

Useless Pursuit: A Search for Meaning in the Meaningless

Prologue

I had no idea what it was.

It wasn't for a lack of understanding. I could read and the words printed on the box were plainly written in English. Or at least most of them.

My ignorance had nothing to do with my excitement either. It was Christmas Day, 1987, and as a seven-year old, I was at the peak of enjoying this particular holiday. I awoke at 4:30am and waited impatiently in my room till 5:00am before bolting to my parents' room and dragging them from their slumber. How could I understand at age seven that they stayed up late wrapping gifts so carefully hidden throughout the house and setting the scene under the tree; in general, parents love to perpetuate the lie of Santa Claus, but in practice, especially in those crunch time moments on December 24th, most parents are ready to break the bad news to their children. Why perpetuate a fantasy when it entails so much effort, so many layers of lying, all in the hopes that the world is in step with this great role play? Because parents remember what it's like to believe in Santa Claus and if they can actualize that for their own children, albeit for a few brief years, they won't be robbed of an essential part of the American childhood.

Needless to say, I was primed for any gift that was left under the tree for me, labeled somewhat suspiciously with my mother's handwriting, from Santa. Too many years have passed

for me to remember exactly what I was expecting to find, though there was one category of gift that I could cross off the list altogether: toys. Once I turned five-years old, toys were outlawed in a very Burgermeister Meisterburger fashion. Why? I don't know and I've never heard a good explanation from my parents, though that could be the subject of a very different sort of expose. It didn't matter to me that I wasn't going to be opening any toys. There was still great for potential for other things I loved, like books and board games and puzzles and sports paraphernalia and so on. No doubt I warmed-up with such things, but when it came time for the main event, lovingly referred to as "the big gift", I was thrown off from the moment my eyes focused on the rectangular box.

If this was in fact my "big gift", shouldn't it be larger? Like the size of a mountain bike or basketball hoop? As a kid, I often associated size with quality and importance. The larger the package, the greater the bounty. Nothing quite beats finding out how wrong you are.

Even though I didn't know what I was opening, I tore at the wrapping paper with the same fervor I approached every gift under the tree. I was a tornado and the only victim of my destruction was wrapping paper. Once the paper was in shreds everywhere, I sat on my knees, holding the box in my lap.

Okay. So this is my "big gift". But what is it?

My parents waited eagerly for my reaction. They expected that I'd leap so high that I'd bump my head against the ceiling, wail like a siren and crack the frost bitten windows, hug them so tightly they'd need to pry me off them with a crowbar. Instead, I stared at the box, afraid to look up, knowing that the look on my face would be a dead giveaway.

It's not that I was disappointed. How could I have been? Maybe it *was* the greatest thing ever. The problem was, I didn't know what it was and I was supposed to know what it was. Nobody likes to be embarrassed and even worse, nobody likes the slow build embarrassment, the one that crawls down the street toward you, smiling devilishly as it prepares to wrap its cloak around your neck.

"Huh? What do you think?" said my dad.

I swallowed, but there was no saliva in my mouth. I coughed.

"Yeah? You like it?" my mom chimed in.

"I - it's -," is all I could muster.

"This is the thing! The *thing!*" my dad proclaimed like a used car salesman standing next to a three-wheeled minivan.

"That's what they're saying," said my mother, not indicating exactly who the "they" was that she was referring to.

"I'm telling you. It's the thing," said my dad, grabbing the box from me and running his finger underneath the item's title in Reading Rainbow fashion. "It's Nintendo. See? You're gonna' love it."

I nodded in agreement. My dad could have said, "It's Sashimi, you'll love it", and I still would have nodded. He could tell by my reaction that I didn't know what Nintendo was, no matter how excited he pretended to be. I stood up and took the box back from my father and sat on the couch. My sister was organizing her gifts and wasn't very pleased when I nearly knocked her box of sweaters to the ground. She didn't know any more about Nintendo than I did, though she clearly believed that her gifts were superior. I couldn't argue against her in the moment

because I didn't even know what Nintendo was. If this was in fact the "thing", why hadn't I heard of it? Did my friends know about it and keep this secret to themselves? Or had parents across the country fell prey to a widespread scam that convinced them to buy this magic box that would do nothing more than collect dust in three months? My parents weren't the types to fall into the traps set by trends, so they had to do their homework. But if this was the greatest gift ever - or at least the greatest gift of the 1987 Christmas season - why hadn't I heard a peep about it? I was frustrated when I should have been ecstatic.

It was a great gift, beyond what either of my parents could have ever predicted. There was no way for them to know that Nintendo would become the single most important and influential cultural force in the final two decades of the 20th Century. There was no way for them to know that Nintendo would shape the lives of hundreds of millions, alter the course of popular culture forever, and jumpstart an industry now worth tens of billions of dollars. Nor could they know that Nintendo would play a central role in my life to this very moment, as I sit and type at age thirty-five. They could have never known that I'd spend countless hours playing and discussing, then reminiscing, and playing more, and finally, introducing their grandchildren to the wonders that started that fateful day. Or maybe they did, but I doubt it. I'll just say that my "big gift" for Christmas 1988 was a Hulk Hogan Workout Set and I'm not even sure if I used anything but the headband from that set.

"You like it, don't you?" said my mom.

"Yeah, yeah he does. You like games, don't you?" said my dad.

Games. That was a word that I understood.

"Games are cool," I said.

“This is for video games. You know, the kind you play on the TV,” said my dad.

