoyance or – in this case – became a “secret trick” shared among gamers through newsletters and fan-magazines.

This particular glitch, for what it’s worth, exists only in the original NES version of SMB3 and the Wii Virtual Console port. Re-released versions like those found in “Super Mario All-Stars” or the “Super Mario Advance” GameBoy Advance titles “corrected” it.

...Hah! It works! Long live exploitable glitches! The pipe leads to a terrific little treasure room where two chambers contain two Switches – one delivering a cache of Silver Coins, the other Gold.

Exiting the secret room places me back out in open-water – now it’s a traditional Spiny Egg gauntlet run, but underwater. The effect of the eggs hitting the water and drifting down slowly is actually an arresting visual, and having to swim to avoid slowly-falling hazards is a wholly new “feel” for a Mario level – briefly giving me the sensation of playing a “bullet hell” shoot-em-up rather than a platformer.

I seem to have two main options – stay near the surface where I can at least see where the Eggs are coming from, or dive to the bottom where I have more room to maneuver but less idea where the attacks are coming from. I opt for the bottom, where at least I’ll have the ability to take cover under the wooden blocks at times... and it pays off.

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SLEDGE AGAIN

After exiting 4-4, I stop into a Toad House and pick up a mushroom. Not exactly a great prize, and for my trouble both Hammer Bros have moved into my path. Both of them are Sledge Bros; one of which kills me twice but gives up a P-Wing, while the other goes down easy and yields a Star Man.

Up ahead the road forks – you only HAVE to clear 4-5 or 4-6 (as opposed to both of them) to reach the second Fortress (which, in turn, must be cleared to reach the Castle). I'm aiming to clear both, of course, but the key difference is that 4-5 is an easier level but only blocks the way to a Spade Panel while 4-6 is more challenging but will let you reach a Red Toad House.

LEVEL 4-5

Back on dry land, and back to battling with Giant Troopas... a battle I quickly lose this time, at least at first. It really does mess with your sense of movement to have them so big but still moving with the same physics as before.

After scaling the tower of stairs and making a few pointless (but fun) attempts at jumping onto one of the giant-size floating Clouds, I head right and into a hail of what first looks like Bullet Bill gunfire... but these Bills are different. They flash red, and when they miss you they turn around in mid-air to try again! Missile Bill – SMB3's Mario-seeking munition – takes his first bow.

The first three Missile Canons are easily avoided (they can only chase you sideways, not up and down thankfully), but the fourth is a real bugger: placed at ground-level on a tiny two-block platform above a wide chasm, opposite a pipe holding a Giant Piranha Plant. Standing against or on top of the Cannon keeps it from firing, but once you jump away toward the pipe it's going to start up again. Up ahead: Six more Cannons of varying heights, filling the air with sentient lead - but my eyes are drawn skyward.

At the very top of the screen, just barely visible, is the bottom of a single hovering Brick Block placed so that you can strike it by standing on the second canon and bouncing off the Missiles fired by the third. It takes a few tries, but I make it work and hear the welcome sound of a Beanstalk sprouting from that block offscreen. Another well-timed bounce – this time starting from the top of Canon #3 – should get me up there...

...And then the previously-lamented slippery mechanics of vine-climbing send me falling back down into the line of fire. Dead. Crud.

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Round two. This time I make sure to collect and keep Power-Ups as I move forward, but all I get is a Fire Flower – ineffective against Bills. Back to that “hidden” block... back to jumping toward a vine I can’t see... success! Whatever is up there, it will soon be mine!

The beanstalk leads to a pipe, which in turn leads to a Secret Room with bricks, a Switch, and a giant Question Block. I already remember what’s in here, and I’m still excited. I strike the block, and the screen trembles as though hit by a mini-earthquake as what appears to be a small brown stuffed animal emerges... The Tanooki Suit!

There’ll be time to elaborate on the sheer awesomeness of the Tanooki Suit in a bit; for now its first benefit is apparent immediately: rather than just sporting the ears and tail, Mario is now wearing a full-body costume of what most Westerners (including my younger self) would assume is a Raccoon. Otherwise, it works just like having the normal Raccoon tail, but with one value-added feature: holding down and “B” turns Mario into an invincible (and curiously Eastern-looking) statue for five seconds.

Armed with my new power, I strike the switch – turning the bricks into coins – and then hurry back outside with the timer still ticking, which it turns out means that a set of Silver Coins are waiting for me in mid-air during my tail-enabled slow descent. Obviously the Tanooki’s statue power would be of use against the barrage of gunfire below, but I’d rather not risk losing the power before I get a chance to try it out. The goal is right there, anyway... and as icing on the cake I snag my third Star Card in a row for a 5-Up.



LEGENDARY BEAST



The Tanooki Suit is easily my favorite Mario power-up ever, and I maintain that its very existence is the ultimate symbol of everything right about “Super Mario Bros 3.”

Games of this era – particularly top-tier first-party titles – tended to be about straining against the limits of whatever technology was in play. The NES, despite being far and away the sales leader of its era, was a technological dinosaur by 1989; dwarfed in graphical and processing power by 16-bit rivals like the Sega Genesis and TurboGrafx16. As such, it wasn’t uncommon to see designers pushing graphic and sound capabilities right to the edge in order to compete, which often led to games that were big on visual beauty but short on content or gameplay variety. SMB3 takes the opposite approach, employing deceptively-simple cartoon-style

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graphics (large spaces of solid color, often “drawn” with stark black outlines) in exchange for a massive, sprawling world that’s so big and has so much room to move around in that it can “afford” to do things just for kicks. In other games it might have been seen as a waste of precious data to include two different versions of the same item (Tanooki Mario and Raccoon Mario are identical save for appearance and Tanooki’s statue-power) “just because,” but SMB3 does so comfortably.

As a child growing up in the U.S., I’d always assumed that Tanooki Mario was wearing a Raccoon costume – having never heard of a tanuki and having grown accustomed to “ordinary” items, enemies, and objects in video games having strange-sounding Japanese names. But tanukis are actually Japanese raccoon-dogs – so named for the resemblance they bear to raccoons, though they aren’t related. Supernaturally-powered versions of these animals, “Bake-Danuki,” are fixtures of Japanese folklore; alternately seen as animal spirits of tremendous power or as mischievous “yokai” (monsters) depending on the era and region.

Various shrines and holy places throughout Japan, most often in remote areas, are decorated with tanuki statues often said to contain a genuine spirit-animal in hiding and/or slumber; hence Tanooki Mario’s statue-transformation. Interestingly, while the tradition of tanuki-deities predates (and is said to have been suppressed-by) the arrival of Buddhism to Japan, Mario in statue-form makes visual reference to Jizo-Bostasu – the Japanese incarnation of the venerated bodhisattva Ksitigarbha.

LEVEL 4-6

Providing you don’t simply skip it and head directly for the Second Fortress after 4-5, Level 4-6 is your last “normal” level in Giant Land – except there’s nothing normal about it. In an inspired bit of playful design, this otherwise standard platforming level features a pair of doors which – instead of leading to interior rooms or alternate paths – transport you to and from an alternate version of the level where the enemies are no longer giant-sized and the placement of items within blocks has changed. I remember as a kid actually dying via the clock running out the first time I played this level, as I was having so much fun making the world change back and forth...

There are more giant enemies grouped together here than in the other

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levels, and I can already feel myself being overcautious for fear of losing my beloved Tanooki Suit. The first important landmark to be seen is the floating square-outline made of bricks: on the “giant side” there’s a 1-Up in the upper right-hand corner, while on “small side” it’s a Star-Man at the lower-left. As a result of the big/small twist to the level design, we’re here treated to the sight of a Giant Piranha Plant living in a normal-sized pipe – which actually makes it look a lot more menacing.

Up ahead at the pastel-colored scenery blocks is the first door – I take it, turning the enemies small and thus making the loss of my costume that much less likely. The Question Block spits out a Leaf – which I narrowly avoid grabbing on pure instinct. That was close – I’d have been furious to lose Tanooki so foolishly. Still, the Leaf is a clue that I should probably take flight anyway; and as cool as Mario flying looks in general it’s that much cooler as Tanooki Mario. On a row of clouds in the sky above I find coins... though had I taken wing on “giant-side” there would also have been a hidden 1-Up.

Back on the ground (and switching back to “giant side” for the visual kicks), a Troopa patrols between two pipes. Usually that means there’s a hidden block he’s guarding, so I go for it – avoiding the sentry and jumping next to the pipe. As it turns out, there are three invisible blocks... which bounces me down into the path of the Troopa. Stupid mistake. Stupid Bob.

Just like that, my Tanooki Suit is gone. Genuine anger – expletives, fist-pounding, self-hatred. It’s a blind angry rush to the end now – smashing Troopas, charging across the brick-platforms stretching over the canyon... my irritation soothed only by the reminder that there is a Red Toad House waiting for me on the other side, and maybe it holds a replacement for my furry friend...

DENIED

Completing 4-6 does indeed open my path to a Red Toad House, and it does indeed contain a Tanooki Suit among its three randomly-awarded Power-Ups... but it’s not the one I get. Just a regular old Super Leaf – phooey.

WORLD 4 – FORTRESS 2

Still smarting over the loss of Tanooki Power, I ascend the stairs and survey the path ahead of me. “Path” turns out to be a poor word-choice – the first leg of this Fortress is a vast lake of boiling lava, and the platforms spread out above it are all comprised of Donut Lifts.

The fifth platform is longer than the others (and is patrolled by a Dry-

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Bones) because a running start is needed to leap to the sixth. If you haven't already worked out the precise amount of time you have before Donut Lifts fall, now would be the time to figure it out – because the seventh platform is a lot smaller and the jump to number eight is A LOT more extreme. I'm actually kind of impressed that I pull it off on the first try...

The lava-field now gives way to a tight corridor crawling with Dry-Bones. A block at the end of the hall hides a P-Switch, which materializes a set of Silver Coins arranged in such a way as to suggest an invisible door. Hm...

The “door-shaped space” is, in fact, a door – but unlike other Secret Rooms in previous Fortresses this is no shortcut. It's a lengthy detour, beginning at the bottom of a huge vertical shaft packed with pipes (“plumbing” for the lava chamber, perhaps?) that does eventually lead to some items; but more important gives us the opportunity to practice some new skills we'll need later on: working with Directional Lifts.

Directional Lifts are rectangular platforms decorated with arrows which, when stood on, produce a ghostly copy of themselves that carries you in whatever direction the arrow had been pointing until it or you makes contact with something solid. The first three are all “up arrows,” leading up into the densest grouping of pipes with the third actually rising straight-up between a pair of eagerly-snapping Piranha Plants. The only way to proceed now is through the two down-facing pipes – but which one?

I choose the second (left-to-right) pipe, which leads right up to a Fire Flower – good decision. From the now-empty block I jump onto the pipe at the right, as its path curves down and to the right to deposit me where I need to go (the first pipe down below goes to the same place, just by skipping the Power-Up). This marks the first point (chronologically) in a Mario game where multi-directional pipe-travel has been visualized by moving the whole screen rather than just “cutting” to your emergence on the other side.

The upward-leading pipe in the center of the “loop” is my target, and it leads up to one more directional lift – this one marked not by an arrow, but an Exclamation Point. You can “steer” this variety by changing its direction when you jump, which takes some getting used to. Having not done this area in awhile, it takes me two tries to get all the way up through the two narrow passages (one requiring a vertical move left, the other right) to find the exit.

The reward for the detour is well worth it, though – a treasure room with coins and invisible blocks (in the air to the right of the exit pipe) with a secret 1-Up, followed by a second treasure room where a Giant Question Block tosses out three 1-Ups and a brick-blocked/Raccoon-accessible upper passage hides a cache of coins. After that it's time to fight Boom-Boom again.

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This time his chamber is at the bottom of a pit instead of at the end of a hall, which makes this manifestation of him feel more like a caged monster being used as a trap rather than the “master” of the Fortress. He still dies, all the same.

WORLD 4 - AIRSHIP

Whoa... am I really about the clear all of World 4 in a single night? The sense of accomplishment has me a little giddy as I head into the castle. I'd hoped to take a Tanooki Suit into this Airship, but then all that... other... stuff happened. The King has been transformed into a diminutive doppelganger for Godzilla, which makes me laugh the moment I see him – something about the stumpy little arms and the staring-off-into-space “expression.” The designs for the transformed kings are actually uniformly-excellent and among the best-looking sprites in the game, partially because they're among the only ones “drawn” from something other than a direct-profile perspective.

The Airship itself offers a big gameplay change-up – there are no Cannons, Bullet-Bills, or other enemies to be seen – instead, this one is all about the Flame Jets. Down below I see the kind of ridged poles that hold up Bolt Lifts, and even though they're just a holding up propeller decorations my heart sinks – I hate using Bolt Lifts.

Fortunately, I don't have to: the only reason to use the wide Bolt Lift up ahead is to avoid having to deal with a row of upward-aimed Flame Jets, and I don't mind jumping over those – though I'm more cautious than usual not wanting to lose the Fire Mario powers I came in with...

Not cautious enough, it turns out, as I lose them a moment later when trapped in a spot where a down and left-facing Flame Jet face one-another.

The flame-jets do make the rest of the level a royal pain (especially since I forget myself and take the more-dangerous low-road) despite the lack of any other hazards. They're the first hazard/enemy that can turn a significant amount of air/ground area deadly for an extended period, since even Chain-Chomps are only lethal at the head – you can pass through their chain “body.”

The master of this Ship is Iggy Koopa – named for punk rock legend Iggy Pop – whose in-game sprite sports a white mohawk instead of the rainbow-colored one he's given in most of his official promotional images, and he's also colored a striking hue of dark blue that isn't used much in the rest of the game despite being green/brown like the rest of the Koopa family in the rest of his depictions. Iggy is faster than his siblings, both in movement and in the frequency of his magic-blasts, but my luck has turned around – three quick hits and he's gone, the fastest I've dispatched any Koopaling

since Larry back in World 1.

The untransformed king of Giant Land is a chubby, shirtless guy in a T.E. Lawrence head wrap. I feel like him not being a giant of some kind is missed-opportunity – it'd be hilarious to just see a massive foot filling the screen, rather than this fellow.

THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Did I really clear all but the entirety of a World in a single sitting? I did, and it's actually left me a little melancholy... I'd have gladly played through another few dozen giant-themed worlds, and I'm halfway-tempted to start over just to play through these ones again.

I'm always sad to leave Giant Land, because it's largely the last I'll be seeing of the scaled-up blocks and the plus-sized enemies. It's not just a fun gameplay change – the “big-ness” of the characters allowed for the most-detailed in-game images of classic enemies like Goombas and Troopas to date, and it's a simple but serious power-trip to smash blocks literally four times your size with a single hit.

But, done is done. There will be no giants in the next World, where an inverted sense of scale will be replaced by an inverted sense of gravity and stability – Sky Land beckons...

WORLD 5: SKY LAND

THURSDAY, MAY 17

Took a bit of a break after the marathon that was the previous session. Hoping to settle back into a more contemplative, relaxed pace for a while... which will probably not happen, given that Worlds and Levels both begin to get progressively more difficult from this point on.

Something isn't right. That's what World 5's Map says to you, as soon as you enter. The music is upbeat, but not nearly as "groovy" as levels past. And it seems bizarrely empty: less than a handful of levels, only one fortress, only one Hammer Bros... and no Castle. Instead, just a strange-looking Tower - rendered in a spiral shape that recalls a Ziggurat or the Biblical "Tower of Babel" - looms ominously in the distance, while a huge puffy white cloud hovers high above the bottom righthand corner of the screen. As a final touch of unease, the bushes aren't dancing.

LEVEL 5-1

5-1 is a level I remember vividly for its unusual design - a full half of the level is covered by a "dome" of steel blocks that must be scaled - which in terms of this exercise I want to explore fully. So I decide to head in using one of the P-Wings I've managed to keep in storage thus far. The first thing visitors to 5-1 are confronted with is a new enemy, Buster Beetle, who looks like an upright-walking Buzzy with usable arms. Strangely, his signature ability - he can lift and throw the same objects Mario can - isn't used in this level; a rare case of an enemy effectively being "teased."

Even if Buster could toss something at me, he's not my concern given the P-Wing's permanent flight power. My memory turns out to be correct: there's a skybound pipe hanging above the very beginning of the level, which typically requires a much more complicated method of access. The first wooden block and the first question block hold power-ups (Leafs, providing you're Big at the time) but are both guarded by Chain-Chomps, while the second question block and the following row of question blocks hold Star Men. The idea is to get to the midpoint of the dome and work backwards,

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using Star Man invulnerability to collect the Leaf, clear the bricks to make a runway at the start, and fly straight up... no small feat, considering that the dome is patrolled by Munchers – a small white breed of Piranha Plant that hops around on its own and will jump up to bite you when you try to hop over them.

But, since I've brought the Wing, I opt to just fly straight up into the pipe. The secret room on the other side has two paths, one of which appears only accessible to Small Mario... which is maddening, since you've got to be big to get in here and there's no enemy to take a hit from and shrink. It's time to practice one SMB3's hardest tricks – one that, no matter how often I play this game, I have difficulty pulling off: crouched flying. You're supposed to build up flight-speed, then duck right before taking off. If you can do it and fit through the slot your reward is a Music Box and early-completion of the level. I take a few shots... but I can't pull it off. Lower road it is.

The lower path exits onto the island in the middle of the lake that the "dome" is covering, and a chance to collect four 1-Ups. There's just enough room to fly up and break the bricks to escape the dome... but when I go for it, a Chain-Chomp lunges out and steals my P-Wing in the midst of breakage (said bricks contain a Switch that fills the dome with silver coins in the shape of two "3's"). Then, when I go hunting for a Star Man, he takes my life. It comes back to me that I usually blew through this level as fast as possible, once upon a time.

Round two, this time Wing-less. I power through, no more exploration, and reach the other side of the dome easily. A Para-Goomba descends from the above, and a vertical tower of bricks sits in the middle of the road – subtle clues, for first-time players, that there's a sky worth flying into in this level... but not in the area where the clues are found. Having now spent half of the Worlds teaching us how to play, SMB3 now begins "playing with" our received wisdom.

LEVEL 5-2

Cliffs of snow (or, at least, white terrain of some kind), a wall that can't be cleared even with a P-Wing, a pipe leading straight down into what the music is already telling me is an underworld level. Down we go...

I'm spat out of the pipe into a free-fall in a long, vertical shaft. World 5 is all about playing with and/or taking away your sense of gravity-physics in the game, and the theme begins in earnest here. After falling through a narrow space and passing a cluster of blocks on the right, I'm pretty much tumbling down into wide-open darkness, with only the occasional coin and

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the minimalist backdrop (the vague dark-blue “highlights” of pipes are the only background detail in a sea of black, effectively communicating pitch-darkness) to indicate motion.

At the bottom, at last, water breaks my fall. Continuing the clever ways the graphics are used to establish a “deep dark place” feel, the water is black with only a wavy blue outline to indicate its surface. Three pipes wait at the bottom, but only the center goes anywhere; dropping you down a small waterfall into a (mysteriously better-lit) small pond in another cavern. A Cheep-Cheep waits in the water, and I opt to let him kill me – I want to try landing on those blocks at the top of the shaft instead of falling.

It takes me two re-tries to not fall past the blocks, but it’s very-nearly three: the first block you’re able to hit is a Music Block, which not only bounces you back up and off of it but drops a Power-Up out from underneath... and my instinct to chase after it almost gets the best of me – no way that isn’t an intentionally-devious design choice. It takes careful timing, but my goal is to ascend up the small brick platforms and enter the pipe on the right – practice, of course, for more precarious sky-bound platforming to come... in places where there won’t be a nice, safe lake waiting below you.

Traveling up the pipe (a pair of Troopa sentries made entry a bit hairy), I emerge back on the surface, seemingly on the other side of the high wall. The white terrain is here arranged in hills and ramps, giving off the vibe of ski-slopes on a mountain peak. Hopping down the second pipe leads to a treasure room and a giant Question Block that produces three 1-Ups. Then it’s back up to the surface and a short trip to the goal.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

5-2 is one of the few levels in the game that actually has a complete “alternate route” rather than a mere shortcut; a feature that would be a fixture of Mario side-scrollers beginning in the next game “Super Mario World.”

If you miss (or skip) the blocks at the top of the shaft and instead continue all the way down to the lonely Cheep-Cheep’s pool, a good length of cave awaits to the right – a narrow passage infested with downward-lunging Piranha Plants and more Buster Beetles, and now there are ice-blocks so he can show off his throwing skills. If you can scoop up a block or two before the Busters claim them all, they make a handy anti-Plant tool.

Beyond that it’s little more than a straight run to the end – clearly the less-interesting path, but its existence is at least noteworthy.

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RE-TAILED

5-2's completion clears the way to the other side of the river and further progress, but also to a Toad House... where I manage to pick up another Tanooki Suit! Excellent. As it's likely my evening is going to improve from this point, I'm calling it a night for now...

FRIDAY, MAY 18

Just finished up and sent off a review of "Battleship" to work – a movie so bad that hopefully by the time your reading this it's the first time anyone has thought of this movie in a long, long time. Let's finish with the "ground" of World 5 today, if possible...

NOT SO FAST

On reaching the other side of the river on World 5's map, the road forks: you can go straight to the Fortress or to 5-3, and both paths lead to the mysterious Tower. I'm going to 5-3 first, though a Hammer Bros skirmish (which ends in the acquisition of a P-Wing, huzzah!) blocks my way at first...

IF THE SHOE FITS

I have a feeling a lot of Mario fanatics skipped ahead to this part. 5-3 is among SMB3's most legendary levels – not for its terrain, but for a very special piece of footwear. Yes, you read that correctly.

"Kuribo's Shoe" is the strangest item in the game by far, starting with the fact that it is encountered only in Level 5-3 and that its strange-sounding name is actually a mistranslation: the enemy is a Goomba jumping about in a huge green shoe, and Kuribo is actually the Japanese name for the Goombas. Later reissues of SMB3 retranslate the name back into "Goomba's Shoe;" which feels like a mistake to me – Kuribo's Shoe made it sound that much more rare and interesting.

If Kuribo's Shoe is attacked from underneath while it's standing on a block, the Goomba will pop out but the shoe will remain – unoccupied and waiting for Mario to hop in and take control. While "piloting" Kuribo's Shoe, you can attack anything from above, even previously un-stompable foes like Piranha Plants. In a curious design detail, the Shoe has a turn-key like that

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of an old-fashioned wind-up toy on its back, continuing the mechanized/industrial theme of Bowser's army in the game.

LEVEL 5-3

The level begins on the right rather than the left, already indicating that something unusual will happen here. The first opportunity to get Kuribo's Shoe is set up in the assumption that you'll be too eager to get it – a row of Bricks forming a killing-box between two pipes with a Spiny on patrol and a Venus Fire-Trap firing down at you. I let Kuribo chase me for a bit, waiting for the right moment... and bang! There it is. Kuribo's Shoe is now mine.

It's adorable to see Mario's head peeking up out of a giant shoe, bouncing around across the terrain, even able to "walk" right across the snapping Black Muncher enemies who also make their debut in this area. And it's amazingly satisfying to, however briefly, be able to smash Spinys (which begin to rain down from a vengeful Lakitu shortly after the first Shoe is found) and Piranha Plants with impunity. Arrogant little bastards... so proud of their relative-invincibility in every other level, but here as squishy and vulnerable as the weakest Goomba. Take that! And that!

Heading down the pipe puts the remainder of the level back in familiar left-to-right linearity. Helpfully, if you've managed to lose your shoe by this point another is penned-up by ice blocks and waiting to be relieved of his burdens... but I've still got mine, so I show him mercy. Ahead, a clever trap designed to use the fun of Kuribo's Shoe ownership against you: Four pits, three filled by Munchers, the fourth bottomless – it's not hard to imagine folks enjoying standing unharmed on Munchers making an error and willfully leaping into the "bad" pit.

On the other side of another six Muncher pits I find blocks and procure a Fire Flower – which continues to work even while you're wearing the shoe. Invincible from below and now able to fire projectiles, it doesn't get much better than this... until, that is, I remember that since this is the original NES version of the game I'd be able to use the shoe while in Statue Form had I thought to wear my Tanooki Suit to the party.

Exiting the level makes Kuribo's Shoe disappear, a loss which never fails to leave me with mild separation anxiety. I elect to take my disappointment out on the last wandering Hammer Bros., winning a Star Man in addition to the catharsis.

LEVEL 5 FORTRESS 1

Another fine example of minimalist graphical design: while most previous Fortresses have filled in the space beyond the wall/ceiling/floor borders with more block-patterns, this one leaves that space as wide-open blackness. It's disconcerting – a feeling of being “caged” in otherwise-open darkness. The very first hazard is an exercise in beautifully-maddening trap-laying: the lava-pit is just wide enough to require a big jump, the ceiling is just low enough that making said jump from a running-start at the top rather than the staircase leading down is ill-advised, a Spinning-Ball trap waits on the opposite ledge, a Podobodo resides in the pit to force you to time your leap, and a Thwomp is ready to strike you down if you fail to immediately skid to a stop upon landing. I attribute the fact that I clear it on the first lunge more to instinct and muscle-memory than to skill.

A row of four Bricks covers an open space above. Escape? A secret? I smash one for access and begin ascending a narrow, crooked shaft upwards. The Question Block is a difficult hit, but it gives me a Leaf – and since I can climb no higher any other way, the obvious answer is to drop back down and attempt Raccoon Flight.

Building speed down below proves tricky – I overshoot the runway and end up skidding right into the Thwomp back near the lava, losing my tail. So much for that plan... but, wait! The very next Thwomp ahead has bricks beside him. Could it be? It is! Another leaf, another chance for flight. This time I make it through, though I've now burned up a lot of my allotted time. At the top of the shaft is a pipe, leading to a secret room where Coins form an arrow pointing upwards: three hidden blocks, three 1-Ups, three reasons to love Raccoon Power. Down the exit pipe, 70 seconds left to clear the level...

Three more Thwomps between me and Boom-Boom, the first two cruelly hovering above elevated Spinning-Ball-topped platforms while the third sits between two lava-pits. No time to be cautious, though... I take off at a shot, clearing the first but losing my tail to the first and my big-ness to the third, but I make it. After that, Boom-Boom is almost an afterthought. One stomp, two stomps, three stomps, done.

That, friends, is how “fun hard” works – racing the clock has left me as “winded” as one can get from playing an old video-game. Calling it a night, since The Tower waits ahead...

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SATURDAY, MAY 19

Rested. Relaxed. Mildly amused at how little it bothers me that I'm not doing something more interesting on a Saturday night than playing more of the game. As a kid, firing up the NES late at night was something that happened because I couldn't sleep, or because a single frustrating boss or level had yet to be conquered. Now, it's because I'm too busy to do it at any other time. Ah, well...

WORLD 5 – THE TOWER

The Tower is the only structure of its kind in the game: similar to a Fortress but vertically-inclined and, you will ultimately discover, unoccupied by a Boom-Boom. The background art once again combined the “artsy”-looking gray tiles and the columns, which adds a brightness and “opulence” to what otherwise feels very much like another Fortress – especially with the phalanx of Roto-Discs that blocks your way on the first floor. The lone Power-Up found here is the only one in the entire building.

Second floor is much easier – just two Thwomps, and a pipe that leads to a “roof” outside. Here, we see Brick Blocks used as building-materials to the furthest extent yet seen in the game; arranged to call to mind the turrets of a classical medieval castle. It's another “how to play” clue, of course – all those begging-to-be-smashed bricks, especially the big wall on the right, are telling you that a Raccoon Tail would be useful for finding treasures; and if you come in with a P-Wing you can fly up and over the far wall for a trio of hovering 1-Ups.

The background on the roof at first appears stark-white (some blue peeks through if you fly up far enough) and, as we've come to know that color as belonging mainly to clouds, it deftly conveys a feeling of having climbed to some remarkable height – this tower climbs up into the clouds themselves, and it's easy to imagine Mario emerging into this area and being struck by forceful winds and thin, dizzying air...

The third floor has a pair of spike-pits, a Thwomp and a final Roto-Disc. Wherever this place leads, whoever built it did not intend for my trip through to be easy. Scrambling up the final (interior) pipe, I emerge at what must be the very top of the place – a mere speck of pipe and bricks (the chimney, perhaps?) against a backdrop now sporting much more blue sky... we've risen above the clouds. To the right is a strip of blocks, the second of which

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sends a strikingly blue-colored Beanstalk rising (rather iconically, given the terrain or lack thereof) toward a pipe that stabs down from high above...

ABOVE AND BEYOND

...I emerge from the pipe not in a new Level or a new area, but on an entirely new Map – this one settled on top of a huge, sprawling sea of clouds. The remainder of World 5's levels, Fortresses, and the Castle are here, with big stationary Star Men serving as this map's version of landscape-foliage. Helping tie the illusion of depth and connection together, you can see a miniature "far below" version of the previous map through a break in the clouds' upper-left corner; complete with tiny versions of the footpaths and The Tower. Apart from World 8, World 5 is the only Map spread over multiple individual screens, rather than a single "big" one; and it even has a different set of music – a dreamy, lullaby-like tune in contrast to the jauntier melody left back down on the surface.

LEVEL 5-4

"It gets harder from here" is the immediate message of the first cloud-borne level: an open sky of propeller-lifts (the first of which you see are in a constant state of spinning) accentuated by a cloud-filled background. My vertigo is already in effect, not helped by the fact that you can't actually see what you're supposed to be jumping toward when you leap from the entrance platform over the first propeller; though obviously once you see the comfortably-placed platform set for you it becomes a bit less frightening.

The whole "middle" of the level can be easily skipped, providing you have the capability to take flight from the first platform and find a nice safe path of clouds and coins up above. I haven't brought Raccoon or Tanooki powers with me, though, so I'm on my own.

The seemingly "stationary" propeller-lifts here actually set up an early version of the now-common gaming trope of the Physics Puzzle, itself pioneered by the original "Super Mario Bros" counterweighted-lifts. These are far more devious, though, tilting side-to-side based on where you stand. Since the NES hardware wasn't capable of scaling or rotating "solid" sprites (no home console would be until the Super Nintendo a few years later) the "rotation" effect is ingeniously accomplished by having the props be "constructed" out of small, linked individual boxes. At the time of release it was a pretty arresting effect – "terrain" rarely if ever was effected by a player-sprite standing on it, and it wasn't unheard of for gamegraphics obsessives to

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drop themselves into the abyss watching the prop bend under Mario's weight.

Two waterfalls now, tumbling down from airborne ponds. Where the water is coming from, who can say? Their main function is giving you a false sense of security. If you miss the jump the water will break your fall, but you'll have to swim back up against the current in a hurry. The last leg of the level is four more props – two spinning, two physics-reactive. Over two decades later, these kinds of jumps are still white-knuckle territory for me, an immensely satisfying to clear.

Waiting at the goal is a Lakitu, because why wouldn't he be up here, riding in a cloud like he does? It occurs to me that letting him fill the goal-area with Spinys before hitting the checkpoint would net me a bunch of points and maybe some 1-Ups, but it's not a theory I want to test at the moment.

LEVEL 5-5

Holy. Hell.

Before me stretches a vast field of Donut Lifts – a few wood blocks as well, yes, but the first impression is of a “bridge” level where all surfaces of any length are made from these blasted drop-away pieces. A Mother Para-Goomba appears straight away. I make it a point to take her down early – this terrain will be difficult enough to negotiate without her younglings impeding my jumps.

The tip of the first “wall” of wood-blocks is bump-able, and after a shove it produces a Super Leaf. Raccoon Powers are incredibly useful here, for obvious reasons, but a secondary use presents itself immediately: two pipes, both “plugged” with bricks. There are Troopas bouncing about whose shells could also do the trick, but tail-swatting is much preferred. The first pipe holds no secrets, but the second drops me into a secret room with a Giant Question Block. Oh my... could it be?

It is – I become Tanooki Mario, yet again. I'm so glad to have it, I don't even think about how counter-productive Statue Power is in this particular area. Back on the surface (such as it is) I backtrack a bit and see a “bridge” of Donut Lifts with coins above and below – this must be another “get all the coins to trigger a White Mushroom House” level. I think better of trying, though there's an even more maddening trap ahead: a set of bricks closed-in by woodblocks, accessible only from underneath, just asking you to stand in one place on Donut Lifts. Against my better judgment, I take a shot at it.

Stupid, stupid mistake – the down-pointing pipe nearby might as well have had a “warning: contains Venus Fire Trap” sign on it, and now I'm boxed-in and under fire. Worst of all, the “prize” for entry is just a Super

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Leaf, which would've taken away my Tanooki Suit. I manage to dodge both. Impressive, yes, but I should never have gotten into that spot in the first place.

The way the final three wooden blocks are laid-out across the Donut Lift surface makes it mostly-impossible to fly here, which makes me think I should try. Before hitting the goal I do... but I'm just taking wing into nothingness. Odd.

HIGHWAY IN THE SKY

A nice balm after the relative-intensity of donut-hopping, the path is now open to a Mushroom House (prize: Fire Flower) and a Spade Panel, where I'm once more disappointed that the stationary drawing of Mario doesn't sport a Tanooki Suit when he in fact has one. You can actually opt to skip either 5-6 or 5-7 next, but... well, by now you know how this works.

LEVEL 5-6

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, while best known for "Sherlock Holmes," was also a writer of science fiction and horror stories. Among his more unusual (and overlooked) entries is "The Horror of The Heights;" in which an early aviator's lost journal details its author's discovery of a "sky jungle" – an aerial-ecosystem of unknown, permanently-airborne animals, both predator and prey, living in the upper atmosphere. The "record" concludes thusly: "Forty-three thousand feet. I shall never see earth again. They are beneath me, three of them. God help me; it is a dreadful death to die!" I don't recall under what specifics circumstances I first stumbled onto it, but I do recall that upon reading it my first thoughts were of this level.

5-6 is the first auto-scrolling area in World 5 and introduces two new aerial enemies to the Mario canon. The first are the Para-Beetles: Red-and-white Buzzy Beetles with wings who fill the sky in a slow-moving swarm. You can stand on their backs unscathed, though they will slowly begin to lose altitude; and if you're guessing that this is how you'll be asked to traverse much of the level, you are correct. The timing of the jumps is easier than I remember, but I still get a feeling I won't be leaving with my Tanooki Suit.

My feeling is correct. Midway through, I'm struck by an errant fireball. Meet 5-6's other new enemy, the Fire-Chomp. Best described as Chain-Chomp's hell-spawned cousin, Fire Chomp is a black orb with dead white eyes and a genuinely-frightening mouthful of fangs. He snakes through the air, dragging a lethal "tail" of fireballs which he then shoots at you. When his fire-supply is exhausted, he explodes like a Bob-Omb.

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There's a row of bricks below me where I know a P-Switch is hidden, but I'm too busy dodging Fire-Chomp's pursuit. I finally managed to work my way above and stomp him just before the pipe leading to the goal where, as a final assault on my nerves, a Lakitu is already spawning an army of Spinies. 5-6 is a nightmare of a level, overall – you can see exactly why they decided to place it on the “optional” path.

LEVEL 5-7

More bricks arranged into castle-esque structures, though their placement here is more offbeat since they don't seem to be representing and kind of structural-element located on the map. In terms of level-design, however, the reason for their placement is immediately apparent: lots of hiding-space for Pile-Driver Goombas, who guard a brick-surrounded pipe at the midpoint of the area.

I head down the pipe, and it drops drops me out the bottom of the clouds. When I touch down (the drop seems substantially less great than you'd think, given the height of the tower I climbed to get here...) the surface world looks an awful lot like Level 1-1, but with more wood-block towers. Bumping the third of these gives me a Super-Leaf, and I backtrack to the open-field at the beginning to do some flying. Nice bit of design here: not only can you see the undersides of the clouds but the bottoms of the brickwork structures from above as well. There's a P-Switch tucked into a mass of bricks, but I'm impatient at this point.

At the end of the “surface” area (going down here actually does skip you past a good chunk of the cloudy parts) is a series of woodblocks leading up to a pipe and back to the sky... where I am immediately under fire by a Lakitu, Bullet-Bills, and still more Pile-Driver Goombas. It dawns on me too late that there was a white block down below (only in the NES version, apparently) and that I probably could've done the “crouch and jump to the background” trick; possibly rendering myself invulnerable for this part. Ah, well... either way, the goal comes right after. Haven't been that glad to exit a Level in a while, honestly...

IN THE CARDS

A memory panel pops onto the Map as I exit 5-7. By now I've turned over enough of the cards successfully that it's looking a bit “full.” I miss the first try but score a 1-Up on the second. That's a cue to call it a night if I've ever seen one.

MONDAY, MAY 21 2012

It's only Monday, and this is already a trying week – press-screening on the stiflingly-mediocre “Men In Black 3” in the evening, and a day of researching obscure spin-offs of “The Flintstones” for a different project before that. Sleep should be my first priority, but the fact that I’ve still got a sliver of World 5 to clear has been eating at me.

WORLD 5 – FORTRESS 2

If nothing else, this Fortress is brutally honest about your chances from the beginning: you began standing on one of two narrow platforms above a lava-pool, a single nearby pipe as your goal. The “tilework” in the background, previously only seen in shades of gray, is here bright red (as are the pipes), which adds an appropriate sense of oppressive heat to the atmosphere.