It was beginning to make more sense to me. When I was four, I had a neighbor twice my age who owned an Intellivision and permitted me to sit on his living room rug and watch him play. He led me to believe that objects from the game would escape from the TV and when they didn't, I grew more and more frustrated. Video games for me, even to this day, are not much of a spectator sport; there are millions of people that disagree with me and spend ample time watching others play, but that's not my thing. I also had cousins - or more appropriately, they were my mom's cousins who were my age - that owned an Atari, but it was never plugged in and we used it and the game cartridges as fortress building blocks during intense GI Joe warfare. I had no reason to believe that video games were a thing, let alone something that I would enjoy, but there was something about the box that was intriguing. Something about Nintendo was different than those other systems and I was willing to give it a chance. By all counts, it looked like something I should like. The two shades of grey with red lettering was an intriguing aesthetic choice and the two controllers looked simultaneously futuristic and retro.

Most importantly, a game was included with the Nintendo. It was called Super Mario Bros. The cover featured a fiery haired and mustachioed gentleman wearing white overalls; he was in full motion, running toward a blue brick wall and what I thought was a piece of jumbo fried shrimp. The system and the game were calling to me, luring me to open the box, empty the contents, and convince my dad to connect the system to our big TV in the family room. Before that could happen, I was presented with yet another gift to open and this packaging ripped as easily as all the other gifts.

“This is supposed to be the best game,” said my dad.

He was right. I was holding The Legend of Zelda and the gold packaging and box art was far superior to Super Mario Bros. Not only that, but The Legend of Zelda was also promising more on the front of the box with the simple sentence: “Includes invaluable maps and strategic playing tips.” Both elements of this statement were precise. Truth in advertising. The back of the box offered, “Experience the challenge of endless adventure”. Undebatable and 100% accurate. To this day, The Legend of Zelda remains my favorite game series of all time and its world is one of the most interesting ongoing world building exercises I’ve ever experienced; I hold it in as high a regard as I do Star Trek and Planet of the Apes and Star Wars and X-Men and Daredevil and Sandman. Receiving both games on the same day set me off on two very distinct journeys, both of which continue to this day.

The main difference, however, is found in a simple question that Super Mario Bros. asked the hundreds of millions who played it. On the back of the original box, one simple question is posed: “Do you have what it takes to save the Mushroom Princess?” After I read that at age seven, I said with resounding confidence, “yes”. I was wrong. So wrong. I never saved the Mushroom Princess. At least not until Super Mario World. The original game, considered by many to be a classic - deservedly so - is a game that I never beat. I’ve beaten many video games in my life, but never the game that launched a million other games. In the grand scheme of things, does it matter? Probably not. Didn’t it achieve what it set out to do and hook me on video games forever? Most likely. That doesn’t mean that it sits well with me.

Twenty-eight years later, I’m setting out to do something that eluded me for decades, that’s hung over my head, that’s burned slowly inside, that’s been an itch under a scab, that’s - well, you get it. Going back to take on a game that I couldn’t beat might not change my life - in

fact, it probably won't - but sometimes you have to do things just to prove to yourself that you can do something, even when it doesn't really contribute to the greater good of your life. It isn't important to anyone else but me and that can be seen as selfish, but we are selfish creatures and our motives for conducting ourselves vary so greatly that I'm embarking on this useless pursuit because I can't think of any reason why I shouldn't.

Part One

Me, Mario, &

Histories. We have them with people and places and that's been true since man first started walking around this planet. In our modern times, we also have histories with sports franchises and ideas and popular culture and artists and types of cuisine and so on. You can't say something as simple as, "I'm a fan of the New York Knicks." You have to be prepared to expound in great detail where you were when they lost to the Houston Rockets in game seven of the 1994 NBA Finals (I promise that I've gotten over this; really, I have). You can't just say, "I like Janet Jackson's music"; you have to be able to produce the Rhythm Nation Tour T-shirt you bought when you saw her perform in Cleveland. Even if you're discussing a mutual acquaintance with someone, you will want to pull out a story that bests your conversation partner's in obscurity and believability. This is how we are wired in the 21st Century.

We must be seeped in things completely, priding ourselves on the totality of our affections and experiences. If you are only going to kind of like something, or sort of be into something, don't bother mentioning it because you will be bombarded with looks of scorn and sarcasm so quickly that you'll question every aspect of your life.

The reason I bring this up because I feel that it's necessary to justify my grand experiment. The tale I recounted in the beginning was shared, no doubt, by millions of other kids. I wasn't the only person gifted a Nintendo Entertainment System and I wasn't the only person that never beat Super Mario Bros. So why do I think this endeavor is important enough to write about? It has nothing to do with importance and even though I was and continue to be a

complete failure in terms of Super Mario Bros. skills, the game remains enough of a touchstone in my life that I feel it's important enough to revisit. You might be asking, "well if it was so important, why didn't you dedicate yourself to beating it?" Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I was only seven or that I was distracted by The Legend of Zelda or a whole host of other reasons that I'll get into later on. But just because I didn't beat it or couldn't beat it, doesn't mean that it isn't vital to my life. Just like I'm not afraid (or ashamed) to unleash stories about my Marvel trading card exploits, I'm ready to explain why I'm a Mario geek for life. That Italian plumber has been an ongoing figure in my life since I was seven and he's starting to feel like family.

Come See What We've Put in the Parlor

Difficult as it may be to imagine, there was a time not so long ago when recorded music did not exist. To hear music, you had to attend a performance. So few people ever heard professional music and I wonder how many great composers and performers remain lost to history because of this. The phonograph wasn't invented until 1877 and it took a few decades to resemble a machine that we'd recognize today as a record player, but when you could play music discs in your home, it would draw a crowd. People could stand around and listen to, well, mostly opera. Even if opera isn't your thing, you'd be thrilled by the sound of prerecorded music that you'd bob your head to some Rossini.

This gave way to the radio in the 1930's and television in the 1950's and by the time home video game consoles began appearing, it was commonplace for people to sit around indoors around a device. While Nintendo wasn't the first home console, it quickly became the one that everyone knew. And at first, it was such a unique and unusual thing that it attracted all types of people. At least in my house it did.