Beyond that first room, the is Fortress primarily a single long stretch of platforms stretched across a Podobodo-infested lava lake... but with a gravity-bending Sky Land twist: there’s a second lake of lava up on the ceiling from which even more Podobodos are spawned, and since it’s so high up you can’t always see where they’re coming from. There’s a Star Man in the first row of Question Blocks, but the invincibility runs out on me just as I reach a devilishly-designed spot where the platforms are much smaller and a single Boo swoops in to cause annoyance... or, in my case, embarrassingly-awkward instant death.

Take two. This time I arm a Star Man from my inventory before heading in. Making my way back to the scene of my demise, I’m now given to appreciate the “learning opportunity” the Boo here presents: the best way to hold him at bay is to turn-around in mid-air while jumping, which is also the best way to negotiate multiple jumps across smaller platforms.

I like the fact that you can see lava underneath the floor of Boom-Boom’s chamber. Not enough to linger and appreciate it instead of immediately smashing him before he has a chance to sprout wings, of course, but it’s a visually-interesting detail all the same.

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LEVEL 5-8

Something is off about this. It's another cloud-platforming level, but it's not autoscrolling – even though it has the “faster” music autoscrolling levels tend to sport. I move ahead with a certain amount of trepidation, picking up a Super Leaf from the first blocks and racking my brain for what, if anything, might've made this level noteworthy.

And there he is. Crud. Lakitu, swooping in and unleashing a hail of Spinies. There are clouds placed high enough that I could probably hop up and take him out, but it also puts me right in his line of fire. Better to dash on ahead and just hope to stay out of his range.

The game, of course, is wise to my scheme: on the last leg of the level a quartet of Para-Troopas are hover in place specifically to get in the way of running jumps. At the goal, a second Lakitu waits. I should just grab my goal-card a be done with it, but I'm feeling bold – time to try out the “let the screen fill with Spinies before you finish” trick...

...I pay for my hubris. Leaping for the card, a Spiny Egg collides with my head, killing me. Serves me right, really. Second run through is all business – No stops. No blocks. No power-ups. Run. Jump. Dodge. Survive. At the end I jump for the goal without hesitation... and wind up grabbing my third Flower Card in a row. It's not worth as many 1-Ups as three Stars are, but I don't actually see the flower version of goal fireworks all that often. Salve for my silly mistake, at least.

LEVEL 5-9

5-9's reputation is as one of the most difficult levels in the entire game, and by a wide margin the most difficult one that you don't have the option of skipping (unless you use a Cloud on the map, of course).

It's an auto-scrolling level, which is bad enough, but instead of merely moving to the side the progression is diagonally-upwards, and all of the rectangular wooden platforms you're supposed to jump across are in motion themselves. No power-ups, no pipes (except at the end), and nowhere to rest. The backdrop is mostly white clouds, but every once in awhile you find yourself adrift in empty blue space with no sense of what's up or down which, combined with the moving platforms, creates a palpable sense of disorientation.

My ascent to the midpoint of the level goes well enough, though an awful lot of the jumps can only be made just before the spot I was standing

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on vanishes off the bottom of the screen. Then a Fire-Chomp shows up. There's no way of getting around how unnerving these guys are – moving so deliberately through open sky where nothing slow and deliberate ought to be. Platforming while dodging fireballs is problematic, but I manage – making sure to kill him in the brief spot between the exhaustion of his fireballs and his self-immolation.

Whew! I am, honestly, amazed that I got through that on the first try. Less amazing? The goal is once-more patrolled by a Lakitu, whom I'm in no mood to play games with this time...

THE EMPTY SKIES

On entering the Castle, I see that Sky Land's king has been transformed into a large, disinterested-looking bird. Appropriate, but it brings with it a strange realization: this is the only bird we meet in the entire level and, indeed, in the entire game. Curiously, birds never played any kind of significant role in Mario games up to this point – the only examples having been Albatoss and Tweeter in “Super Mario Bros 2,” and they were of course imports from Doki-Doki Panic. For some reason the Mario games tend to eschew avian enemies for “flying-versions” of landlocked critters.

WORLD 5 – AIRSHIP

The previous Airship had, as a nice change of pace, no guns. This one has all the guns. First a canon, then a Bullet Bill turret, then the larger-sized dual-direction canons mounted on the side of the ship. The canon balls, since they lack faces like Bill, are deceptively benign-looking but built to try your sense of aim – hit them from any direction but directly above and you'll take damage, which gets complicated given that they're drawn round and tend to be fired at an angle.

Speaking of angles, the Ship begins to scroll up and down at the midpoint, suddenly throwing the usual tactics for avoiding the straight-shooting Bills out of whack. At the same time, I briefly land in a killing-box between two turrets and a rotating canon up above, which demands a lucky bit of jumping to escape.

Things even out a bit just before the end, but only so that the Ship can reveal the worst stretch of “gauntlet” level-design yet seen in the game: a huge metal wall adorned with two-way canons, a matching set of canons firing up from below and a Bullet Bill strafing the surface. No. Thank. You! I bounce off a canon ball and land atop the wall, avoiding roughly 1/3rd of

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the gunfire.

Damn. Thought I was “safe” crouched at the base of a Bill turret, but a canon ball struck at my heels and I’m dead. A few pixels difference and the outcome would’ve been reversed, but it wasn’t and now I have to dodge all that artillery again...

At least the second time through I know where everything is – though I’ve exhausted my inventory of non-rare power-ups and have to make my way through small. It goes well enough, and I make it to the boss chamber intact to face the boss, Roy Koopa. Roy is supposed to be the eldest of the Koopalings, and compared to his siblings his design is a study in minimalism: no big hair and no self-décor apart from his bizarre sunglasses, which are supposed to be a reference to his musician-namesake being Roy Orbison but, honestly, call to mind Elton John moreso. I make these observations retroactively, however – on entering, I neglect to remember that Roy has the same stomp-attack power as the Sledge Bros. from World 4, and he kills me mere moments after entering.

DESCENT

Back on the map, the Airship departs the clouds for the surface – which means I’ve got to head back down the Tower. As a nice “gimme” from the developers, returning to the surface requires only a quick drop down a pipe... though climbing back up means the whole Tower again. I’d like to avoid that, so upon emerging back on terra-firmer I use the “Anchor” item from my inventory to lock the Airship in place before heading back in.

WORLD 5 – AIRSHIP (SECOND ATTEMPT)

I use up a mushroom from the Inventory so I can at least have a fighting chance against Roy this time, but it’s not to be – I miss the jump at the steel wall and get shrunk back down traversing the canon ball-gauntlet... only to be killed by Roy, again.

It takes me another two tries (both times as Mini-Mario) before Roy finally goes down, and even then it’s the longest I’ve spent on a Koopaling battle by far – he really is a tough one. The restored King of Skyland has a flowing white beard that hangs down in two points – as a kid, my first thought on seeing him was of Burgess Meredith’s “old elf” character from the 80s “Santa Claus” movie.

A FROST IS COMING

Sky Land's presence is somewhat expected in a game whose signature power-up is based around flying, but it's none the less another welcome change of pace to the platforming formula. Having so many levels built around wide-open skies and precision-jumping is a whiplash-inducing change of pace after the more laid-back, explorative level design of Giant Land and the stark white-and-blue dominant color scheme continues the game's quietly beautiful use of minimalism.

The customary letter from Peach this time warns of... ice. Damn. It would have to be ice. If there were ever two words virtually guaranteed to – quite literally – chill the blood of players in the Golden Age, those words were “Ice Level.” But... that's where we're going. No stopping now. Mario has left the clouds behind, but the storm is only beginning to gather. Ice Land waits.



WORLD 6: ICE LAND



WEDNESDAY, MAY 23 2012

It might've been advisable to take more than one day off from the game at this point, for the sake of perspective if nothing else. But I know myself too well – Ice Land is, to put it mildly, not my favorite portion of this game. If I don't dive right back in and power through it I run the risk of half-assing or even losing track of this project.

I've come just a bit too far to let that happen. Suck it up. Settle in. Chug your beer. It's time to face at least the first few legs of this long, hard slog through the snow.

As I said before, there is nothing that makes the hair stand up on the necks of gamers who came up in SMB3's era like the prospect of an Ice Level. 3D rendering had not yet manifested as an element of game design; as such there was little opportunity for designers to play around with the physics of terrain-response, since you couldn't yet set a characters' model to react to traversing three-dimensional textures. What you COULD do, however, was change up what physics-variables were available (speed, stopping, etc) to create the illusion of greater or lesser friction – in simpler terms, you could make the ground “slippery.” Ice/snow-based levels provided an opportunity to make wide use of this trick, frequently resulting in what were often the most challenging/frustrating areas of any given game.

Perhaps being aware of this likely-response from players, World 6's Map Screen doubles-down on the ominous: even if the vast expanse of piercing white terrain and gleaming blue glaciers doesn't worry you, the eerie ambient music (it vaguely recalls the “Twilight Zone” theme) will. Whereas the previous World's aesthetic may have lulled one into a false sense of security, Ice Land wants you to know right up front that this is going to be a punishing series of Levels.

The map itself, you will ultimately discover, is massive – even bigger than World 3, and here not filled up mainly by ocean-travel. It's the first World to have three Boom-Boom fortresses, each one sensibly surrounded by a moat.

UNPREPARED

There's a pipe at the very beginning of the Map which takes me to a spot from which I can access a Toad House and the first Fortress without having to play through any of the first three levels... or at least I could if I still had any Hammers in my inventory, as the exit is blocked by a boulder, which I do not. (World 6 is, amusingly, the last level where boulders and hammers play any role.) Back to the start and on to 6-1 it is, then...

LEVEL 6-1

I've praised the minimalist backdrop-design sensibilities of the game elsewhere, but I have to admit that the "default" backgrounds for World 6's Levels (diagonal white and gray lines) don't really "do it" for me. It's hard to tell what it's supposed to be conveying (a sheet of ice? Driving sleet?) and kind of hurts my eyes after awhile, to be perfectly honest. I suppose you can't win them all. I take a few brief dashes back and forth on the slippery (white) ground, to re-familiarize myself with the game's ice-physics.

In the Question Blocks above the first platform of Ice Blocks (they work just like Wood Blocks, only slippery) I get a Mushroom... and then slip on the ice and lose it. Not a promising start. Blocking my forward path is the first appearance of the wonderfully-named Ptoocie – a Piranha Plant sticking permanently up out of a pipe and bouncing a spiked-ball up and down into the air off its lips. He's easy enough to clear, but the Walking Ptoocie afterwards is much trickier. (It's the first time in Mario history that a full-sized Piranha Plant has been shown outside of a pipe or pit, turns out they "walk" on their leaves... where are their roots?) He's tricky to dodge, but that's kind of the point: here's your crash course in jump-timing on an icy surface.

Incidentally, if you brought one of the flight-enabling Power-Ups in with you, it's possible to take wing here after tail-swatting the Walking Ptoocie. From there you can reach a platform up in the sky where an invisible door leads to a P-Switch treasure room and get some practice at using slippery-surfaces to duck-slide under tight spaces. I didn't bring such an item, so it's more walking for me. After the two Ptoocies, I'm briefly almost glad to see a regular old Venus Fire Trap... until I skid into his projectile and die. Twice.

Third time is the charm – there's a small army of Ptoocies patrolling beneath the platforms of the final stretch, but if you get the rhythm down it's not as bad as all that. It's a welcome surprise that they don't station one more of them at the goal-point.

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BREAKING THROUGH

Back on the map I opt to take out some aggression by arming a Star Man and challenging the first Hammer Bros. He gives up a Hammer, of course. Might as well head back down that first pipe and break the boulder – maybe there will be something worth getting from that Toad House. As it turns out, all I wind up with is a Fire Flower; though this being an ice world there are certainly worse things to have.

LEVEL 6-2

An auto-scrolling level with icy surfaces. Super. This level also introduces a new type of cloud platforms that move faster than the rest of the screen and can pass through (around?) other solid objects, which here means that they'll be trying to shove you off into the ether against the block-towers peppered throughout the area.

There's an ice brick across from a Question Block, and I take the risk to make the obvious move between the two for a Mushroom. I assume if I'd already been "big" it would've been a Leaf given the layout of the level, and the brick tower up ahead strengthens my assumption – if you miss the clouds needed to climb over it, tail-strikes would be your only hope of not being crushed against the edge of the frame.

Midway through, the screen starts scrolling up and at an angle (the first auto-scrolling stage to change directions other than the Airships) just before a very tall tower of wood blocks. Not even a Tail would help me here – if I don't make every one of these cloud-hops just right, I'll be pancaked. The screen goes back downwards after that, moving much faster past ever more precarious sections of brick-towers and flighty clouds.

A curious detail at the goal is the snow-frosted hills – their art style looks different, a bit more florid and naturalistic than most of the other scenery. If anything, they call to mind the look of snowy surfaces in SMB2/Doki-Doki Panic...

LEVEL 6-3

You can skip either 6-2 or 6-3 and go straight to the Fortress, and like most skippable levels they're both especially difficult. This one – another level of tiny ice-block platforms stretched over vast empty space - starts off with an absolutely insidious trap: A pair of music-blocks out in the open air,

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and a tall ice-block wall ahead of them. Your instinct is to bounce off the blocks to clear it... and that instinct is wrong – the wall is just high enough for that not to work. You're actually supposed to land on the platform moving back and forth beneath it and crouch, then hop up to the blocks on the other side.

There's a Troopa on this first bit of ice, and down below and to the right is a question block. I'm not even going to risk throwing him at it – I'm more concerned that immediately afterwards is a stretch of one-block-length pits arranged so that you're supposed to sprint across the gaps; a trick from the original SMB that hasn't played a large role in this installment so far. It can be hard to do on normal terrain, even moreso on ice. The only reason I'm not dead from colliding with a Troopa at the end (that placement is just mean...) is because I was Big when I did it.

A second Troopa patrols an L-shaped arrangement of ice-blocks, and there's a Brick Block floating JUST far enough away that throwing him is the only way to hit it. I do – dodging him when he bounces back toward me and then again off the wall behind me – as a White Beanstalk sprouts up from the block and rises high into the air. Great. With the already overly-loose climbing controls combined with slippery platforms and no ground beneath me, I'm not surprised at all that I fall to my death almost immediately.

Try again. And again. The problem isn't so much the climbing as the initial landing – once you grab on, it's hard to immediately press STRAIGHT up without also nudging a bit to the left or right and slipping off. After five attempts I make it all the way up. As a final twist of the knife, you have to jump OFF the stalk and bounce off a music-block to reach the skybound pipe. This is a nasty, nasty level. The payoff, though, is worth it – the treasure room yields a Tanooki Suit.

Is there anything interesting in the rest of the level? I'll have to check later (spoiler: no, there isn't) because I opt to exit the pipe and use Tanooki Power to gently float more-or-less all the way to the goal – if the first half of the level was that much of a pain, I feel more than justified in bypassing the rest of it.

WORLD 6 – FORTRESS 1

The first platform here looks like a Donut Lift, but it's actually stable and built to ride up the white track-line leading up diagonally above the lava. Much as I'd like to, I doubt I'll be able to hold on to this Tanooki Suit all the way to Boom-Boom...

The ride up is uneventful, though it's pretty unnerving that once the

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track evens back out it does so over a huge field of spikes (what is all this stuff for?) and then drops down through a shaft of Roto-Discs and a Hot Foot who tries to get the drop on me; finally ending in a pit of spikes that you have to leap to a ledge to avoid. On the plus side, my desire to maintain my Tanooki form is making me more cautious than I'd typically be.

In the second chamber there's space to fly up into a hidden "attic" for a 1-Up, but – again – caution. I avoid hitting any blocks, jump only when necessary... I even clear a really hairy duck-and-slide spot and a final spike pit without much difficulty; I can't quite decide if that's a good or bad omen.

Boom-Boom versus Tanooki Mario, oh boy! There are two low-placed blocks in the chamber, which almost certainly means this one has wings... yup, he has wings, and the blocks prevent me from striking him quick enough to stop him from taking off – this is the first time this playthrough I've actually seen a flying Boom-Boom last long enough to do any flying, hovering near the ceiling and diving at me. One more hit, one more to go... damn! I hit him at a bad angle, which somehow defeats him but also robs me of my Tanooki powers. Bastard...

LEVEL 6-4

Weirdly, a strip of three Donut Lifts hangs in the air at the start of this one, serving no demonstrable purpose other than to support three Coins. After that, a difficult jump (wide and to an elevated plane) made even more taxing by a propeller lift. Some steps lead down to a Brick positioned over a single ice-block that conceals a 1-Up which, irony of ironies, tempts me to my death. On the second try it slips through my fingers again, but this time I save my own skin at least.

The wooden platform moving back and forth along a spiral-shaped track is incredibly disorienting. The idea is to use it to reveal a Pink Music Block (leading to a Coin Heaven bonus) hidden next to the top of the two big ice blocks, but I'm in a hurry to get ahead and don't really want or need the coins. Also, I tried twice and fell off both times. But mostly I was in a hurry. Honest.

Two more track-running platforms, then a wall of ice, a tower of bricks, and a P-Switch. This feels like it should be a White Mushroom House level, but it doesn't appear to be. Six wildly-spinning propellers stand between me and the goal, and the last one is a beast: stuck between two huge ice-blocks, meaning I have to jump into the blades and hope for the best. It's a close call, too – I'm thrown straight up into the air, meaning that a few pixels to the left and it might've shot me straight down into the chasm.

PERSPECTIVE

It feels an awful lot like 6-4 was the first level in the game where the design vis-à-vis the layout of obstacles can actually be called cheap instead of simply challenging, likely owing to the wholesale unpredictability of the propellers. Although, on the other hand, it occurs to me that I don't have nearly the reflex-memory for World 6 overall that I have for much of the rest of the game – when I played it just for fun, I usually made sure to skip it.

The road forks again after 6-4, offering the opportunity to skip either the 5th or 6th Level. 6-5, however, blocks the only path to the second of World 6's only two Mushroom Houses. While I may not have this World completely memorized, the contents of that House are burned into my brain. Even if this project would allow me to skip it, I wouldn't dare...

LEVEL 6-5

Of all the Levels in “Super Mario Bros. 3” that require (or at least strongly encourage) you to either solve a puzzle or learn/execute a tricky skill to complete, 6-5 is easily the most teeth-grinding, rage-inducing, controller-smashingly frustrating. It's a difficult level full of relentless enemies, and the trick required to exit is really hard to pull off and has almost no practical use anywhere else in the game other than right here.

The level is a huge underground cavern, “divided” in half by a space of raised hill between two high-ceiling areas that you can fly up to... providing you clear the area of the Buster Beetles, Ice Blocks and Troopas that would impede your flight. I opt to skip the first part – the up-above chamber there has only coins and a 1-Up, and at this point I've got plenty of those. That could well be hubris, but if so I'll pay for it later.