During that initial holiday season of 1987 and the six months that followed, anyone that came to my house went through the typical gestures of "hey how's it going?" and "can I get you something to drink?", followed by my mom prompting me to take over with, "you know,

Matthew's got something to show you". My dad would chime in immediately with, "he got the Nintendo!"¹

Once our guests heard that we had Nintendo, they expected a demonstration. It didn't matter the age or gender of the guest - they all knew about Nintendo, proving once again that I was the last person on Earth to hear about it. I was always delighted to take them to living room (it's original but not final home) and turn on the system. By the end of Christmas day, I owned three games: Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda from my parents and, thanks to my grandparents, Ghosts & Goblins, a game so cruel and difficult that I never made it out of the first level.² Even as a tallied more games, the game I chose for demonstration purposes was Super Mario Bros. I preferred The Legend of Zelda, but Mario felt like an easier sell. I wanted our

¹ Adding the definite article "the" before the word Nintendo made the console sound like an incurable disease (symptoms include incessant gas, itchy eyes, sweaty palms, and greasy fingertips) or a secret military operation ("We need to launch The Nintendo now on ALL FRONTS! Hit 'em with The Nintendo and everything else we've got!"), though a majority of our guests knew what my parents were referring to; in my father's defense, he wasn't trying to endow the video game system with knighthood status - he had the wonderfully funny habit of adding "the" to places it didn't belong. This art was always in full form when we went to the movies and my dad would shout at the glass separating us from the ticket seller, "we'll take two tickets to The Beetlejuice" or "give us two for The Total Recall". It probably should have embarrassed me for no other reason that it's the type of thing that should have made me blush or squirm, but I always found it funny.

² That my grandparents bought me a game that I had any interest in playing still boggles the mind, though in the early days of Nintendo - and Christmas 1987 was the ground floor - there weren't too many options. I'm sure that they asked a stressed Christmas-season employee at KB Toys which game was best to buy their grandson and that employee bypassed Kung Fu and Excitebike to grab Ghosts & Goblins. They only ever bought me one other video game, Monopoly for SNES, and I know I turned it shortly after opening it to make it appear that I was interested, but that was it. No need to play a board game as a video game. Their batting average, .500 - Hall of Fame numbers - was far better than my mom, who was tasked with buying me games based on, at least initially, letters to Santa Claus and eventually, when Santa Claus was revealed to be a hoax, a handwritten list. I was always clear with the games that I wanted and yet my mother always went with her gut instinct instead. And her gut led her to buy games based on movies that I might have seen but certainly knew about. I clearly wrote down "Battletoads", and I somehow unwrapped "Robocop 2" instead. While I never had a huge collection of games, the percentage of movie tie-in games was always overwhelming. I'd say, at any point, the percentage of games based on movies vs. standard games was roughly 70%-30%. I had Friday the 13th, A Nightmare on Elm Street, Batman, Rambo, Back to the Future II & III, Ghostbusters II, Robocop 2, Die Hard, Top Gun, and Jaws. Most of them are terrible. Part of me wonders if my mom thought she was buying the movie for me and not the game; the above mentioned titles would have made for a mean VHS collection, though the truth of it is she probably expected that I'd love the games simply because I saw the films. More often than not, she's right. This is the exception to the rule. And I'm still waiting for my copy of Battletoads.

guests to like the Nintendo and since I was the expert player in the Daley household, they would have more respect for me.

I'd blow on the cartridge, insert it into the console, and press Power. Even if people weren't interested at all, they feigned it for a few minutes. Things always got more interesting as soon as the guest wanted to play. Again, it didn't matter who it was that volunteered to play, the style was always the same. The first-time player refused to sit, as if standing created a connection between them and the game; better yet, as they began to play (with some coaching advice from me), they always whipped the controller up and down as if the A and B buttons had nothing to do with Mario's leaping and their wild gestures willed the Italian plumber upwards; these uncontrollable spasms were always followed by shrieks and "ooh ooh ooh ooh come on come on no no no no NO oh". I was always too nervous to laugh or correct the behavior, but I'd guess that some Nintendo executives and developers learned about this common reaction and started to develop the technology that would one day become the Wii.

From the beginning, there was an accessibility with Mario, an everyman quality, that made video games easy for people to understand. It wasn't as simple as Pong, but it was better because Mario added a sense of purpose to gaming. Even for those people, like my grandparents, who never played a game before or since that one encounter with Mario, they "got" it. Super Mario Bros. had the same elements people recognized with cartoons and took it a step further by adding interactivity. People finally had the ability to tell Road Runner which way to run.

It was the first time in my life that a device intended for me garnered interest from adults. This was a curiosity that they had to see. It never lasted beyond the first play, even for my dad, who I begged incessantly to play but he couldn't pretend to be interested. My suggestions of,

“let’s play Nintendo!” were always met with, “I don’t know how to play The Mario - go ahead, you play”. The shine wore off for all of the guests, but at one time, Nintendo was the main attraction at my house. It didn’t take long for Nintendo to be relegated from the show floor of the living room to a thirteen-inch screen in the basement, but if it weren’t for that move, I never would have become obsessed.

The Dirty Tricks of Older Brothers

When I first got Nintendo, I wanted to play all the time. My mother enacted a strict “You May Only Play 30 Minutes Per Day” policy in my house, which was a frustrating losing battle. No matter how persuasive I tried to be, no matter how many deals with the Devil I tried to make, my mother never budged. This was even true on weekends or summer vacation, when there were so many more hours to fill and I typically exhausted all my Nintendo visitation hours before breakfast. The one way that I got around it at home was by waking up early. This never happened on a school day, but on weekends or lazy days of summer, I would rise earlier than everyone else in my household. My dad had to wake early for work, but fortunately for me, he traveled during the week, so that was one less person that I had to fool. My mother and sister were typically awake between 6:30am-7:00am and I had no problem setting my internal alarm clock to 5:00am. Yes, while most logical kids used their weekends and summer mornings to sleep in, I woke up earlier than I did during the school week. I was that motivated to have more time with Nintendo that I abandoned sleep and snuck downstairs, turned on the TV while holding the Mute button (always afraid that the last person to watch would have turned the volume up to 11), and tip toed around to get the system up and running. I was beating the system.

The thing is, it wasn't enjoyable. First of all, I missed the sounds of the game, like the wonderful soundtracks of Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda, both of which hold up to this day. Instead, I was playing silent films. I couldn't risk the volume even being on the lowest setting. Secondly, I had to keep my button smashing to a quiet purr - the sound could be no louder than two fingers rubbing together. Even my breathing and gesturing was kept in check.

Forget if I had to sneeze or cough. That would be a dead giveaway, so I always kept one of the couch pillows within reach so I could expel any noise and germs into it. Finally, I was only ever giving the game half of my attention because I spent the other half of the time - or more appropriately, had one eye on the screen and the other eye on the ceiling - listening for my mother or sister to wake up.

This scheme of mine bought me about an extra hour of gaming per day, but I was always so tense that it was rarely enjoyable. That was besides the point. I was more concerned with beating the system than quality gaming.

Fortunately there was a much easier way for me to unlatch the constraints than waking up before the sun appeared. The simple solution was my best friend that also had Nintendo.

Nick lived one block away and we were allowed to go to each other's houses after we finished our homework. This usually gave us about ninety minutes together during the post-homework/pre-dinner afternoon. This was plenty of time to do some damage, whether that meant playing football in the snow, turning a living room into an American Gladiators course, or playing Nintendo. When my house was the destination of choice for our exploits, we rarely played games. Every once in a while we squeezed in a game of Ice Hockey or Tecmo Bowl, but more often than not, we stuck with outdoor-based adventures. This made a lot of sense, since I didn't have toys to play with, but I did have sports equipment, including boxing gloves. And nothing quite brings friends together like beating each other in the head with red-gloved fists.

When we went to Nick's house, we had a great variety of activities, since Nick had two brothers (one older, one younger) and toys, but there were many occasions that we chose Nintendo over all the other options. The key was that Nick had an hour time limit on his daily

gaming and his older brother Greg didn't really have any restrictions, so we were quite adept at using our full ninety minutes as Nintendo time. By and large, he had better games too, either because his handwriting was more legible than mine or Greg assured that their mother didn't buy bad games.

Gaming at Nick's house was much different, since we often had to compete for controller time with Greg and his friends (three years our senior and always willing to use violence as a negotiation tool, especially when it wasn't required). Even if we were in the middle of a game, Greg, solo or with his friends, could show up and kick us off the system. This was my first lesson in the Darwinian Principles of Gaming, though I was wise enough to pay attention when Greg did take over. Especially in Super Mario Bros.

Prior to playing at Nick's house, there were four major elements to Super Mario Bros. that were completely foreign to me. I'd like to say that it wasn't anything important. I'd like to report that it was a few obscure nuances that enhanced game play but weren't essential. But I'd be misleading you if I told you that.

I thought that I understood how to play the game. I thought that I understood the purpose of the game. I hang my head in shame yet again, twenty-eight years later, because of my ignorance.

There are a few basics to Super Mario Bros. that most people understand. It is a side scrolling game (you move the player from left-to-right to reach a destination) starring an Italian plumber that jumps over vaguely recognizable animals like ducks and walking owls and collects coins and does his best to avoid death. That description sounds more complicated than the game actually is. I played the game for the first two months with this very basic framework. Then one

day at Nick's house, after a frustrating twenty minutes of trying to master Kung Fu, Greg appeared from out of nowhere and turned the game off. He had no time for Kung Fu. He wanted to get his Mario on and on the few occasions that this happened before, Nick and I would protest briefly, then busy ourselves with something else. But that day, we decided to watch. That's when I learned four valuable things.

Mario doesn't have to walk through the game. He can run.

Those pipes placed throughout the game aren't placed throughout the world simply to be jumped over. Some of them transport Mario to hidden rooms.

When Mario grabs the flower from the question mark boxes he had head butted (okay, technically he punches the bricks and boxes, but it really does appear that he head butts his way through the game), it doesn't arbitrarily change his outfit from red overalls and brown shirt to white overalls and red shirt (and a quick hair dye job). It changes his abilities.

These first three things were mind blowing. Absolute paradigm shifts. The simplistic views I held of Mario were wrong. All because he could run, disappear down pipes, and shoot fire balls.³ This proves how naive I was. Or how in step I was with my gender, since I completely ignored reading the instruction booklet, which would have informed me about running and throwing fireballs. Or I could have used two-cents worth of intelligence and asked, "is it possible that the guy on the cover of the game, who I think is Mario, can do different things than the regular Mario? And why are the game developers or marketers or box art designers showing me this cool picture of Mario throwing fire - is that something I can actually control during

³ Not fried shrimp, like my original misconceptions led me to believe, though I dream of a parallel world where Mario uses various species of shellfish to defeat his enemies. Or better yet, different types of shellfish in traditionally prepared ways: fried shrimp, clams casino, lobster roll, steamed mussel, etc. Even if the good people at Nintendo aren't interested in taking Mario in that direction, could he have an award winning chef cousin Antonio that joins the good fight?

gameplay?” What I should have done vs. what I did sums up many experiences. That should be the definition of the word “life” in every dictionary.