The second downward-facing pipe goes to a secret room where I pick up a Super Leaf. The exit lets me out clear on the other side of the cave... where a Piranha Plant promptly takes it away. Fortunately, you can just keep going back and the block holding the Leaf will keep resetting. The first time I played this level back in grade school, the “looping” nature of the it drove me nuts – where was I supposed to go!?

The answer is up: up the hill and down the steps from where the secret room lets out there's a pair of vertical shafts in the ceiling, the second of which goes to the exit pipe... almost. See, the pipe is blocked by bricks, wood-blocks and White Piranha Plants arranged so that there's no real way to get through on your own – the bricks blocking the pipe have to be smashed

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from the side, and the Plants will snatch Raccoon Power away before you get the chance for a tail-strike. A Shell will do the trick, but the only Troopa is all the way down on the cave floor.

The secret? You have to fly one up there, of course. As it turns out, you can fly while carrying something – you just probably haven't up to this point because it's really, really hard to do: You have to hold down B to carry objects, and on an NES controller B is adjacent to the A button you have to repeatedly mash to fly upwards; meaning you've got to hold B down with the tip of your thumb while simultaneously mashing A with the middle of the same thumb.

Guilty admission time: I don't know that I've ever completed this level the "proper" way. I'm racking my brain, but I'm pretty sure I always used a P-Wing before. I have the option of doing that now... but, no. I'm going to do it this time.

...

Transcribing just how many tries it takes me to actually do this – twice the clock actually ran out, the block-flinging Busters took me out a few others, the Piranha Plant performed his function, and at least four times the damn Troopa came back to life while I was carrying it up – would be embarrassing and profanity-strewn. But, what seems like an eternity later, I've pulled it off, and I don't think I've ever been prouder or more viscerally thrilled to see two measly White Piranhas go down...

IF I HAD A HAMMER

Why was I so determined to enter this one Toad House? Because it's the first spot (in the NES version of the game, at least) to get what is probably "Super Mario Bros 3's" rarest Power-Up: the Hammer Suit – literally, a set of Hammer Bros armor and a full arsenal of Hammers for Mario (or Luigi) to throw. Crouching while wearing it also renders one effectively projectile-proof.

My heart belongs to Tanooki, of course, but Hammer Mario is still quite a sight in its own right: it's the first (and still one of the only) instances of Mario wearing any kind of armor, and the first time Mario has been depicted using a physical weapon since the original "Donkey Kong." Interestingly, in the NES version this the only power-up that changes the color of Mario's skin – specifically from white to yellow-green. It's a strange effect, though you have to assume the idea is to make him look even more like a Troopa.

The temptation is to put this to use right away; but I'm electing to save it – maybe for Bowser, even. Wouldn't that be something...

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IN THE CARDS

The spate of good luck continues, as a Memory Game panel appears on the map and – without really having been determined to – I manage to finish off matching up all the cards. This is the first time I’ve ever actually done that myself. (I usually don’t pay much heed to the Memory Game, to be honest.)

At this point I was starting to get sleepy, and it felt right to exit on a high note... right after I took out the two Hammer Bros who’d shuffled into my path, earning a Cloud and a Star Man respectively. Now I can call it a night.

FRIDAY, MAY 25TH 2012

It’s late (or early, rather) and I’m sleepy as hell. This has been a trying week, and because of the Memorial Day holiday I’ve had to get in a bunch of stuff for Monday way ahead of deadline. That’s good for business, of course, though I just know it’s going to lead me into bouts of “oh-no-I-have-no-work-what-do-I-do-with-myself??” panic-attacks.

The answer SHOULD be “play more of the game, dummy!” but I somehow bet that won’t happen – the space between recording/transcribing and actually writing-up/fleshing-out the playthrough has started to widen a bit, so I may step back for a day or two to catch myself up. For tonight, though, a few more levels of Ice Land, at least...

LEVEL 6-6

I pull a Fire Flower from the inventory before I go in – it’s Ice Land, after all. 6-6 begins much the same as 6-5, beginning with a pipe that leads into another huge underground cavern. Fortunately, this one isn’t nearly as punishing – or at least I don’t remember it being so.

Two paths to take – one up, one down. I opt for down first, grabbing a Star-Man and killing a Piranha Plant, but curiosity gets the better of me and I double back to try the high road. First observation up top: Spike (the spike-ball spitting turtle) makes his return appearance. Lucky for me, he’s vulnerable to fireballs. The little block-length water pools up here have a Cheep-Cheep jumping between them, the first time this behavior is observed of this enemy. High road leads to a dead-end, but at least there’s a Question

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Block containing a Fire Flower... which I'd have been glad to get had I not come in with one.

Back down to the low-road. For some reason, a Venus Firetrap stuck at the base of two sloping hills makes me think of the scene with the sand-pit monster in "Enemy Mine" – a great 80s sci-fi movie that nobody seems to remember. There's another Firetrap at the top of the second hill, and the two of them are positioned so as to cover your entire climb with fireballs when they're both attacking at once.

The middle leg of the level is a huge water-filled passage absolutely teeming with Cheep-Cheeps, the blocks and walls arranged to give you very little space to pass them safely. I make it out of the water, but I've taken damage and been reduced to Small Mario... making it easy for the two Spikes to take me out on emerging back on dry land.

Second time through I go in big, grab the Flower up top and resolve to hit the water and blast the crap out of everything in my way. Killing water-monsters with fireballs has always been one of the more satisfying elements of Mario games for me, and I haven't forgotten how questioning the logic of fireballs "working" in the original SMB's swimming levels led me to learn that some fires could burn underwater – a revelation that blew my then-five-year-old mind.

There's a great "gotcha" design bit in the water section where it looks like you can take a high-road and avoid some fish, but the way is actually blocked. I also like the teeth-like arrangement of Piranha Plant pipes you've got to pass to exit the water altogether. A wave of Spikes is waiting at the end, but this time I just mow them down with fireballs and head for the goal – where one last Spike happens to be waiting. Clever.

LEVEL 6-7

Auto-scrolling. Ice Blocks. Donut Lifts. Hooray.

Alright, to be fair I actually really like the way the Donut Lifts are employed here from a design standpoint: the only way to progress forward past certain arrangements of ice-blocks is to stand on a Donut and drop through the floor – which really messes with your previously-learned instinct against staying put on said Donuts.

Continuing with this theme, there are spots where strips of coins are located under the Donut Lifts; meaning this is probably a "get every coin" level. I'm tempted to try to do just that, thinking that maybe the White Mushroom House might contain another Hammer Suit (it doesn't, it's an Anchor) but think better of it – I'm well-armed enough, let's just get through

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this. Especially since a Fire Chomp shows up to make trouble at the midpoint.

The exit from the level is absurd, however – a strip of ice blocks and a single donut you have to ride down, then jump off to hit some Music Blocks and bounce yourself onto the exit pipe. Slip on the ice and lose the lift and you're out of luck, since unless you've brought a Tail with you all this way you can't reach the pipe without it.

Just before the goal, a final indignity in coin-collecting: a big stack of ice-blocks with coins frozen inside them; which you can only liberate by melting the ice with fireballs. I don't have fireballs, so it just sits there – taunting me...

WORLD 6 – FORTRESS 2

By and large, the later-world Fortresses are all about precision: standing in the right place, jumping the right distance, stopping/going at the right time. So seeing one comprised entirely of ice is nothing short of stomach-tightening. Thwomps and ice... what did we do to deserve this?

The first thing I see is a Boo. Not a good sign, as their entire function in the game is to force you into moving in exactly the way you don't want to in any given circumstance. Attempting to trigger (and then dodge) the first horizontal-moving Thwomp while holding the little specter at bay proves difficult.

There are only two power-ups in the entire level, both of them Super Leafs if you're already big. Typically, becoming Raccoon Mario is good news – but here it's part of a trap: There are two wide chasms over the course of the main hall, both of which look as though they could be cleared with careful flying, and both of which are preceded by flight-friendly "runways." However, the chasms both "end" with ledges sticking out above where you'd need to "land;" rendering said landing impossible. As if that weren't bad enough, these spots are separated by a "slide-while-crouching" obstacle guarded by a cruelly close-placed Thwomp.

After clearing a particularly grueling run of Thwomp/Boo/Roto-Disc business just before the end, I find myself in a refreshingly empty passage. It's tempting to take off at a run, just to celebrate being able to... but that feels like the stuff of a trap. I proceed with caution, moving in short, deliberate steps... which ends up being the last thing I should've done. A Thwomp waits at the end, and I manage to spot him and turn back before he "engages" by sheer dumb luck. The way past is to run at top speed and jump over him (the passage ceiling opens up at the end) just as he takes off; but you more or less have to know he's there to know to do that. To my recollection, this is the

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“cheapest” trap in the game.

Unlike all of his previous incarnations, the Boom-Boom here starts off perched on a “pedestal” rather than at floor-level with you. Somehow, this makes him feel more like a “boss” in his own right than the others, but after that Thwomp-dodging nightmare of a Fortress he’s no match for me. Goodbye, Boom-Boom. Come to think of it, goodnight period – that was more exhausting than I’d expected.

TUESDAY, MAY 28TH 2012

Technically, it’s more like “bedtime Monday night” for me, but the facts are the facts – it’s about 3am or so Tuesday morning, and I’m winding down after a somewhat draining Memorial Day. My Grandmother is back at home after another worrying trip to the hospital; now under more-or-less constant oversight by family and nurses.

I woke up to a phone message from my mother informing me that she appeared to be in a “fading” state, and that people were advised to stop by and say... well, you get the idea. I went over, but couldn’t bring myself to stay long – she was with her nurse at the time and indeed not entirely ambulant, and my presence didn’t seem to be helping either of us. I’m TERRIBLE at this stuff – mortality and other “facts of life” that are wholly out of my control frighten and infuriate me – but I said my piece and left in as good a state as I could manage... at least until I got to my car.

I needed to get outside “the grid” of my familiar areas, and I needed to “happy up” (or at least clear my head) after that, and took the first course of action that entered my mind in that regard: My brother had raved recently about a retro-style video arcade (“The Pinball Wizard”) that had opened up shop just over the state line in New Hampshire... a half hour drive up into the country. All things considered, it was a better option than drinking in the early afternoon. The place was small, but well managed. They had the cabinets arranged by genre (fighters, brawlers, old school, puzzle, etc) and some surprising rarities – only time I’d ever seen the (barely) localized “Sailor Moon” beat-em-up in the wild, and I’m ALWAYS overjoyed to find a “Beast Busters” still standing.

In terms of head-clearing, the (not overlong) detour did the trick, and on arriving home I learn that the earlier worries were a touch premature – her condition had improved greatly later on in

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the day. Small relief, but relief none the less. Still, since “playing classic games as a psychological-balm” has become a theme of the day, may as well polish off some more of World 6 before I officially call it a day.

LEVEL 6-8

Green grass? Blue(ish) skies? What sorcery is this?

For whatever reason (there’s nothing on the Map to indicate “special” terrain), 6-8 eschews the wintery trappings of the rest of the World 6 in favor of a more traditional (for the rest of the game) layout. I don’t know why, but I don’t care – finally, solid ground with proper traction once again. Sure, there are some Ice Bricks, meaning I’ve got to be on the lookout for Buster, but I’ll take it.

I pick up a Troopa shell and use it to kill a Ptoocie right at the start, and something I’ve never seen before happens: the shell gets “stuck” in a bump-loop between the lip of the pipe and the edge of the one-block-length pit next to it. Interesting sight, but I immediately regret doing it when I realize my path forward is filled with White Piranha Plants and Spikes – would’ve been much more satisfying to mow them all down, and maybe worth enough points for some extra lives.

After an open field of ice-bricks (some arranged, mysteriously, into a letter “H” with a 1-Up hiding above) is a P-Switch that looks strangely lonely – where are all the bricks it would be turning to coins? Taking flight, I find them – a HUGE mass of bricks (currently coins, of course) floating alone up the sky. I only manage to snatch a handful of coins before they turn back, then waste some time flying back up to see if anything is hiding there.

As it turns out, the big brick-mass was hiding nothing, and I end up making it out of the Level with only 5 seconds to spare.

LEVEL 6-9

You have the option of skipping either 6-9 or 6-10, as both ways lead to the third(!) Fortress, which means they’re both notoriously difficult Levels. 6-9 is placed adjacent to a lake on the Map, which means we must prepare for some swimming.

The first thing you see in 6-9 is pipe leading down, presumably into another flooded cavern. On the right there seems to be a “wall” of large Ice Blocks, but it’s actually the side of a stack that can be scaled and crossed to

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skip the *entire* level... if you have a P-Wing, since there's no room to fly via the traditional running start. Owing to a hit-detection glitch, it's *possible* the "climb" the cracks between the ice-blocks in the NES version as Small Mario; though I've never been able to do it myself...

The pipe, as expected, drops me into yet another underground lake. Like other cave levels, there are dual upper and lower (water-filled) paths leading to the same end; the water brimming with Cheep-Cheep and Blooper hazards, while the "dry" path is all precision jumps and Piranha Plants. There's a spot at the beginning where Frog Mario can swim past some otherwise-inaccessible current-pipes to reach a treasure room, but I've long since lost all my Frog Suits.

The upper path starts off with a pair of Muncher Fields separated by singular wood-blocks that test your jumping accuracy and, as a bonus, prepare you for similar but *much worse* frustrations in World 7. After a brief mandatory dip back into the water I take the high-road again in the second chamber, uncovering a P-Switch just before what looks to be the most unforgiving Muncher jump yet. Good news: P-Switches turn Munchers into coins just like bricks! Bad news: When the remaining ones turn back, they kill me.

Second time through I opt for the water route, immediately encountering my old friend Big Bertha in the first chamber. In the second I run into a Mother Blooper and experience my first (for this playthrough) hit of the dreaded NES Slowdown...



BULLET TIME 101



A common ailment of NES games, processor slowdown caused the onscreen action to move in jittery slow-motion (reminiscent of the movie-effect "*The Matrix*" would one day dub "bullet time"). It would occasionally occur when too many independently-moving elements were onscreen at any given time; one of the many reasons why console games often favored sparse "enemies as obstacles" sprite-placement strategies instead of the waves-of-attackers design seen more often in arcade titles. In some instances this almost became a "skill feature" – I remember distinctly trying to *cause* slowdowns in Mega Man or Ninja Gaiden games in order to make certain bosses or sections more manageable, though I don't recall how well it actually ever worked...

In Mario games, though, it was almost always an unwelcome

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annoyance, and I suddenly get very paranoid that I'm going to crash the game. Wii ports from older consoles weren't so much "faithful" as they were "direct because that saves money," meaning that ports like the one I'm using brought their "authentic" processing issues with them. (Capcom's deliberately-retro "Mega Man 9 & 10" games actually had an option to turn on "simulations" of this slowdown where-appropriate, which is meta beyond belief...) Fortunately, I manage to exit 6-9 before a crash has chance to occur.

LEVEL 6-10

Wide-open sky plus low-stacked Ice Block terrain equal a nervous gamer. 6-10 is a relatively short level, but it's one of the nasty ones.

Right in the middle of the level is a huge wall of Brick Blocks, three lengths wide and rising high into the sky. Buster Beetles have been lobbing Ice-Bricks at me, but their doing so has exposed a narrow spot below two bricks which I can reach with a sliding-crouch maneuver. Striking the bricks produces, as expected, a white Beanstalk that rises up parallel to the wall. At the top is a P-Switch that turns the wall into a tower of coins – it's fun to fall down through the riches, though I can't help but think how frustrating yet hilarious it would be get "stuck" in there when they turned back.

Fresh from the coin dive, I come upon the first of a new type of ice hazard: Frozen Munchers hiding under Frozen Coins. The temptation here is genius – melt the ice to get the coins, but run the risk of unfreezing the nigh-invincible black plants. I don't have a Flower on me at the moment, so I don't have to worry – though up ahead is a spot where Frozen Munchers block the mouth of a pipe, and I wish I'd had one to bring in. (My regret doubles when later on, I look up the level and learn that the prize in that pipe was another Hammer Suit!)

The final hurdle is an absolute beast of a jump: a long stretch of icebound coins and Munchers, topped by ice-bricks and Busters, ending with a wide leap ending in a narrow platform and a second jump over a propeller. Diabolical, but ultimately manageable.

WORLD 6 - FORTRESS 3

The first 3rd Fortress in the game and one of the most difficult, as it's also the first to feature (among other things) only one power-up and exclusively invulnerable enemies.

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The first thing I see on entering is a spike-covered ceiling, giving way to a high-ceiling chamber where a pair of conveyer belts (another maddening trope of 80s platformer level-design) are my only way across two wide pits of spikes. Roto-Discs and Boos are onhand as well, just to make the maneuvering extra difficult.

Two Stretch platforms, looking deceptively comfy (like pillows or giant marshmallows) and guarding a power-up... which is promptly taken from me by the Thwomp at a second set of spike-pits. Jumping based purely on instinct and dumb luck, I clear the last stretch of this chamber (two Stretches over a final spike-pit) and find the door...

...Which drops me into a vertical shaft with a trio of Boos. There doesn't seem to be anywhere to go, until one realizes that the background "walls" seem to be moving up and down independent of the floor – the trick being to let the room "stretch" until the exit rises into view. The presence of the Boo ghosts makes this feel an awful lot like a reference to the legendary "stretching room" of Disneyland's Haunted Mansion, and in that respect is a precursor to the Spook House levels that would become a Mario staple one game later.

Now for Boom-Boom. Per my usual strategy, he's dead before I can take much notice that the placement of two levels of five floating blocks would've made him a real challenge had he a chance to get moving. In this, as with the rest of the Third Fortress, I feel like luck is playing a big role tonight – might as well take the chance and head for the Castle...

LEVITY

The King of Ice Land has been transformed into—hah!—a seal (or maybe a sea lion?) who sits on his throne, balancing his crown on his nose like a ball. For reasons I don't fully grasp, the sight of this sends me into a laughing fit – I've skipped the troublesome World 6 so often, I had totally forgotten about this particular King. Almost seems a shame to turn him back...

WORLD 6 – AIRSHIP

The ship is blue, which feels about right for Ice Land's color scheme. It opens with a pair of Bolt Lifts stretched over wide spaces spread just wide enough to trick over-eager players into jumping onto the difficult-to-manage devices when both spaces can actually be cleared with simple running-jumps if you time it properly – once again, the way these levels have been

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maximized down to the last pixel in terms of both instructing and “messaging with” the player is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

Speaking of “messaging with,” a cruel fake-out next rears its head: it looks like there might be a high-path/low-path split here, but the wall blocking the upper way can’t be cleared without a P-Wing, and hesitating too long can get you scroll-crushed. Instead it’s a low-path sneak through a gauntlet of Fire Jets... where the up-and-down screen movement leads me to misjudge the size of a pit and fall to my death. Try again, dummy...