I watched as Greg whipped through the early levels with ease, running, killing enemies with fireballs, and warping to secret coves of coins. It was all so much to take in at once, and yet, these three things paled in comparison to the final reveal of that February day.

Mario can cheat.

Or more appropriately, Mario can skip levels. Bored by playing level-by-level? The developers expected this, so they included shortcuts in levels 1-2 and 4-2 that allow players to jump ahead, all the way to level seven. At this point, I didn’t know how many levels there were, though I just discovered that there were at least seven.

After watching Greg breeze through a few levels of Mario, then quit out of boredom, I never played Super Mario Bros. the same again. This was both a benefit and a hindrance. I wanted to play again as soon as possible to try out everything, but I also never played through most of the levels. I would never put in real time to understand how to best beat the game or learn the rhythms of it because I was so enamored with and then preoccupied by warping to later levels that I never even set foot in levels two, three, five, or six. It was like earning minimum wage the first week at McDonald’s and getting a pay bump to \$250 an hour in week two. I thought beating the game would be so easy now that I had an arsenal of tricks. As a reminder, I’m writing this twenty-eight years after learning these tricks and I still haven’t beaten Super Mario Bros. If you haven’t caught on to that by now, there’s something wrong. I won’t point fingers, but I suggest you listen to track seven of Michael Jackson’s album *Bad*, another

incredible cultural force from 1987. Nintendo and Bad? Is 1987 the most underrated year ever?⁴

Maybe.

⁴ To further this argument, here is a list of some of the movies released in 1987: The Princess Bride (one of the greatest live-action kid movies ever), Angel Heart (is there any way to reunite Robert DeNiro, Mickey Rourke, and Lisa Bonet?), Spaceballs (I saw this before I saw Star Wars, which might explain everything that's wrong with me), Evil Dead II (is it a comedy or horror film? I still can't answer that question), Lethal Weapon (the movie that launched a million action movie cliches...but don't hold that against it), Predator (the testosterone sweated off the screen), Mannequin (I never walked through department stores the same after seeing this), A Nightmare on Elm Street 3 (when Freddy became Freddy), Full Metal Jacket (before watching this, I thought I wanted to be in the Army), Robocop (which I saw in the theaters, at age six...still not sure how my dad got away with this), Raising Arizona (a movie I'd always watch on HBO because I knew I should get it, but I didn't), Dirty Dancing (the movie my sister wouldn't stop watching), The Lost Boys (after watching this in a hotel room, I had my one and only sleepwalking incident), Interspace (exactly what I thought doctors did), Beverly Hills Cop II (proof that Eddie Murphy could carry anything at this point in his career), The Untouchables (what I thought a movie about organized crime was supposed to be...before I saw The Godfather I & II and Goodfellas), La Bamba (still sad), Good Morning, Vietnam (the war wasn't so bad because this guy's got a radio show!...oh wait, is this the same war as Full Metal Jacket? Never mind), Adventures in Babysitting (my dream scenario before Home Alone came out), The Monster Squad (the movie could never live up to the name), Wall Street (why is the guy from Romancing the Stone a bad guy), *batteries not included (it's E.T. with robots!...I'm guessing this was the pitch), The Secret of My Success (if only this was based on a true story), Planes, Trains, and Automobiles (remains the only proof you need to not travel close to the holidays), Over the Top (no dad could compete with the still incredible combination of truck driver/arm wrestling champ), Summer School (made failure look like a pretty great time), The Living Daylights (underrated Bond), Stakeout (turned boredom into a good time), Disorderlies (paved the way for Ice Cube's acting career), Fatal Attraction (lesson learned), Near Dark (if the cast of Aliens thought xenomorphs were a problem...), Prince of Darkness (strange, but at least it was horror made for adults...I think), The Hidden (it's like The Thing and The Terminator), Eddie Murphy RAW (who cares if I would get slapped in the face for repeating these jokes). I think I've made my point.

Total Creeps or Totally Cool

In the age before smart phones, parents were wont to permit the babysitter they hired to bring their boyfriend along for the night's shift. While this practice - a terrible idea - has been well documented in slasher films, I'll comment on it only to say that babysitters are only permitted to date guys who are way too old to be dating the babysitter⁵ and make the kids feel uncomfortable or they are the type of guy that you want to be when you're their age. I'm not sure if any of the girls I dated in high school ever babysat, so I never had the opportunity to fit into a babysitter boyfriend type, though I'd like to believe I would be the more respectable flavor.

Fortunately for me, most of the babysitters I had never brought their boyfriends with them. When it wasn't my Aunt Karen or Aunt Judy - hands down the greatest babysitters - it was either a neighbor or friend of the family. Only two ever brought their boyfriends; one of the boyfriends was an artist and the other was a master at Super Mario Bros. I wish I could report that the artist had a tremendous impact on my life and that he inspired me to follow a path toward philosophical and spiritual enlightenment as a great sculptor or painter, but I can't write legibly, let alone create great works of art. I could wrap my head around Super Mario Bros., though it became a spiritual experience after I watched a master play it before.

I'd met Bobby a few times before that Tuesday night. It was rare for my parents to go out during the week and I don't know where they went; I didn't protest at all because my bedtime

⁵ Perhaps I'm taking this too far, but many of these boyfriends have bad facial hair, smell like cigarettes, and don't have much planned for their futures beyond hooking up with the babysitter. They were never college students and if you asked them what kind of job they had, they'd laugh and giggle with the babysitter. Now that I'm a parent, I understand that parents overlook such things because they are so desperate for kid-free time, but even I'd pause if a guy that fit this description showed up with my kids' babysitter. I'm not saying that I wouldn't go out, but I would definitely disinfect my couch before sitting on it again.

was extended by a full hour (from 7:30pm-8:30pm) and I was allowed to play video games all night. What I didn't realize was that Bobby was a samurai warrior with an NES controller. He was a poet, zen master, and cool Jazz trumpeter all in one. By that point I knew about fireballs and running and level skipping, but I didn't understand that the true art of the game was to play it from level 1-1 through level 8-4.

It wasn't my time to do so; it was my time to watch a Super Mario Bros. genius at work. I was always high energy when I played, often standing, moving about, jittering, talking, distracting myself. Bobby locked in and played through each level with absolute tranquility. Mario was second nature to him. Even more impressive, he played without losing a life. The feat still amazes me. I watched with breathless wonder as Bobby navigated Mario with expert timing and precision. It was like he had designed the game. Afterwards I was too nervous to ask any questions or make any comments because it was one of the greatest things I'd ever seen, even though it was nothing to Bobby. He'd done it many times before and could do it again if he wanted to.

I couldn't sleep that night. I replayed the brilliance over and over again in my mind. All I wanted to do was play the game level-by-level till I beat it. I didn't. I fell prey to skipping levels every time, blocking the memory of the euphoria I had from the one time I watched the game being played properly. I've never been as good at any game as Bobby was at Super Mario Bros. Perhaps it was the only game he ever played or he was that skilled at every game. I'll never know. Nearly thirty years later, I still want to recreate that magic.

Method Commitment

Mario learned from his mistake.

The follow-up to Super Mario Bros., at least here in the States, was the aptly titled Super Mario Bros. 2. While it allowed gamers to play as characters from Mario's posse - Luigi, Princess Peach, Mushroom - it abandoned the traditional side scrolling style of the original. I never owned that game. It didn't interest me. The Price Brothers, twins Brad and Tim, who were (and remain to this day) funny and fun and always a joy to be around, owned it; since they lived one block away and our older sisters were best friends, we often convened at their house for fantastic feasts of the imagination. When we grew bored or rain pushed us indoors, we'd play Nintendo. Out of curiosity, I'd suggest Super Mario Bros. 2 and only lasted ten minutes each time. Nobody really enjoyed it, though it had to compete with Operation Wolf and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, both of which were impossible for us to beat, though the sheer amount of shouting at the screen should have tipped things in our favor. Perhaps if the first sequel to Super Mario Bros. had been more faithful to the original, I wouldn't have ever lost interest in the character. While my own collection veered toward embarrassingly bad, I moved away from Super Mario Bros.

That is, until Super Mario Bros. 3 came out.

In the pre-internet days⁶, building a wave of hype was more difficult. Brands had to rely on traditional methods, which included ads on TV/radio/print, feature stories on TV/radio/print, and the crown jewel of them all, word-of-mouth. Super Mario Bros. 3 became a juggernaut before it was released. I knew about it and was so hyped to play it and I still don't know the minutiae of the marketing ploy, but it worked. I certainly knew about it through Nintendo Power⁷ and word-of-mouth - which was so powerful in this particular instance because all of my friends talked incessantly about it. We talked Mario 3 while we were waiting outside the closed double doors of Shafer Elementary School, we talked about it in the cafeteria, we talked about it at recess, we talked about it at basketball practice. Looking back at elementary school, I now see that kids fell into two camps: Athletes and Not. I had friends in both and Super Mario Bros. 3

⁶ For those of you who do not remember a time before the Internet existed, fear not, for I will summarize things for you. First of all, I grew up thinking that the ultimate resource for anything and everything was the Encyclopedia Britanica and up until High School it was the only source I ever cited for any project. If you wanted to know about any band or movie, you had to rely on TV and radio and magazines, regardless of your level of exposure to these things; think about this: if you didn't own a particular song you loved, be it on the full album or the single, you had to watch a lot of MTV or listen to a lot of radio - though you presumably did both - to hear that song. If you had a crush on someone, you relied on handwritten folded up notes that got slipped to them via a friend; waiting for a response - if you ever received one - often took days and the tension was as bad as it sounds. If you were braver than that, you'd look up their number in the phone book, cold call them, and pray that one of their parents didn't pick up the phone. Having your crush pick up was a double-edged sword because yes, you technically wanted to talk to them but you really didn't want to talk to them because you had nothing to say and you certainly weren't going to admit that you "liked" them, even though there was no other reason to call them and what followed was the longest two minutes of awkward conversation never recorded. Finally, if you wanted to criticize someone, you had to talk about them behind their back or directly to their face. Both methods featured bad results, but it was only committed to people's memories and not social media, so you could always get away with people forgetting the terrible thing you said in a matter of weeks. Does this sound terrible? Don't worry. There will be many technologies that come around during your lifetime that you won't get and one day you will explain to someone younger what life was like before such technology. And then, you will be old.

⁷ This was a monthly magazine published by Nintendo comprised of preview stories, detailed breakdowns of current games (with maps, walkthroughs, cheats, etc.), and reviews. I never had a subscription, but a close friend did and as soon as he and his brother were through with them, I took them. Creating a magazine was a genius move on Nintendo's part. It, along with Wizard Magazine, was the only magazine I cared about until 7th grade. For some reason my parents never got me a subscription to Nintendo Power, though I did have subscriptions to Sports Illustrated and American Heritage and the reason that those seem like odd choices for a ten-year old is because they were. I'd like to paint myself as the kid sitting in a maroon-colored robe, smoking a tobacco pipe, reading American Heritage magazine, but that didn't happen till I was a teenager. Nintendo Power would have been the much safer bet in my earlier years.

was the game everyone wanted to play. Normally, the Athletes were Tecmo Super Bowl guys and the Nots were Tetris guys. Mario 3 was the great equalizer.