After the Jets is a spot where, for the first time, an Airship Level scrolls straight-vertical instead of sideways. A Power-Up waits in the blocks right at the end, and it’s a good idea to grab it.

The chamber of Lemmy Koopa (named, of course, for the lead-singer of Motorhead) looks “easy” at first, being a flat plain instead of multi-leveled like most of the other Koopaling’s quarters, but it’s only flat so that Lemmy can make full use of his secondary weapon: the Beach Ball. He rides around balanced on one of them, making him much harder to avoid, and each time you hit him he sends more of them bouncing around the room. If you land on top of them you can jump off, but they’re lethal from any other angle.

Jumping off the balls proves to do the trick, though – despite all the flailing “weaponry,” he meets his end relatively quickly. It may be worth mentioning that the King, in his subsequently-restored form, appears to be wearing a cat-ear cowl... which I’m not positive was a “thing” even in Japanese pop-fashion at the time.

THE BIG THAW

This playthrough is probably the most success (and the closest thing to “fun”) I’ve ever had making my way through Ice Land... but it’ll never be one of my favorite Worlds. That said, I do appreciate a lot of the things it does, aesthetically – the map-screen music is a genuinely unnerving loop, and the bleakness of the whited-out levels contributes a sense of snow-blindness that I can only imagine must accompany a real trek through a truly frozen wilderness.

There is now only one more world to go before the descent into Bowser’s Kingdom.



WORLD 7: PIPE MAZE



SATURDAY, JUNE 1 2012

Confession: Despite my oft-stated “ticking clock” scenario with this project re: “one more playthrough in my childhood home before I move out,” my actual apartment hunting has been moving in fits and starts, at best. I’ve only recently begun to make any real headway toward decent (within my budget) arrangements.

Oh, I’ve been looking at places, lots of places in fact. But I just haven’t found the proper space yet. I obviously don’t expect to find a palace, but I’m also not looking to move into somewhere sketchy – living in pseudo-squalor “for the experience” is for 20 year-olds who just moved to New York, not 30 year-olds belatedly moving from one part of Massachusetts to a different part of Massachusetts. The big breakthrough recently has been raising the ceiling on my price range, which seems to have opened up spots where the dollar-amount rent is higher than I’d been looking at but some of the amenities (electricity, for example) are included... which might actually work out better. I have a prospect in the works now – a lead on an in-law apartment in the lower-level of a suburb in nearby Revere. Sounds promising. We’ll see...

As though setting us up for the wave of new-ness to come in Bowser’s domain, the next-to-last World is decidedly different from what we’ve experienced before; starting with the detail that this is the only World (in the NES version, at least) to be called something other than “Land.” Whereas the other Worlds are themed around traditional geographic features (or, in the case of Sky Land, the lack thereof) this one is themed around a man-made (Koopa-made?) feature and a specific type of enemy: pipes and all manner of Piranha Plants. By that same token, it’s also the first instance of a Mario game building a World-theme around a mechanism/characteristic that only occurs in the Mario franchise – the slow-creep of self-reference continues.

The layout of the Map Screen explains the name: It’s a series of islands, mostly unconnected, traversable only via Pipes. The local decorative-fauna are all Piranha Plants, and said leafy carnivores have also replaced the wandering Hammer Bros as map-hazards (two of them, fixed in place as though growing

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there rather than stalking the Map). The color scheme - a dark green and brown terrain against the darker-than-usual blue water - almost gives a sense of passing light... it's dusk now, and beyond lies dark times.

The music is also refreshingly different (and excellent) a slow, low, beat that recalls a dark, smoky jazz club during off-hours - "suspiciously laid-back" would be an accurate description - particularly given the amount of punishment the Levels are about to mete out...

LEVEL 7-1

If nothing else, I am thrilled to be back on relatively-stable, non-ice-covered ground. Green grass, autumn-hued ground, a cream-colored sky - it's good to be back to normal...

...And I've spoken too soon, as a few steps brings me to a door that leads to a vertical, pipe-filled shaft. Welcome to Pipe Land. Here is our first appearance of "thin pipes," which later portend the hated Munchers but for now do a welcome job of changing up what could otherwise be mundane scenery. Of note is that, while this isn't the first vertical stage, it is the first to break out the old arcade-game design trope of having objects (including the player) that move off one end of the screen emerge on the opposite side. In the arcade era this was a mandatory design shortcut, but here it's incorporated into the actual navigation of the level.

Going up through the first pipe I encounter the first instance of what will become World 7's most consistently-employed trap: Piranha Plant killing-boxes - in this case, two facing each other and a third popping down onto them from the pipe I have to enter to progress. It's a test, and I fail - meeting quick death by forgetting that standing next to a pipe-mouth doesn't hold a Plant at bay the way standing on it does. It's probably worth noting, at this point, that World 7 is often regarded to have the most difficult set of levels overall in the entire game - even compared to World 8.

I don't repeat my mistake, but the fun is just beginning. Incidentally, the graphical detail of the pipes being set behind or in-front of each other does a solid job of conveying depth and dimensionality - you begin to really feel that you're ascending through a network of subterranean plumbing.

Emerging from the twisty pipe I see three Question Blocks above me and another signature World 7 trap to my left: two pipes, both leading up - which one to choose? In this case, jumping up onto the blocks above doesn't just help me find a hidden 1-Up; it gives me the answer: the furthest-left pipe is the good one, the other will just take me on a ride and drop me down to the previous level. Learning to "read" the layout of warp pipes is the key to

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survival in Pipe Land.

A Red Troopa between two blocks waits on the next level up. He seems to be guarding a power-up above him, but it's just a coin – the real prize turns out to be in the blocks penning him in. Climbing higher, a stretch of “floor” made from thin-pipes affords your first opportunity to fly (if you have a Tail) by running off the screen; your goal being a pipe-accessible bunch of coins in the upper left. I have no tail, so it's a tricky set of jumps up a “staircase” of Piranha-occupied pipes for me.

More climbing. A spot where you can get “stuck” bouncing between two Music Blocks is the fun kind of frustrating, while seeing the roomful of coins at the left and knowing I'm unable to get in is the regular kind... but they're nothing compared to the last “room” of narrowly separated packs of wooden blocks. Jumping off a Troopa's back on my way to the exit (finally!) exposes a hidden 1-Up. Hah! That never would've worked on purpose...

UP THE DOWN WARP-PIPE

It's a clever extra detail – seen elsewhere in the game but nowhere as frequently as in World 7 – that pipe-to-pipe travel on the Maps actually drops you into a one-room “level” just to move from one pipe to another. Like a lot of the best stuff in SMB3, there's really no gameplay or strategic reason for this, but the aesthetic/atmospheric value is great: it makes the whole world feel so much more cohesive, which is a trick considering how abstract and “representational” a lot of its design is; especially on the Maps.

The pipe previously blocked by 7-1 goes to a second island that houses 7-2 and two other pipes, one of which you don't need to beat a level to access. It leads to another island populated by a single lonely Mushroom House, where I pick up... a mushroom. Anticlimactic, yes, but ultimately useful. Now, back into the fight...

LEVEL 7-2

Improbably, this is a desert-themed level. There's nothing on the Map to indicate this, but for some reason 7-2 shares the basic visual elements of most levels from World 2... only with a lot more pipes, silver bricks, and much greater difficulty.

The first pipe appears “blocked” by silver bricks, but you can't go down. The second, however, leads down into an underground waterway, revealing this to be a dual-path level. Swimming to the left reveals a dead-end, but also a P-Switch. (This is another “get all the coins for a white Mushroom

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House” level, though you’d need a Frog Suit to pull it off and I haven’t had one in awhile.) I feel vaguely smug at first as I swim to the right, secure in the knowledge that I’m likely bypassing a bunch of enemies and obstacles... until I head up the pipe at the “end” of the waterway (you can see the other side of the lower level, but will have to head for the surface to get there) and remember which level I’m in.

I find myself in a spot that, back when the game was new to me (when a lot of things were new to me...) took my life on any number of occasions: a “valley” created by two tall pipes and patrolled by a Para-Troopa that, when you try to exit, blocks you in with a “bridge” of invisible Music Blocks across the entire thing; requiring you to backtrack and get across the non-swimming way. So much for the scenic route.

The level concludes with a long stretch of varying-length pipes and Venus FireTraps to cross. You can go back underground, but only to get an extra Power-Up. Continuing with the overall “maze” sub-theme of World 7, it’s another level where multiple paths are designed specifically to eat up your timer – though it must be said the stark visual contrast between the sand-colored desert décor and the bright blue water makes for a lovely level-palette.

LEVEL 7-3

Occasionally, World 7’s Levels feel like a “greatest hits” of previous Worlds’ visual/design themes; perhaps as a signal that the end of the game is approaching and this is your last go-round. To me, though, this time a new idea takes shape: Warp-pipes being the primary method of distance-travel in this world, perhaps Pipe Maze is the “center” of it all – the “hub” from which all the pipes (and maybe the roots of the Piranha Plants) extend; thus these pieces of other Worlds are a part of that, traces of flora and fauna cross-pollinated from across the worlds.

Case in point: 7-3 is a Level of rolling green hills straight out of Grass Land, but its real aim is refining your skills at Invincibility Running. Almost all of the power-up blocks in the level will have a Star Man in them, but only if you HAVE Star Man power when you hit them. The idea is to just plow through the place, getting all the Star Men and killing all the enemies...

...But when Lakitu turns up partway through, I decide to double-back and take him out. Unfortunately, invincibility wears off just as I get there, and a Spiny Egg takes me out instead. In fact, that happens twice – for such a straightforward, almost “bland” level, it’s a surprisingly tough slog. I clear it out on the third try, getting four Star Men and blowing through it all quickly

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enough that I actually have to check a map to confirm that it is, indeed, kind of a “bland” level apart from the invulnerable-gauntlet aspect.

LEVEL 7-4

The “hardest versions of stuff you’ve already done” theme continues in 7-4, which is an auto-scrolling underwater enemy-gauntlet level.

Auto-scrolling underwater is a crafty twist, as the usual “trick” to underwater levels is to hug the walls or other solid-surfaces to keep yourself from drifting all over the place. Here the level has been designed to crush you for trying to do that... at least in the first half, which is comprised of coral blocks and patrolled by Big Berthas, Nanny Bloopers and Spiked Cheep-Cheeps who can actually move against the current and through the scenery.

After that, the level dumps you out into open water – which is profoundly disorienting, as the solid-blue backdrop makes direction impossible to judge... until I find myself in a school of Jelectros. Now there’s at least a way to gauge movement, but as a trade-off literally everything around you that isn’t water is now deadly. The sense of having to rely on the movements of enemies/predators to tell which way is “up” actually does an excellent job of recreating the sense of oceanic diving – which I would likely appreciate more if the deep ocean and what lurks there were not the most terrifying things in the world to me.

Growing up on the New England coast, harbors/beaches being suddenly invaded by huge fields of jellies was a sight I was both familiar with and uniquely horrified by. Seeing it recreated in one of my beloved Mario games has always been a source of great discord for me. After surviving the Jelectros, the rest of the level (another Bertha, more cruelly-arranged coral blocks) passes with relative ease.

LEVEL 7-5

Another level whose completion is technically optional, but it is blocking the way to a Mushroom House. 7-5 is another dead-end ridden maze à la 7-2, and once again the starkness of the design and color palette are what stands out first – deep blue walls, bright green pipes, pitch-black backdrop. Visually, it’s so simple and starkly-hued as to suggest a brief regression to the Old World of the arcades...

The level begins with a pair of large single-room chambers, leading out into the main maze. The whole place is lousy with Troopas, and as a gang of Bob-Ombs greets me at the maze I realize I was probably supposed to bring

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a shell down that second pipe with me. No matter, they're easy enough to avoid. Moving forward through the hall I try jumping up to the next level (where the pipes are) through holes but am blocked by invisible blocks both times – a preview of coming attractions. All of the pipes above this space lead further up, but only the center proves to be the true exit – though the fourth pipe all the way at the end below leads to what might be a power-up...

...It does: the Leaf! Now armed with a trusty tail, I smash a brick that lets me skip over a lower chamber and go directly to the final half of the maze. Heading down a pipe next a Troopa "caged" by ice-bricks, I find a Spiny penned-up between two blocks and a wall that prevents simply jumping over him. Once more, the tail does its job... almost. As it turns out, what looked like the exit is sealed off by invisible blocks, forcing me to go all the way back around and over to escape.

More than any other area, World 7's Levels are built to kill you by running out the clock, and suddenly my amusing-but-not-too-challenging maze escape morphs into a nail-biter as my counter is all the way down to ten seconds by the time I hit the goal.

ARMORY

Humorously, the pipe that becomes accessible after beating 7-5 leads to nowhere: just a single pipe-exit on a tiny island surrounded on both sides by plants. Back we go, to the Mushroom House.

I had somehow forgotten that the remaining two Toads of World 7 maintained houses that, depending on your choice of chest, gifted either Hammer, Tanooki or Frog Suits: one last chance to load up on the Big Guns before the descent into Bowser's world. A Tanooki is my prize this time; as good a moment as any to call it a night...

MONDAY, MAY 4 2012

Today (or, rather, yesterday – though it was only a few hours ago) was a good day. Dinner at fancy (for our area) restaurant with the family "officially" celebrating my kid sister's college graduation. Classic New England fare: steaks, big salads, chowder, family-size plate of mussels, etc.

Went our separate ways after that, but as my brother and his girlfriend were making ready to head back to their apartment it occurred to the three of us that we didn't have anything to "do" between us. A lightbulb went off in my head, and I asked my brother

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if he'd made note that "The Simpson's Arcade Game" had been ported Xbox Live? He had not – but his widening eyes told me we'd found our "thing to do" for the evening.

Side-scrolling multiplayer fighting games (colloquially known as "beat-em-ups" or "brawlers") were one of the reigning arcade genres of the early 1990s, largely because it was a can't-miss template for almost any franchise you could dream up (or, more profitably, license). Players (usually between 1 and 4, sometimes more) could each pick from a roster of good guys and fight their way through waves of their series' bad guys. The various "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" titles of the era are among the most well-remembered today, but the "Simpsons" version was a popular oddity. Developed by a Japanese team who weren't given the chance to become intimately familiar with the source material, it played like a fever-dream version of the then-groundbreaking animated sitcom: Springfield is crawling with hired goons and even zombies, Mr. Smithers is stealing diamonds for some reason, and Mr. Burns attacks with a mecha-suit at the end.

In any case, the game was a staple of me and my brother's arcade-frequenting youth. We were never able to muster the proper stamina (read: amount of quarters) to actually beat the damn thing, though, so powering through it with XBLA's unlimited continues is a special thrill.

All in all, a solid evening of retro-gaming; now to be followed by a solid early-morning of retro-gaming...

A ROAD RE-CLAIMED BY NATURE

Unique to World 7, the previously ever-present wandering Hammer Bros map-hazards have been replaced by spots where the path has become overgrown with Piranha Plants. Unlike the Hammer Bros, you can't just wait for them to get out of the way. The first of such tests awaits on the fourth (level-bearing) island of Pipe Land, and while he (she? it?) is quite skippable I've come too far to start backing away from a fight now.

WORLD 7 – PIRANHA PLANT 1

The entire (relatively brief) area is made from pipes (the ground, the walls, up-above, everything), and the effect of that is surprisingly

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disconcerting by simple virtue of how absent even the semblance of “solid ground” or flooring is.

It doesn't help that there are Venus FireTraps everywhere right at the start, beginning with a pipe that's just tall enough to require a running-jump – meaning that the vital strategy of standing against the pipe to keep the plant from jumping out has been turned against me. I make it to the top, then jump to the next... and even after all these years what I see next still makes my heart jump just a little.

A wide stretch of thin pipes looms ahead with Munchers popping in and out of them in sequential rhythm so that only “every other” space is safe at any given time, and even then only for a moment as Munchers do not stay in their pipes just because you're standing on them. Helpfully, they are also the only enemies who don't turn invisible or stop moving when the game is paused, meaning you can stop the clock and memorize the “beat” of their movements before proceeding.

Making it across the Munchers is so precarious and cringe-inducing that I blow through what would normally be a difficult jump (a Piranha Plant hangs down from above) and a final run of Plants and FireTraps in something like a triumphant daze. The smallest pipe leads down to a treasure room (I love the design detail that there are Munchers wriggling around under the floor) where a small chest holds a P-Wing – fitting prize for such a difficult diversion.

OASIS

The pipe directly to the left of the now-cleared Plant leads to a spot behind a locked gate on the final island where the Castle is – a cold-hearted tease, to be certain, but it makes me notice another nice visual detail: the Castle's island has big flowers for foliage, like Giant Land, instead of the Piranha Plants that “decorate” the rest of World 7. Fitting that that's the last place that has yet to be overgrown, perhaps? Good thought, but now back to the previous island and the first Fortress...

WORLD 7 – FORTRESS 1

This Fortress is unique among all the others in that it's devoid of enemies (except Boom-Boom) and has as its central feature a huge chamber filled with Bricks and a P-Switch that turns them all into coins. It's also something of a maze, so you can keep looping back around to do that again and rack up lots of 1-Ups. (The actual “exit” from the Coin Chamber is an invisible door

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hidden on the only non-brick bit of platform.) It's sometimes referred to as "Bowser's Treasury," which I'll admit is a fun interpretation of the design.

I opt to go in using one of my saved-up P-Wings – might as well have some fun and shore up my extra lives. After gobbling up my fill of coins I find and use the invisible door, entering a small secret room with two pipes – one going down, the other to the right. The down pipe goes to yet another small room, this one holding a Giant Question Block and... yes! A Tanooki Suit! And since I came in with a P-Wing active, I am now – for the first time this playthrough – a permanently flight-enabled Tanooki Mario!

It takes a bit of doubling-back around, but after making my way through a Lava Chamber (in a nice bit of time-gobbling devilry, there's a Fire-Flower Power-Up on a ledge that seems enticing but proves useless and detrimental) the Fortress suddenly opens up in a huge (and similarly deserted) Great Hall. The only doors simply lead back to earlier areas, so I fly up and find the true exit in the form of a pipe high up on the ceiling. That's why they give you a Tanooki Suit – so you can fly up there. Once again, it's the clock – not the enemies – that are the real danger here (Boom-Boom, once again, goes down like a chump.)

LEVEL 7-6

Another vertical-shaft level, this one with an intimidating lack of places to stand that aren't Donut Lifts or Directional Lifts.

After hopping up the steps, ride #1 is a Multi-Directional Lift that you're supposed to steer around a horizontal pipe first (or jump up onto the pipe and let the "ghost" of the lift pass through) followed by one that only goes straight up, during which time you're asked to avoid two Blocks topped with spikes that are (distressingly) twice as large as any spike-hazards seen before.