I'm sure the window from my initial awareness of Super Mario Bros. 3 and its release was only a matter of months, but it felt like years. The one thing that I knew - that everyone somehow knew - was that this was a return to form for Mario. It was going to be like the original Super Mario Bros., but better. The graphics would be improved, you'd be able to turn into different types of Marios, and the game overall was a much larger canvas than the original. It became the first must-have item of my life. I never missed an opportunity to remind my parents that Super Mario Bros. 3 was coming out and my life would not be complete without it.

Nintendo built the hype around the game so thoroughly - and smartly - that they teased some of it in the movie *The Wizard*. In my estimation, the movie was going to be about some kids that sat around for ninety minutes playing Super Mario Bros. 3, which was perfect, because I wanted to see the game play so badly that I dragged my dad and sister and grandfather to the Gap Theater to watch it. Little did I realize that using Super Mario Bros. 3 was a ploy by a movie studio to manipulate kids into thinking that they were luring their parents to a video game centric film when in fact they were forking over dollars to watch a limp drama about the kid from *The Wonder Years*⁸ and his gifted brother go on a road trip to compete in a video game competition that lasts all of two minutes on screen. *The Wizard* was promoted as a thrilling and exciting movie and instead it was Hollywood's answer to "hey, kids like video games and even though

⁸ That "kid from the *Wonder Years*" is Fred Savage, who is a talented TV actor and director, that, at the time, was one of three people I recognized from TV. The other two were Alf and Bill Cosby. Forgive me. It was the late 80's/early 90's. Though I have to say, if you've never seen *The Wonder Years*, it's a pretty great show that has an amazing opening credit sequence.

Tron didn't work, let's figure out a way to use video games as a way to sell tickets". It was the beginning of a tumultuous relationship between Hollywood and Video Games⁹.

Getting Super Mario Bros. 3 was a top priority for me, though my parents put a few other things ahead of it, like "paying bills" and "feeding kids". I get it now, but at the time, my mind was completely boggled. In fact, if I would have had an MRI at the time, the doctors would have seen boggling (represented through unnatural coloring and movement). The game was released in the States on February 12th, 1990 and I didn't get the game till April. In the grand scheme of things, two months isn't a big deal at all. But my nine-year old self was slowly being destroyed inside. I had to drop hints everywhere and anywhere, just to make sure my parents didn't forget that the game had been released.

"Matthew, what do you want for lunch?"

"You know what would be good mom? A ham and turkey sandwich. You know who always eats those? Conrad. His mom packed him one for lunch yesterday. You know what else she did? SHE BOUGHT HIM SUPER MARIO BROS. 3. I'll have that with mustard and mayo."

Subtle hints like that.

⁹ Some people you know might insist that there have been good movies based on video games. They are misleading you. I don't want to say lie, because that is too harsh, though they are most definitely misleading you. They might cite titles like Tomb Raider or Resident Evil, but those are not good movies, no matter what evidence they present. Back in the 1990's, there were some wonderfully terrible attempts in Hollywood to piggyback off the success of video games. There was the infamous Super Mario Bros, Double Dragon, Street Fighter (which starred Jean Claude Van Damme but didn't play like most Jean Claude Van Damme movies; the Van Damme formula was this: reluctant guy participates in underground fighting tournament. It was used quite successfully in Bloodsport, Kickboxer, Lionheart, The Quest, and In Hell. There were so many movies like this back in the 80's and 90's; I can only think that screenwriters at the time were so inept at weaving action into story that most threw up their hands and said, "I'll just use the Van Damme formula". But the strange thing is, the only movie that he really ever should have used the Van Damme formula was Street Fighter and he didn't. They tried to tell a story. It didn't work at all and it's not even watchable on an "it's so bad it's good" scale. It's just bad.), Mortal Kombat, and Mortal Kombat: Annihilation. It wasn't until The Matrix in 1999 - which isn't even based on a video game - that a film captured some of the essence of playing video games. There have been many more movies based on video games and more will come and it's always a safe bet to assume they will be terrible.

The problem that I was facing was that the release date did not coincide with my birthday or Christmas. If I had to wait till November or December, my body would have calcified. I also didn't get an allowance, so there was no way of saving up money to buy it. It's not like I could have offered up my services around the house either, doing chores or mowing the lawn, because I was required to help out with that stuff anyway. I was a little too young to grasp the concept of "selling organs on the black market", but I would have explored options like that if I was more aware of them. When I finally broke my parents down, my dad and sister and I set out to find it.¹⁰ We went to KB Toys and they were sold out. Devastation. We then drove to Circuit City, which was also sold out of Mario, but my dad didn't want us to go home empty handed, so he bought us Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego for our dust-collecting computer. I'm not saying Carmen Sandiego is bad, but it was not a fair substitution. It's like your parents telling you that you're going on a 14-day cruise to Hawaii and you spend a long weekend on the Jersey Shore instead. Yes, there is sand and water, but they are not quite the same thing.

Fortunately, my mom was able to find the game at Toys R Us one day after work and balance was restored to the universe. I hadn't invested very much time in Mario since I first got Nintendo, opting instead for some of the games in my embarrassing collection. Once Super Mario Bros. 3 came out, I was devoted to that Italian plumber all over again. I played at my house and at friends' houses. That passion carried all the way to Halloween.

In late September, when my mom asked me what costume I wanted for Halloween, there was only one answer: Mario. Whether or not there were Mario costumes on the market didn't

¹⁰I learned at an early age that my parents were far more willing to indulge me with things if my sister was also interested. So I convinced them that she also really wanted the game. This helped later in life when I wanted to play guitar and get a dog. It's always best to know how to get an advantage in life.

matter, because my mom was going to make me a Mario costume. It was quite incredible too. She created overalls by sewing together blue sweatpants and a cut-up blue sweatshirt, then outfitted me with a red long sleeve T-shirt, fake mustache, white gloves, and a hat. I was never prouder or more excited about a Halloween costume, though it barely edged out my “old man Judo instructor” from my pre-school days. I couldn’t wait to wear it to school. Prior to that fateful Wednesday, I wore the costume around the house. More importantly, I wore it while I played Super Mario Bros. 3. I convinced myself that I was Mario and wearing the Mario uniform would make me better at the game. It didn’t for many obvious reasons, one being that it’s

difficult to play video games while wearing white puffy winter gloves, but I didn't care. I was committed to being Mario, not just playing Mario¹¹.