I'm a little ashamed to say it took me a few beats (and two slip-and-falls) to remember what I was supposed to do at the third Directional Lift, which only goes to the left while the pipe to the next level is only accessible from the right. The trick is to remember the "screen-loop" physics of these vertical levels (exit screen-right, enter screen-left and vice-versa), set the lift going on its own, just over the pipe it passes-through on the left and then ride it "around" to the right and reach the pipe that way. On its face not a difficult puzzle, but easy to overlook at first given how few previous levels worked this way.

Another Multi-Directional Lift now, and a narrow passage though a ceiling (and then floor) of those plus-sized spikes is the goal. Even if you make it through, the Lift is set up to vanish shortly after, leaving you to jump

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for dear life onto one of the available safe spots (a left and right-going Lift, respectively). I'm still wearing a Tanooki Suit at this point, so I'm probably being even more cautious than I'd otherwise need to be. The final climb to the exit is admirably hairy: one last Multi-Directional ride through one of two paths – both of which are guarded by Piranha Plants – and then sideways over a floor of spikes to reach the pipe. Jump too often or bang your head and you'll be impaled. I don't mind telling you I'm proud of myself for getting through that in one try with my fancy animal pajamas intact.

LEVEL 7-7

And so, here we are.

Apart from possibly 6-5, 7-7 is probably the most often-skipped “optional” level (i.e. you can skip it without using a Cloud) in the entirety of the game. 7-7 is that level; the one where 95% of the surface you must cross is completely covered by an endless field of Munchers, arranged in such a way that not even a P-Wing can get you through unscathed – only the precision-use of Star Man can do the trick. It's not blocking forward-progress, it's not blocking a Mushroom House (the much less difficult 7-8 is), there is literally no reason to play through it... other than to prove that you can.

In a way, it's another handy example of what made this game so special originally and what still makes it special today – it's all about that “room to breathe” again. This level exists to challenge completists, the sort of “just for fun” extra that just didn't happen in this era due to how limited and precious space was.

Here's the deal: There are four Question Blocks spread across the level, each one containing a Star Man. You have to run as fast as you can and dodge obstacles as precisely as you can so as to collect each one before the previous runs out – without invincibility, there is simply no place to stand that won't hurt or kill you. I have a bad feeling, thusly, that I'm about to say goodbye to my Tanooki Suit once again...

Sure enough, I lost the Suit during Attempt #1. Got the first three Star Men, made it through mid-point hazard where you have to jump through narrow spaces created by upper and lower facing pipes, but ran out at the simply mean part where the fourth Star Man has a wall next to it so you can't just run back and grab it when it comes out. Once I blew that, the rhythm is gone – the star-power runs out just before a space you have to crouch-slide under to clear (the exit is right on the other side!) and I'm plant food. Damn it to hell.

Attempt #2: Back in, this time as plain-old Small Mario. It's actually

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easier to maneuver this way... but that damn wall trips me up again. Dead.

Attempt #3: Got the fourth star to spit-out in the “right” direction this time... and then managed to miss grabbing it. Bounced right under my jump, lost my power in mid-air, dead before the I hit the “ground.”

Attempt #4: See Attempt #3. The gods, they mock me.

Attempt #5: Getting angry, getting *sloppy* – this time I didn’t even clear the mid-point pipes.

Attempt #6: FINALLY! At last, I manage to hit the blocks and grab the Star Men in a perfect rhythm and blow right through the damn thing. Palms sweaty, twitchy... but I did it. In Mario Lore, 7-7 is a legend among Levels, and I’m both worn and exhilarated to be reminded why. Here, using only a handful of the game’s elements in deviously-specific ways, the designers created one of the most memorable areas in the entire Super Mario Bros canon.

LEVEL 7-8

Anything would feel “easier” after the punishment that was 7-7, but Level 7-8 is quite a beast in its own right: a long, sprawling area overgrown with Plants and profoundly difficult jumps, beginning with the very first – another “tall enough to require a running-start” pipe with a Plant of its own and two FireTraps sniping at you all the while.

It’s the next spot that’s the killer, though: five vertical pipes arranged like teeth (two above, three below) with snapping Plants aplenty. The trick is to “undershoot” your jump to the center pipe so that you “miss” the upper plant, and I’m happily surprised to see that I remember how to do it; yet another muscle-memory moment, I suppose. It briefly feels like a reward when I grab the Star Man from the subsequent Question Blocks – nothing feels better than plowing through perilously-arranged enemies while invulnerable, after all – right up until it runs out and I’m whacked by a patrolling Ptooie. Bastard was fiendishly positioned, “guarding” a spot where a block and a low-hanging pipe necessitate a narrow passage.

Second time through (Hah! Made the jump again!) I forgo the Star Man and concentrate on dodging. Takes a bit more time, but the rhythm pays off and I slip past Ptooie via the block he’s stalking in front of happens to be white and the “fall into the background” trick still works. As a nice payoff, it turns out there’s a Pink Music Block for a quick trip to another Coin Heaven area... and then a drop back down to earth where I’m once again “in the shit” – Ptoopies everywhere. One of them is stationed atop two pipes, and it strikes me odd that he’s no just in one of them... maybe there’s something

down there?

There is! A secret room, a Giant Block and a HAMMER SUIT! Since I'd been saving the one I picked up earlier to (try to) use on Bowser, this is my first time this playthrough using one. Joy.



THE OTHER BROS



The Hammer Suit is the first power-up in a Mario game to have both offensive and defensive capabilities – not only does it let you throw a volley of projectiles like the Hammer Bros, its helmet/shell armor makes you effectively fireproof when ducking. The controls take a little while to get used to, as the hammers are thrown in a steep upward-arc (they fly further if tossed while moving, making them the first Mario weapon to incorporate physics), but once you get the hang of it it's damn close to game-breaking in terms of how formidable you become... until you take a hit, at least...

...and take a hit I do, forgetting that the White Muncher up ahead of me (the last obstacle before the goal) spits out an arcing stream of fireballs and fail to duck in time – at first robbing me of my Hammer Suit, then of my life. On the plus side, that means I can go back through and get the suit again.

Round two. By now, clearing the earlier part of the level is almost easy; in no time flat I've got my Hammer Suit again. Let's do this th – *sonnuvabitch!* The little bastard got me again!

Round three: By now my palms are sweating, which is not helping with all the precision jumping. It takes longer this time, with more waiting and backtracking, but now it's a mission – I will get out of this level and I will be dressed like a hammer-throwing turtle when I do it. Find the pipe again. Get the suit again... hah! A casually-thrown hammer took the offending enemy out before he even appeared on my screen! Justice.

FINAL GIFTS

Clearing 7-8 (at last) opens the path to the very last Mushroom House in the entire game. As I enter, I feel something approaching melancholy nostalgia – no doubt owing to the various life-changes going on in my real life at the moment. Part of the point of this has become to play through this specific game “one last time” in my childhood home, and the idea that this is the last time I'll perform this “pick mystery item from the chest” bit in those

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circumstances is hitting me surprisingly hard considering how trivial a thing it is. It would be just great if it were a really good item, for the occasion...

...a Frog Suit. That'll do, Toad. That'll do. Can't think of a better mood to end this day's work/play in, as a matter of fact.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 6TH

Finally got a look at my first truly solid apartment prospect... and I instantly liked it. Good location, convenient for work, full kitchen, full bed, bathroom, nice little niche I can easily turn into a TV/gaming area, price extraordinarily well given all that.

So... I put in a bid. We'll see if it pays off. Either way, the "finish this project before I move out" clock is now actively ticking again. Back to work, now...

LEVEL 7-9

A maze of small chambers made from interlocking pipes, once again inexplicably utilizing a desert backdrop and color-scheme. I'm still wearing my Hammer Suit from the previous level, and it comes in handy for taking out an early Troopa, but I can't imagine this level – the last in World 7 – will let me hang on to it for long...

It looks possible to clear the bricks and fly up onto the top of this bizarre structure if I had a tail, but I don't and I'm not about to give up my hammers to get one. Instead I head for the spot underneath where you can hop up into the maze by bouncing off some Music Blocks, noting that I like the way the space between pipes is depicted as an actual "break" rather than just empty space – both aesthetically and as a subtle hint that wall-destruction/removal will be key to further progress...

...And my moment of pleasant appreciation ends with a Para-Goomba dropping down from above, taking my Hammer Suit and killing me. Bloody hell.

Heading back in, I snap up the Mushroom from the aforementioned Question Blocks and take my frustration at hammer... less... ness out on the Para-Goomba. There's another Power-Up in a "cell" to the bottom left of the structure, but getting to it is a trick – you have to go to the "roof," drop off the lefthand edge, hug the wall while falling, and pull Ice Bricks away as you go to make a "door." It takes me three tries, but I get it down – a Fire Flower is my reward. Burn, baby, burn.

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The rest of the level is built around a pretty great – if initially-frustrating – fake-out: you can easily run across the top of the maze all the way to the end of then screen, but you won't find a goal; just a dead end. There's actually a small pipe in the bottom-right area of the maze, and that's the way out. To get there, you're supposed to go back to the roof (assuming you ran all the way to the end in the first place), drop down where the set of Music Blocks are, pull down the left-hand set of Ice Bricks, and then just keep trying to head right to the Pipe and freedom.

I've got to say... as much as I like the "gotcha" aspect of the fake-out dead-end, the "maze" aspect to this level is more irritating than clever. It's not especially fun or even "challenging" to play through, and as such makes for kind of an inauspicious end to the otherwise extremely creative World 7 Levels. Ah, well.

WORLD 7 – FORTRESS 2

SMB3's next-to-last mini-boss fortress begins with a precipitous long-jump onto a tall, plant-housing pipe surrounded on both sides by lava – just to let me know what I'm in for. I suppose I should be thankful for a straightforward "jump over the lava, avoid the enemies" setup after all of the tricky mazes so populous in World 7, but it's still quite a workout. The only reason the plant in that first pipe doesn't kill me is because I had Fire Mario powers to lose instead.

Now I'm small, in a level made up almost entirely of narrow, precision-demanding jumps onto dangerous pipes amid a river of lava... and right up ahead is a Boo. Spectacular – now I've got to worry about effectively jumping "backwards" so as to hold him at bay. Just after and below the third pipe is a brick that I know contains a Star Man, positioned out over the lava, and against my better judgement I'm going to go for it...

Hah! My better judgement was wrong – I get the Star, and now for a brief moment I'm untouchable. It's viscerally empowering to be able to jump and move through this part without a care, watching the Plants disintegrate upon touching me... and seeing even the mighty Thwomp at the midpoint (placed in a deadly position otherwise) simply bounce out of existence with the same pathetic "pop!" sound as any other random enemy when it tries to crush me is satisfying in the extreme. I've never been so "down" to see Star Power fade, but for a moment there I felt like a god.

Up ahead: one of the most difficult jumps in the game – a narrow space between two opposite-facing vertical Pipes whose occupant Piranha Plants actually bump heads when they emerge. It'd be nice to still be invincible,

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but I'll have to settle for being lucky... because I make it almost without trying. That'll never happen again. After that it's just seven more jumps (and a Question Block containing a Leaf! Hooray Leaf!), eight more plants, one more Boo, and a Thwomp before the Exit Pipe (cruelly positioned in a "fall down and to the left" spot in the middle of the lava) to the next chamber.

The last two obstacles in the Fortress are doozies – "duck and slide" spaces with Roto-Discs positioned so as to pass right through the space you're aiming for... and the second is followed by a Thwomp! After that, it's almost welcome to head up some stairs and drop down to fight Boom-Boom who, after all that, feels more like an afterthought than ever. I killed a Thwomp back there. Some turtle is going to stop me? Not today.

WORLD 7 – PIRANHA PLANT 2

Fittingly, the last obstacle between me and the Castle/Airship is another overgrown-plant zone; slightly larger and more dangerous than the first, but still nowhere near as bad as 7-7 (or that last Fortress).

The centerpiece of the area (once again made up entirely of Pipes and Plants) are two "fields" of Munchers arranged in an "every-other" pattern, forcing you to navigate using multiple small, precise jumps or one very long jump. I opt for the long jump over the first set, and it works perfectly... save for the Venus FireTrap that pops out of the "safe" pipe I was aiming for, killing me.

Second time through goes better – still mis-judge the timing on that jump, but this time I end up sailing over the Fire Trap instead of colliding with it. After that, the section of upside-down pipes is practically a breeze; but that last part... oh, that last part: Another wide stretch of intermittent-Munchers with only a set of four Question Blocks spread out above as a means to cross them. I make it, but just barely – and the treasure-box "reward" at the end just being a Mushroom takes away what little sense of accomplishment one can get.

But, oh well. Time for the home stretch...

ENEMY MINE

The King of Pipe Land has been transformed into a Piranha Plant – rather appropriate given the World, and noteworthy for being the only King whose alternate-form is an enemy sprite rather than some original creature – but kind of disappointing given how silly/offbeat some of the other reveals have been. It does, though, make for a fun callback to the original SMB,

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where some versions of the game story suggested that all or most of the enemies were actually transformed Mushroom People.

Either way, it's time to attack the final Airship.

WORLD 7 – AIRSHIP

The final Airship, commanded by one Ludwig Von Koopa, is all about open space and tricking you into taking the more-difficult path. Case in point: the very first stretch is a wide-open gap with only a pair of Flame Jets filling in the space, where one of those maddening Bolt Lifts appears to be your only means of safe passage. In actuality, I find that patiently making your way across via the “safe” parts of the Jets is actually preferable, though either way it's white knuckle stuff.

There's a spot where you can drop down for a Power Up directly after that, which is tempting to skip because the one-block-length access-point makes it look like an easy spot to get trapped... except the blocks on the sides are actually gray (stationary) Bolts, which means you can just jump right up through them. The level of visual-trickery the designers of this game were able to muster up using mostly block-placement remains staggering, even after seven Worlds of it.

Another Bolt Lift crossing, and yet another fake-out: it's entirely possible to jump from the safe side of the Fire Jet to the other side; but you can't see that until said Jet is almost halfway off the screen. In fact, I'm partway across using the treacherous Bolt before I see this and my memory kicks back in. The next spot pretty much dares you not to get crushed, either by failing to slide under a narrow gap in time or by head-butting a ceiling-mounted Bolt Lift in order to create a platform to climb over everything. I take the lower path, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't take more than one go to make it happen.

Suddenly, it appears as though the Airship itself has ended - the solid, singular structure replaced by what looks like a fleet of smaller aircraft: single wooden platforms with either Bolts or propellers mounted at their rears, some “piloted” by Rocky-Wrenches. One almost gets the impression (providing one has time to think during what quickly becomes a succession of all-or-nothing long-jumps) that these guys are the “wingmen” to the main ship. I manage to clear them without death (surprisingly) and only minimal cursing before finally landing on the final “deck.” I'm feeling good about myself right now: this is the longest and probably the most difficult of the airships, and I was sure it'd take me more than one try to make it through. Looks like I may actually clear this thing...

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...Or not. Stomped to death by Ludwig immediately after entering his chamber. Damn it. Alright, shake it off, head back in.

LUDWIG VON KOOPA

Like any next-to-last Boss worth his salt, Ludwig Von Koopa (named, of course, for Beethoven – making him the sole non-contemporary “pun-name” among the Koopalings) combines the most dangerous powers of his siblings: he’s big, he’s fast, he has stomp-stun ability (whose paralyzing-effect takes twice as long to wear off as Roy’s), and his chamber has an irregular-shaped floor, making running away problematic.

Graphically, Ludwig probably has the best-looking sprite (design-wise) of the Koopalings – very clearly rendered, and his face and name-sake inspired hair (white in the game, blue in all other depictions) give him a definite sense of personality. I’d be tempted to sit and admire his construction more if he wasn’t trying to murder me...

I took a Fire Flower in with me for my second run through the ship, hoping to use fireballs to hit Ludwig while keeping plenty of distance between us... but it’s not to be. I barely have time to get off two shots before he’s in my face and I have to just jump on him. The subsequent shell-attack takes my Fire Power and my size, but I have time for a second stomp – Yes! One more hit. Dodge the magic-blasts. Jump to avoid the stun-stomp. Come and get me, you little creep. One... more... hit... SUCCESS!

What makes the Koopalings such memorable opponents in this game is that they move around a lot more than most Mario boss characters had up to that point. With the exception of Fry Guy in SMB2, most Mario bosses prior had followed the model of Bowser in the first SMB: stay mostly in one place, perform a specific dangerous action, and either wait to be hit with something or worked-around by the player. The Koopalings, on the other hand, actively chase and attack you – they can even jump around like you do. It makes it feel much more like a knock-down, drag-out “brawl” than usual.

The King of Pipe Land turns out to be a Viking with a flapping mustache – funny. But the big surprise is yet to come...

POISONED PEN

“Yo! I kidnapped The Princess while you were running around. She’s here in my castle if you dare to try and rescue her. Ha ha ha... - King of The Koopas.”

The expected letter from Peach is actually from Bowser, revealing her abduction and daring you to come after her. Gee, didn’t see that coming, right? Well, actually, at the time of SMB3’s initial release this actually was something of an unexpected turn.

Since so many 80s and 90s platformers borrowed the “save the princess” plot from the original “Super Mario Bros.,” it became probably the most well-known gaming cliché of the Golden Age at least as far as the mainstream culture was concerned. Eventually Nintendo started being self-aware about it, having Peach get snatched up in every game... but at the time this was only the SECOND time this had happened; right after Peach had been Mario’s equal as a player-character in SMB2.

Well, surprising or not, the goal is now clear: Dark Land awaits.



WORLD 8: DARK LAND



FRIDAY, JUNE 15 2012

The past couple of weeks have been rough – equal parts trying and semi-exhilarating.

It's looking very much like I'm going to come out on top regarding that apartment, which is extremely good news. On the other hand... things seem to be deteriorating for Vovo (my grandmother). She's been back in and out of doctor's care, and now requires a rotating schedule of family members to keep an eye on her overnights. The failing health has taken most of her hearing. The inevitable, and whatever comes with it, is likely not far off.

*To be honest, I'll be "happy" for her to go to her rest. She'd always been a fiercely self-reliant person, and this current state must be as frustrating for her as it is for us. Mainly, I'm worried about what becomes of my various relatives in the wake of her passing: My father, in particular, doesn't handle these things well at all. Meanwhile, my mother, being *The Nurse* in the family and also the self-appointed manager of family history and memorabilia, will likely be conscripted as part of the arrangement-making.*

It will be taxing. I know this, and it dawns on me now that – though it wasn't my intent – if this apartment deal actually goes through I will be "moving on" at the precise moment when a family should be pulling closer together. Nothing I can do about that, but it feels unfortunately... "fitting" that fate would make a callous-seeming man of me in this moment.

As ever, SMB3 is there for me in this time... but not for much longer. I've reached the point of no return. The Last World. The Final Conflict. The end of the game.

Dark Land.

To call any video game villain of the Golden Age "scary" was usually a stretch. The traditional things that would read as "frightening" (ominous mood, partial-concealment, massive size, etc) in a monster were difficult to "pull off" in 8-bit graphics. Some games managed it thematically: "Castlevania II: Simon's Quest" masterfully used music, stark gothic graphics, and a grim

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plot line about scattered vampire body-parts to make itself suitably creepy. Other games managed it through shock and awe; the sudden appearance of the massive alien atop the waterfall in the third level of “Contra” is a great reveal, and that he’s such a beast to defeat made him a figure of some terror at least to young kids.

Bowser was not one of those villains, even in theory, before SMB3. He’d appeared without much in the way of in-game “character” in SMB1, had been absent from SMB2, and in the spin-off cartoons and comics his (significantly-altered) appearance as “King Koopa” rendered him as a buffoon – a dull-witted oaf defeated just as often by his own cartoonishly-outsized hubris as he was by the Mario Bros. In the SMB anime movie “Super Mario Bros: The Great Mission to Rescue Princess Peach” (never officially released in the U.S.) he’s nearly beaten in a battle of wits by Peach before the Bros even show up.

But all through “Super Mario Bros 3,” even though he hasn’t been seen, his presence has been felt and there’s been very little “funny” about it. This Bowser isn’t some single-minded kidnapper of Princesses: he’s a tactician – a warlord on the march. He’s conquered seven whole kingdoms, installed his children as puppet-dictators, and attacks from the sky with flying fortresses. Only when you were busy dismantling that mess did he make his power move and abduct Princess Peach. Evidently, for however long Mario and company were busy mucking about in Subcon... Bowser got his act together.

Now before us stretches his domain, and it’s ominously fitting that the landscape stretching before us is, essentially, HELL – a rusty-red map screen with lakes of bright orange lava and roaring fires in place of vegetation. The music is gloomy but also rapid, continuously reinforcing a theme of an approaching finale. Of climax. There are no level-markers on this first (of four) Map Screens, no Toad Houses, not even a Fortress... instead, your path is blocked by something (two somethings, actually) that looks completely, utterly out-of-place in a Mario game.

In the distance, bobbing up in and down in the “surf” of the lava lake, is a kind of Battleship; but before that – right in front of you – is a... *tank??*

WORLD 8 - TANKS

I love this part.

Once upon a time, this “level” was mind-blowing. Like I said, Bowser was not traditionally thought of as one of gaming’s more serious threats. And yet... here I am (or here Mario is), facing down a full-on battalion of TANKS. Bowser has gone modern-military – the last thing you ever expected to see in

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a Mario game. Granted, the “Tanks” are made of wood and pipes just like the Airships (and the Airship music plays in the background), but the presence of anything “militarized” in a Mario game just looks... wrong, which is of course why it’s such a perfect intro to the final World. Looking on them now, the “repurposed” wood and pipe sprites make me think of Saruman’s Army in “Lord of The Rings” – the gardens of Isengard torn down and rebuilt into munitions.

There’s not much “strategy” to this level beyond “don’t get hit by Bullet Bills or cannonballs.” After the long tank at the start there’s nine more “normal”-sized tanks (one of which shoots fire instead of projectiles, an unsettling effect), a gigantic one that shoots super-fast giant cannonballs and a final unarmed transport that contains our boss fight against... a blue-skinned Boomerang Brother. Huh. Doesn’t really seem like a fitting commander for such an arsenal, but at least once he’s dispatched I get a Star Man out of the deal.

WORLD 8 – BATTLESHIPS

It only makes sense that Bowser would have a Navy to go along with his Army, but it’s still impressive to see. Unlike the unique-feeling tanks a moment ago, this does feel more-or-less like another Airship but for one key difference: if your reflexes are sharp enough, you can drop down into the water and swim under the ships, effectively bypassing a whole level’s worth of danger.

I’m not going to do that this time.

It’s another “gauntlet” level, in any case. The only element of strategy comes right at the start of the first ship, where a Question Block is located underneath a long platform. The trick is to maneuver all the way to the right and drop down immediately to have a shot at it. (It’s a Flower, providing you’re already Big Mario at the time.) Beyond that, it’s three big boats worth of bullet-dodging, ending with a Boom-Boom boss fight. Dark Land is defined by “survival” levels like these, and it really adds to the feeling of a “home stretch.” No more secret-paths or exploration levels; this is Bowser’s Domain – run for it!

Playing through these two levels was as much fun as I remembered, but it’s late now and I know that the next stretch is significantly more difficult, so that’s enough for tonight.

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SATURDAY, JUNE 16 2012

This is not a good day. Tonight, sometime after midnight, Evangeline Chipman - my grandmother - passed away after her long illness. This isn't the place to dwell on the details or burden you with my own sadness, but suffice it to say that despite the impression the rest of this book may have given, I DO have many happy childhood memories that don't involve video-games, and many of them were spent with her.

I will miss her terribly, and the next several days (hell, the next YEAR) will likely be very trying for the whole family. All I'm sure of now is that for the first time since I started this project (maybe for the first time ever) I just don't feel much like playing "Super Mario Bros 3."

SUNDAY, JUNE 17 2012

Things are, as you can probably imagine, more than a little downbeat here. The Funeral won't be until the end of the week, with the Wake and various other unpleasant duties to attend to before that.

I hate the Western "death pageantry," the whole Funeral "scene." I understand and respect that the whole production – the flowers, the speeches, the organized grief, the services, the procession, etc – is comforting to some people (most people, it seems), and I absolutely "get" how it restores a sense of structure for people who're left adrift after a loved one's passing... but it's all just so much anxiety and crowd-panic to me. I know that people have the best possible intentions when they want to "comfort" me (or anyone else) in such circumstances, but I only "get over" or "accept" loss through the passage of time. It's just how I'm wired, and conversely I'm really of no good emotional "help" to anyone else in such times either.

I just want to deal with it, get through it, grieve in my own way, and get back to living (complicating things, the morning before Vovo passed I found myself finally signing the deal to move into my new apartment on the 1st of July). Part of which involves getting right back on the horse with this book...

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IDLE HANDS

The second Map Screen of Dark Land adds dancing skulls to the area's spooky décor and adds to the overall “Halloween-esque” feel of the place by forcing you to cross a row of five “portals” – three of which will randomly trigger a monstrous hand to pop up and drag you down into a short (but dangerous) Level. Maybe you'll have to play through all of them, maybe you'll get lucky and bypass them completely.

Technically, I was only “forced” to play through one of them this time; though I went back to the others for completions sake – if nothing else, you at least get a Super Leaf for completing each one.

WORLD 8 – HAND TRAP: CHEEP-CHEEPS

The first hand trap that got me (rather, the only one that did so without me “baiting” it, so to speak) happens to be regarded as the most difficult of the three: a mad dash across a series of bridges over a lake of lava from which schools of Cheep-Cheeps leap up and attack. Another callback to the original SMB's infamous “flying fish” levels.

It's a short level (they all are), but the design is crafty enough: usually, the best strategy for gauntlet-style levels is to go in powered-up so that you can take more than one hit, but the two main obstacles in your mad dash to the exit-pipe are blocks that are best gone under – meaning that if you are powered-up you'll have to slow down and crouch-slide to proceed forward. (Technically the first one you can jump over, but soaring skyward is ill-advised with all the airborne fish.)

Case in point: I was “big” when I went in, but the second “duck” part got me caught up and shrunk. It only took a little more dodging and weaving to reach the endpoint, but the tension was notably higher.

WORLD 8 – HAND TRAP: HAMMER BROS.

Over the course of this long journey, I've fought every variety of Hammer Bros multiple times, but this is the first (and only) place in the game where I'll have to fight them all. It's a nice conceit for a last-World area, lining up all types of a certain enemy for a “last stand” scenario; probably my favorite of the Hand-Trap levels for that very reason.

A Fire Bros comes first – ironic, as they're the rarest of their species. So rare I haven't fought them often enough to have the timing of their fire-

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spitting down, and I pay the price as he drops me moments after I enter. I get him the second time through, but now I'm over cautious and take more time than I like to against "traditional" Hammer Bros (two at a time, jumping between brick-platforms tossing hammer-volleys) that come next. After that, another Boomerang Bros and the final appearance of those delightfully-chubby Sledge Bros.

Two down, one more to go...

WORLD 8 – HAND TRAP: PODOBODO

Podobodos, being living fireballs, are probably as close to a "native species" as anything in Dark Land could get, so it's kind of odd that they feature in the easiest of the Hand Trap levels.

It's almost suspiciously easy – just seven short platforms to cross while avoiding the jumping Podobodos. My sense on completing it is a palpable "that was it?" though it quickly dissipates when I remember that Bowser's Air Force comes next...

WORLD 8 – AIR FORCE

Having previously faced and defeated Bowser's Tank Battalion and Navy, the time now comes to take out his Air Support. For obvious reasons, I arm up a set of those Raccoon powers won from the Traps before heading in.

The Air Force is by far my favorite of the "Bowser's Army" areas, because it "works" on so many levels: it's the ultimate culmination of the "Airship" motif from the earlier Levels (it basically is another Airship level, but moving much faster and with more open spaces to jump across), but it's also a great example of just how cool Mario can be under the right circumstances. Sure, the "fighter jets" are visualized as single-strip "log" sprites with Rocky-Wrench "pilots" and deadly fire-jets coming out the rear, but the idea of Mario up in the stratosphere, jumping from wing to wing and beating up planes hand-to-hand, combined with just how white-knuckle intense the actual gameplay gets around the midpoint still gives me something close to goosebumps.

As a kid, this part would set my imagination afire – the actual scene plays out in the same minimalist style as the rest of the game, but in my young head I'd picture a night sky full of fire and smoke – Mario jumping from plane to plane with only the expert flapping of the Raccoon Tail to keep him from plummeting to his death between attacks. Now, my mind keeps going back to the Hulk jumping onto the fighter in "The Avengers" (going

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to see that movie again and again, along with playing through this game, has become my “sanity time” amid all the recent chaos that led up to yesterday’s awfulness).

Given how awesome the plane-jumping is, it’s kind of anticlimactic that the finale of the whole endeavor is... just another Boom-Boom battle, but whatever. It’s an exhilarating level, and a good place to cut-out for the evening.

THURSDAY, JUNE 21ST 2012

The funeral was early this morning. Things were... difficult, but the service was beautiful and everyone kept their composure as best they were able. As mentioned earlier, I’m a complete and utter social wreck in these situations – I couldn’t make it all the way through the wake yesterday, even – so I was in no (psychological) state to attend the post-burial “let’s all eat potluck and somberly-socialize” business afterwards. I justify my emotional cowardice by telling myself that my main concern is not offending/disturbing anyone else with my angst, which is true... just not as true as I’d like it to be.

In any case, fate provided a solution: on top of everything else, the air-conditioner in our home – which is ancient enough to have a beige housing and faux-wood-paneled faceplate but which Dad has convinced himself is “only a few years old” and easily fixable – finally gave up the ghost after years of erratic functionality. So, while the rest of the family was off to share grief in the manner of psychologically-healthy human beings, I was off to buy, set up and install a new AC. If nothing else, when we were all (inevitably) still sad later on, at least we weren’t also miserably hot and sweaty.

Life will go on, in any case. It’s only now starting to dawn on me, with the weight of today now (starting) to recede, that my impending move is also fast-approaching. Given that so much of this SMB3 Project has been about nostalgia, I suddenly realize just HOW utterly wrong it would be for me to finish this playthrough somewhere other than this house – my childhood home – where all the others that led up to it were played.

There can be no equivocating now. No “well, it’ll be fine if the last few bits are done somewhere else later.” I will finish this before I move.

ALONE IN THE DARK

World 8's third Map Screen (containing its only two numbered Levels and Fortress) is set up using another great, simple, low-tech visual trick: the whole screen is blacked-out save for a small circle of visibility centered on Mario. You can't see what's ahead of you, so say goodbye to careful planning and item-management – “what's up ahead? A level? What kind? A fortress, maybe?” – you won't be told. In terms of video game history, it calls to mind a similar gimmick (itself a variation on an old cartoon trope) from Atari's “Haunted House,” which featured a blacked-out maze where the player was represented only by a pair of eyes shining in the dark.

LEVEL 8-1

World 8's two lonely Levels are not the longest or most challenging in the game, but they are two of the most frustrating and least “joyful” to play through. Stark-looking and linear, they're endurance tests, demanding that you call up every skill and reflex you've acquired in every Level that came before to survive the journey. One thing I've managed to retain: when in doubt, go in as Raccoon Mario.

Sure enough, 8-1 opens with a flat patch of ground whose end (in a pit) is marked by a wood block – perfect space for flying. Above me, I remember, is a switch-block that briefly fills the screen with Silver Coins, but I've got extra lives coming out of my ears at this point so I veer forward – ultimately landing atop the last of five large green pipes. Two memories come flooding back: First, that going down this pipe will net me three 1-Ups from one of those giant blocks (it does). Second, that I've bypassed a set of hairy jumps... but the worst is yet to come.

The pipe's exit looks strangely “safe” to me, as though a key geographic feature of the level has been missed. Like a curious fool, I backtrack to make sure and wind up losing my Raccoon powers – and then my life – to a Boo. I was right, though – going through the pipe had let me bypass 8-1's main memorable feature: a huge wall of blocks in the Level's center that bottlenecks you through a hail of Bullet Bill fire.

Back in again. Those opening jumps aren't as hairy as I remember - plants in every pipe and bottomless pits if you so much as slip - but by now I've done worse. The first Question Block is positioned as such that you have to jump out over the abyss and “drift back” to get under it, but I managed it for a Mushroom. Interestingly, this spot was apparently deemed “too difficult;”

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as a note-block has been added in the GameBoy Advance version of this title. Five Bullet Bill Cannons (four stacked atop one-another) block the way to the wall, and I opt to bypass the Question Block hovering in their killing-box (I shouldn't have – turns out it's a Star Man).

The passage under the big "wall" is brutally designed: A row of Question Blocks forms a ceiling and Bullet Bills are set to fire at your feet and head at either end. There's a 1-Up in the first block, but for now I'm ignoring it – just get through the damn place alive. Speaking of "alive," at the end there's that Boo again... but I'm too fast for him, and a block holding another Leaf is my prize. The next few obstacles are suspiciously simple: a Troopa, and Piranha Plant, a ParaTroopa bouncing around near a Bill; perhaps to lull one into a false sense of security before a final leg of pure torment standing between Mario and the goal...

First up: a chasm that can only be crossed by bouncing off the Red ParaTroopa floating over its center and landing on the double Bullet Bill tower that's firing right at you. Cleared, but just barely. After that, another killing-box of Bills where an initially-invisible block can either help you climb out or block your escape if you bop it by accident. Finally, my least favorite jump in the whole game: you have to bounce off one of those erratic Music Blocks onto a benign pipe, then onto one more plant-inhabited pipe on your way to escape. All this time and all these levels, and I still haven't gotten any better at timing my bounces off these damn things...

...And I don't make it. Back to the drawing board again, and small to boot. I don't even make it to the wall this time – cut down by the Bills once more. Try again... die again, on the Music Block. Frustrating, but not as frustrating as the three more tries it takes me to get that close to the ending again. This time, I change up the strategy: inching backwards to make those last two Bullet-Bills fire, then bouncing off the block; the idea being to land on the Bill for an extra insurance-bounce. The plan... works! At last, on to the next.

LEVEL 8-2

The visual design of this level is genuinely striking: it's the last one – the very last regular "numbered" level in the entire game, your very last stop before you storm the last Fortress and then the grounds of Bowser's Castle, and the final (non-vehicular) exterior location of a World that's supposed to be the Mushroom Kingdom version of Hell on Earth... so what does it look like? Death. Decay. Petrification. The rolling hills are the texture of the bright green grass in all the other levels, but here colored a stark white. The foliage

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in the background is a sickly gray. The sky is dotted with stars, suggesting a distinct lack of other light-sources. What “movement” and color there is comes in the form of orange quicksand pits, spiraling down into the ground. This, without question, is The End.

The secret, I recall, is in the first pit of quicksand – the only one that leads down off the screen. I let Mario sink all the way in, and indeed he doesn’t die. Instead, the sand spits you down into a secret chamber with two pipes. The left one takes you to a power-up, the right one takes you to a coin room, but they both let you skip the entire middle of the stage (a steep hill and a wide chasm with only Music Blocks to use as platforms – no thank you) and exit onto a hillside surrounded by Venus FireTraps.

On the other side of the hill, a steep slope. You CAN slide down it, sliding being fun in this game, but you run the risk of skidding into a hole at the very end. Said hole has two more accursed Music Blocks to bounce across, but being Raccoon Mario at the moment lessens the annoyance considerably...

And just like that, both of World 8’s Levels have fallen. Ahead is the last Fortress, whose very image appearing in my tiny window of visibility conjures potent childhood feelings of hurled controllers, gritted teeth, and bellored curse words. I’ll save it for next time...

TUESDAY, JUNE 26TH 2012

Was in a car accident this evening. I’m fine. The car... not so much. The driver in front of the driver in front of me stopped short, causing a secondary short-stoppage, causing me to slam on the breaks and – as it had just rained a bit – SKID right into them. The short-stopper who started the mess fled the scene, leaving me and the young lady I’d just rear-ended to hash things out.

I was freaking out pretty bad. The move to the new place was only days away, and this was not an expense I needed. More immediately, the residents of houses along the street came pouring out to surround us both; apparently she was local and The Neighborhood was coming to her “defense.” I’ve lived in this town long enough to have seen this scenario play out before, and I knew I didn’t want to be on the “offending” side. One guy among the crowd appointed himself the leader and started in trying to wheel and deal me: no cops, let’s just settle up, maybe some cash, insurance will just raise premiums, etc. No thanks, pal. Cops showed up anyway, but not before I’d called the family for a ride (and, frankly, for some strength in numbers).

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I was ultimately able to drive the car home – mangled hood, banged-up bumper, and all. It's sitting outside now, held together by bungies, waiting for me to drive it to the dealership (the owner is my mother's cousin, so at least I know it'll be taken care of fairly) in the morning. For now, The Fortress...

WORLD 8 – FORTRESS

The last Fortress is a beast: both a maze and a gauntlet of traps, the worst of the worst from all the Fortresses that came before. In the broad strokes it's a set of two parallel halls, one mostly full of Thwomps and Roto-Discs centered on dodging while the other is half-filled with lava and demands more precision jumping. A long succession of doors both allows and necessitates transition between the two to reach the goal.

Taking no chances, I arm up Raccoon Mario before heading in. The layout of the starting hall (let's call it the "front") is all about requiring yet restricting movement; low ceilings, high floors, and narrow platforms forcing your hand and your timing. The first door to the secondary hall ("rear," henceforth) is in an upper corner, and I have to snake my way through three Roto-Discs to reach it.

It's worth the work, though, taking me to the other side (an indoor ocean of lava, plus the added hazard of most of the platforms being conveyer belts) where my path to the right would be blocked by a wall of bricks if I hadn't brought a Tail. Instead, I smash right through – no matter how many times I do that in the game, it feels fiendishly fun, like I'm somehow being allowed or encouraged to almost cheat. On the other side is Fire Flower, which I forgo since the Tail is obviously so useful and since the only enemy typically found in Fortresses who's vulnerable to fire is Boom-Boom, and he's no danger.

Nearby is a door that seems to be floating in mid-air. If you drop down the space below, you can bonk invisible blocks into existence to make the door usable, and since I'm still big I break some bricks to climb back up and use it. Back to the front hall, back up near the ceiling. The next available door is blocked-off by an "H" made of bricks. There's a P-Switch at the top of the structure that reveals an invisible door to acquire a 1-Up, but I'm not looking for that now. Smash the bricks, head through the door, right back into the rear hall to fight the lava and moving floors again. The door on the second small island is the goal...

...GAH! That always, always scares the hell out of me – no sooner am I back in the front hall than a Thwomp attacks diagonally! Apart from being

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a shock, it's kind of aesthetically odd and somewhat disappointing. Now I can't help but wonder why the rest of the Thwomps don't have that kind of mobility, and wishing there was some alternate species of "slanty" Thwomp in this spot instead of the regular kind. In any case, continued progression on this side is finally a dead-end (preceded by a veritable nest of Thwomps), so it's back over to the rear hall, some quick lava jumping, and back to the front again—past the dead-end where Thwomp-dodging gives way to speed-running.

This second "leg" of the front hall begins with a P-Switch that turns a set of five brick walls into coins and makes a coin-filled gap solid on a long stretch of "road" en-route to the final exit. If I get stuck or fall below (that is, if I also didn't have my brick-busting Raccoon tail still) I'll have to backtrack through the rear hall again, where at this point the lava has given way to traps and spikes. It's quite a thrill, at least, after so much restriction of movement in this Fortress to finally cut loose and just dash at top-speed past a Thwomp and a Dry Bones, finally coming to rest at a far-end door (a hidden one, revealed by the P-Switch as well) back to the rear hall.

I remember this part confusing the heck out of me in the early days: Without triggering the hidden door on the other side, this last part of the rear hall becomes a nightmare of circular travel. But the secret door has put me on a straight path the final room, which seems to only feature one door on the lower level guarded by a horizontal-moving Thwomp. It's a decoy, though – the oddly placed bricks at the start of the conveyer-belt partially covering the area holds ANOTHER P-Switch which, in a final act of game-design sadism, yields TWO doors... only one of which is helpful (the furthest to the right).

At last, the final chamber – dropped down a shaft onto a conveyer belt that forces you to duck as it passes below a row of spikes before giving way to Boom-Boom. Fighting him on a moving floor proves only slightly more difficult than usual, which is to say not very difficult (it's not even a winged Boom-Boom). And with that, the last Fortress has fallen.

IN THE COURT OF THE KOOPA KING

World 8's final Map Screen (indeed, the final Map Screen in the game) is the courtyard of Bowser's Castle. High walls surround the place, and the Castle itself lies at the far end; your progress blocked both by the Super Tank – the last and presumably the finest of Bowser's militarized defenses – and a Locked Gate preventing you from skipping said Super Tanks with a Cloud item.

I like the strange detail that Bowser's Courtyard features the only

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vegetation in Dark Land, in the form of towering Mushroom Trees. I wonder if that's supposed to suggest anything... did the Koopa King have them planted as part of his fixation on the Mushroom Kingdom he's always so eager to conquer?

WORLD 8 – SUPER TANK

A final wave of military hardware stands between me and the castle, deceptively beginning with a single “small” tank before the full war-machine rolls into view. This one is a carrier convoy: three long-decked vehicles (plus two structures above providing air-support), two covered with cannons and one holding six Rocky-Wrenches.

Unlike the other auto-scrolling levels, the Tanks are designed to throw off your natural tendency to forward progression: you want to move through all these guns and hazards as quickly as possible, but you're prevented from going faster than the machines are – trapped for long periods in the midst of a hail of cannon-fire. Early on, I slip up and lose my Raccoon power from the first cluster of three cannons on the first carrier.

The second carrier is packed with Rocky-Wrenches, who remain fun to kill but here are more dangerous than usual owing to their close proximity. It's a nice detail that Rockys and Hammer Bros tend to be the only (organic) minions other than Boom-Boom and the Koopalings associated with the game's vehicle sections, given that they're the ones with humanoid limbs and fingers. Intentionally or not, it provides a sense of reasoning to the “castes” in Bowser's army: “higher” animals working the machinery and trained to use weapons (Troopas wouldn't become upright-walking in the games until Super Mario World), lower creatures – possibly trained/enslaved wild animals, even – used to occupy territory.

The third and final carrier (before the rear transport housing the boss) has a Bob-Omb armed and waiting, and the blast knocks me down to Small Mario. Whatever is waiting for me in that boss carrier, I'll be fighting it at a disadvantage - or not, as it's just Boom-Boom again. Fittingly, he's got his wings back for this final encounter, but still provides no real challenge once you've got his rhythm down.

The last of Bowser's army now lies in wreckage behind me, as does the entire game's worth of enemies, levels, Fortresses, items, Mushroom Houses, Airships and everything else. There's nothing left to do and nowhere left to go: Bowser's Castle is ahead.

WARDROBE FUNCTION

And now... decision time. I've been carefully saving my "costume" power-ups for a chance to finally say I beat Bowser using a suit, which is one of THE major achievements to be had in the early Mario titles. Apart from simply "looking cool," there are no suits to be found inside the Castle itself, making defeating the Koopa King while wearing one proof-positive of having made it through the place without taking any damage – a difficult prospect under any circumstances.

My "reserves" at this point: one Hammer Suit, one Frog Suit, and two Tanooki suits. It's now or never...

WORLD 8 – BOWSER'S CASTLE (FIRST ATTEMPT)

In a nice final design touch, Bowser's Castle looks wholly different from any other area in the game. The checkered floor of the main halls you've seen before, sure, but the imposing crimson red bricks that make up the walls and ceilings aren't seen anywhere else in the game and have the subtle effect of reinforcing how far out of his element Mario is supposed to be: these are the only bricks he can't break. There's also a "trap" hallway featuring an eyesore of a backdrop (it sort-of looks like white limestone) not seen anywhere else in any level, and a surprisingly-deadly new hazard: Bowser Statues that spit out laser beams.

I opt to take one of my two Tanooki Suits in first – might as well go big or go home... or so I figured. Instead, I lose the suit right away – taken out by the first laser in the introductory hall of Bowser Statues. The lasers are such a "different" weapon for the Mario games – even more alien to the fairytale surroundings than all the military hardware was – that their presence is genuinely disconcerting, and it doesn't help that they behave like no other projectile-hazard in the game. Even now, when I've cleared this game more times than I can count, the damn things still manage to surprise me.

Well, alright, then. No suit, plenty of lives to spend, but it feels wrong to just suicide-out for the sake of donning another costume. Might as well use the opportunity to scout ahead and refresh my memory of any other surprises. Beyond the three Statues is a staircase leading to what looks like a short hallway with a gap above it. When you pass beneath the gap, a Lift suddenly appears and shoots you upwards, which feels like a trap but is actually salvation: the "hallway" beyond dead-ends at a door which drops you into the aforementioned White Walled room, which in turn sends you back to the

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beginning.

Instead, up I go... and then immediately back down, riding a Donut Lift piece down through a narrow crevice and leaping off right at the end to avoid a pit. Two snaking staircases now, the first preceded by a Hot Foot going up, the second going down, both lousy with nastily-placed Roto-Discs. The whole ordeal is punishing – small passages with jagged edges, the worst possible terrain for a character built around fast-running and high-jumping – but it actually gets worse when the place opens up...

Just ahead, a wide-open room with a lava lake at its floor, leaping Podobodos all around, only a bunch of narrow Donut Lifts to make your way across, and no clear indication which direction you're supposed to head. There are four ledges to the right, the top and second-to-bottom of which lead to the short and long paths to Bowser respectively, while the middle holds a power-up and the very bottom is a door to the loop-around dungeon. I take the top way – a door leading to a pair of chambers (four more laser statues and one more lava-lake, the first of which blasts me down to mini-Mario) where odd, horizontal-moving fireballs begin to appear in an ominous homage to the original SMB, where you'd always see Bowser's fire before you saw the creature himself.

The final chamber is another callback – a bridge of bricks above a bottomless pit, an obvious upgrade to the retractable-bridges where you fought Bowser in the first game. This time, of course, there's no axe to send him falling...

...and then The Man himself arrives.

THE KING OF THE KOOPAS

“Super Mario Bros 3's” Bowser is probably the most impressive graphical achievement in the entire game, and remains one of the best looking sprites (boss or otherwise) of the 8-bit era. In the pre-3D era, there were only two ways of making a sprite seem “alive” through animation: either build it out of multiple separate static sprites (body, appendages, etc) or actually create multiple separate full sprites with subtle changes between them in the manner of traditional hand-drawn animation. That second method – the more difficult and data-consuming one – is employed here.

For the first time, Bowser appears in a Mario game looking like he does in the manual and other production artwork: the hair, the horns (a remnant of Shigeru Miyamoto originally basing him on a version of the Ox King from “Journey into The West”), the shell, the spiked-bracelets, all the visual signifiers of his various character influences (like his children, a mixture of

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a Kappa, an Oni, and late-80s punk/metal fashion) all finally visible in the game itself. Beyond that, his range of animation is striking given the era and technical limitations of the NES – he has a three-quarter-turn image for when he changes direction, his head is animated to look back and forth, his head jerks backwards before he spits fire, and he even has a separate jumping animation rather than simply being propelled upwards.

That jump, incidentally, is actually his primary attack here... and also the key to his destruction: when he lands on the brick bridge (aiming for Mario, always), a bit of it will shatter – three hits in the same spot and he'll fall through the bottom and to his doom.

...At least, that's the idea. I don't even get to see him break one measly brick this time, as one of his errant fireballs takes out my puny mini-Mario with embarrassing efficiency. Ah, well. On the plus side, an opportunity to try another suit.

WORLD 8 – BOWSER'S CASTLE (SECOND ATTEMPT)

Heading in as Frog Mario this time. Honestly, the vindication comes right away – for whatever reason, I've never actually brought a Frog Suit this far into the game, and it's kind of glorious to see Frog Mario (surely the silliest-looking and least optimally-designed for this area Power-Up in the game) frog-hopping through Bowser's Castle...

...For about a minute, before a mistimed jump gets me hit by that same damn laser, again. So long, Froggy. I make it to the lava, but my heart's not in the fight this time.

WORLD 8 – BOWSER'S CASTLE (THIRD ATTEMPT)

It's time to put that second (and final) Tanooki Suit to use. I remember to run this time, and clear the three statues without incident... only to have it taken away by that damn Hot-Foot. Hot-Foot! The indignity of it is, at least, funny in a way...

WORLD 8 – BOWSER'S CASTLE (FOURTH ATTEMPT)

At this point I'll spare you the gory details – Hammer Mario didn't make it. Sad – really wanted to face Bowser in one of the suits – but maybe appropriate to end this in the "classic" fashion.

By now, the first few chambers and the lava are cleared practically on instinct. I opt for the longer route this time – the second (from the bottom)

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ledge at the end of the lava lake. A horizontal Thwomp protects a Donut Lift, which you ride down a shaft into a smaller lava-chamber with a Roto-Disc complicating a three-jump escape. In the next room are five Bowser Statues to navigate, and I only sort-of regret not going for the Question Block hovering among them... but I'm in no mood to get killed and go through this all over again. The next (and final) chamber is more small platforms spread out over lava, but at least these are solid so you can time your jumps more carefully between Bowser's fire blasts. One more decorative trick waits at the very end – a Bowser Statue is perched just above the ledge leading to the exit-door, and it's only natural to panic and jump back (possibly to your death) when it comes into view... except this one is inert, and doesn't fire any lasers.

Landing safely, it's time to enter the door and fight Bowser once again...

THE FINAL BATTLE

It really is kind of brilliant how this particular Bowser battle simultaneously makes him the most difficult boss in the game and reinforces him as a genuine threat but also sets up a battle that neatly cements everything you need to know about the conflict between the two characters having it out onscreen.

Bowser seems invincible. You can't jump on him and you can't touch him. Mario may be some kind of superhuman force against all the other enemies in the game, but here against Bowser he's a mouse going up against a Sherman Tank. But, invincible or not, Bowser isn't smart. He's a brute – the “leader” of his people solely by deign of being the biggest and most powerful among them – and he fights like one: There's no strategy here, he simply comes after you with everything he's got (literally “throwing his weight around”), utterly blind to the damage he might do to himself in the process. The “fight,” for the player and for Mario, is all about outsmarting Bowser; using the precision jumping and dodging techniques honed over 8 Worlds worth of combat to effectively fool him into beating himself.

With that in mind, I dive out of the way of the Koopa King's first lunge. He lands dead-center on the bridge, one layer of bricks smashed away. I think back to the Summer afternoon, possibly in 1990, when I played this part for the first time. I remember an electric jolt crackling through my brain when I saw what Bowser's impact did to the bridge – an unmistakable satisfaction at having figured out what the “trick” to this boss would be all by myself.

Bowser's recovery time is quick – I've barely scrambled away from the point of impact before the fireballs are coming and he's after me again. The best place to go is the ledge above the door, make him jump wide and give

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myself room to get back to the bridge...

Impact #2 is dead-center again, but this time I'm not fast enough. A hit is taken, and I'm Small Mario again. This is as real as it gets, and that nice comfy store of extra-lives down below gives me no real comfort as I dodge and loop back around again – I want to beat him here, now.

I drop down into the impact-crater. Bowser, having regained his composure up above, leaps into the air poised to rain his bulk down on top of me.

He drops.

I jump for it...

Down. Goes. Bowser. In a truly excellent final touch, his fall is scored to comedic music and ends with the “thump” that shakes the room and bounces Mario off his feet, Wile E. Coyote style.

VICTORY

The locked door vanishes in a puff of smoke, and the door flashes with neon light. Inside (in a room that has “décor” curiously close to that of the Mushroom Houses) is Princess Peach – at last. In an interesting bit of visual continuity, her sprite is basically the same one from “Super Mario Bros 2” with an added “crying in the corner” pose.

“Thank you. But our Princess is in another castle... Just kidding! Ha ha ha! Bye bye.”

It's a simple (and kind of dopey) joke, bringing back the “in another castle” bit that greeted you at every castle BUT the final one in the original SMB. Can't even say I found it particularly funny as a kid, even by the standards of what passed for “humor” in games of the day. But from the vantage-point of history, this marks a very important moment in the evolution of the Mario franchise: the precise point at which self-awareness entered the franchise. This is the first time a Mario game took a “shot” at itself, and henceforth a certain amount of ironic regard for the formula and archness of its universe has been standard issue for the series.

In a nice touch, the big red curtain comes down on the scene once more, then immediately zips back up as the game “takes a bow” over a credit-role of flashbacks to the Worlds conquered, enemies beaten, and power-ups used throughout your quest. But one more especially-awesome bonus remains: if you press Start once “The End” comes up, the game cycles back to the introductory screen ready for another go-around... but with one key difference. Your surplus-items menu is now fully stocked with P-WINGS! This is, without a doubt, a GREAT feature – “Hey, man! Good job beating the

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game! Now, here's a giant bag of ULTIMATE POWER so you can go explore all the parts you might've skipped or found too difficult the first time!"

An invitation to play again and the opportunity to really cut loose while doing so – it's the perfect ending to the perfect game.

THE LAST LOOK BACK

What else can I say about "Super Mario Bros. 3" that I haven't already said ad nauseum? Even today, after all these years and subsequent sequels, it still feels like this is as good as the "original format" Mario platformers ever got. Even this time through – playing it for the umpteenth time and for work rather than (only) for pleasure, it all still hits as fresh as ever – the joyful exhilaration of taking off into the sky as Raccoon Mario, the surreal adorableness of Tanooki and Frog Mario, sun-bleached stretches of Desert Land, the awe-inspiring ascent onto that first Airship, the pure cartoon fun of Kuribo's Shoe... at this moment, in this game, everything went right all at once.

Video games have, to be certain, come a long way since then. The worlds have become more open, the graphics have become more cinematic, the music more operatic. And while I've enjoyed many, many games of the modern era, it's the rare title that can sweep me off my feet and land me back into hours-absorbing gaming bliss like SMB3 still can. That's probably every bit a flaw in me as it is in modern gaming, yes, but what is is.

EPILOGUE

On July 1st of 2012, I officially moved out of the home I'd lived in for 31 years of my life. The home where I'd taken my first steps. The home where I'd said my first words. The home where I'd fired up my first NES, played through countless games, and developed a love of gaming that now culminates in this book. The home where I'd played "Super Mario Bros. 3" for the first time... and where I'd just finished playing through it one more time.

It's a somewhat sad occasion, however long in coming – though blunted, of course, by the excitement of the move. It's a good little place – better than I could've reasonably expected to afford, honestly, but my initial feeling is that it will take a while for me to make it feel like "home." As it turned out... it only took 10 days.

On July 11th, while digging through the far, far back reaches of an old closet while looting my parents' house (I'm trying very hard to think of it in those terms and not as "home" anymore) for usable household wares, I discovered an aged box containing – wonder of wonders – an NES. My NES. My original, real, authentic NES. I suddenly hated myself for letting it languish there... it should've stayed hooked up forever... but this was an oversight I would correct.

Other boxes yielded more treasures: the SNES, the Nintendo 64, a Dreamcast, the controllers and hookups for all of them, and, yes, my original copy of "Super Mario Bros 3." After some refurbishing with rubbing alcohol and careful dusting, I hooked them up to my new TV and powered them up. After a few tense moments and some good old fashioned cartridge-wiggling... it worked. The machine still works. The game – in every sense of the word – still works.

I am, at last, home.

In 1988, Mario was soaring both in popularity and through the skies of his new game, Super Mario Bros 3. Decades later, this game still holds a place of honor as one of the greatest games ever made, long after video game technology has advanced by leaps and bounds.

In this book, Bob Chipman explores the history of Mario, recaps his experience with the iconic plumber, and examines Super Mario Bros 3 in great detail: every enemy, level, and power-up. He examines each twist and turn, notes which developments would change the industry for years to come, and why this game still holds up decades after its release.

Bob Chipman is best known for his weekly programs as The Game Overthinker at ScrewAttack.com and as MovieBob at The Escapist (EscapistMagazine.com).



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