Halloween day, like most holidays during elementary school, was a wasted instructional day. There was no time for lessons. All any of us wanted to do was parade around the school and strategize the two hours of trick 'r' treating that awaited us that night. My friends loved my costume and I was happy to be the only Mario. When we finally lined up for the parade, my teacher, Mr. P., who was only really qualified to teach recess, walked down the line of students and commented about every costume. When he got to me he said, "so, yeah, what are you supposed to be?"

¹¹ This was my 4th grade year and my level of commitment to pop culture was unparalleled. Besides the homemade Mario costume for Halloween, I also convinced my mother to utilize her sewing skills for another great outfit. In 1990, my devotion wasn't exclusive to Mario. I was also a rabid MC Hammer fan. This didn't make me unusual, of course, because Hammer was one of the most popular artists in the world. I listened to Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em (released on the exact same day as Super Mario Bros. 3. Coincidence? I think not) constantly, studied the videos, and sought out any magazine articles I could find at the local newsstand. This, however, wasn't enough. I couldn't prove my fandom in private and it would be 18 months before I would see Hammer in concert (with Jodeci, Boyz II Men, and TLC...reflect on that incredible line-up for a minute) and own a Hammer Tour T-shirt, but at the time I didn't know that fate had such things in store for me. So I asked my mother to make me a pair of homemade Hammer pants. She was more than fine with this, insisting that I go to the store to pick out the fabric. I chose a wonderful pattern of gold, red, black, and teal. Within a few days, she sewed a perfect pair of Hammer pants. She knew the look from the "U Can't Touch This" video, though she added a few extra feet to the crotch so it touched the floor. I thought that this was great. I borrowed a teal-colored T-shirt and pair of all black Nikes from my sister (both were remnants from a dance recital) and my outfit was complete. I couldn't wait to go to school. As soon as I met my best friend Nick for our morning walk, he asked a very obvious question: "what are those pants?" It was a common theme throughout the early part of the day, followed by stares. I assumed that everyone would know what I was going for, but nobody did. Close friends didn't talk to me, as if I wasn't me and I'd been replaced by a new kid. By late morning, I felt so uncomfortable that I tried to figure out a way to fake that I was sick. My outfit was supposed to be a showstopper and instead it brandished me invisible. Everyone was embarrassed for me, even though I didn't know I was supposed to be embarrassed. It didn't help that the crotch of my pants hung to the floor, but I thought that this made them even more incredible. When I played things out in my head prior to the actual day, I expected that everyone would love my pants and I'd start a new trend; not only that, but I had planned to use my recess time to show off the Hammer dance I'd memorized and worked on in the privacy of my room. Instead, I stood near the door, waiting to go inside, too ashamed to play kickball. On a typical day, once the end-of-the-day bell rang, I'd hang out with my friends and lolly gag home. On Hammer day, I sprinted from my desk and ran until I was exhausted. I was so far ahead of everyone else that I didn't have to worry about looks of scorn or questions. I thought the worst was behind me. While waiting for the light on the corner of Center and Broad, a big yellow bus pulled up to the intersection. It was filled with kids from Holy Family, the nearby Catholic school. I slowly tilted my head to look up at the open windows. Six kids leaned their heads out of the window. A shaggy-haired snaggle-toothed kid yelled for everyone on the bus to hear: "Nice pants fag Hammer!" This was followed by uproarious laughter. The tormentor understood my outfit choice and was happy to comment on it. I ran the rest of the way home, took off the pants and buried them in my bottom drawer, and told my mom that everyone loved the pants. Nobody said a word the next day at school, because I had returned to normal. Looking back, it was a glorious failure.

“Mario,” I said proudly, somewhat shocked that he didn’t know.

“Whatever that is,” he said.

The tone was so defeating that a kick to the groin would have been easier to take. It was clear from that moment that even though I had the best costume - and one of the few homemade costumes - that I wouldn’t be awarded the “Best Costume” prize for my class. So be it. I was Mario and that made all the difference. I wasn’t going for “Best Costume 1990”. I was going for Greatest Costume Ever. I assured myself that it was only Mr. P. that didn’t “get it”. While walking along the parade route, with parents lining the sidewalks, I waved proudly, smiling at the excited parents. One dad pointed me out and said, “what’s he, some sort of farmer or something?” Stopping to correct him would have caused a domino effect, halting the entire parade. I ignored the ignorance and marched forward, proud to channel the spirit of Mario.

Let Me Teach You How to Waste Time

We move on from things. Sometimes willingly, sometimes by force.

I'd graduated from the NES to the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) by Christmas of 1991 and never touched the NES again. There was no need. My friends now had either SNES or Sega Genesis, so the old 8-Bit system was packed away and eventually donated. My love affair with the SNES only lasted for three years, but it was intense. I wasn't only playing games: I was beating them. Super Mario World, The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past, Super Metroid, Castlevania IV, Donkey Kong Country. I devoted myself to becoming a better gamer. I owned fewer games because the video rental store in my small town, Video Loop, rented SNES games. I could sample for a weekend and see if they were worth buying. Most weren't.

The SNES was the system I took with me when I moved across the state of Pennsylvania, from a small town to a bustling suburb. With that move, I played fewer games. I was getting into other things, like music, film, and girls. I played on a weekly basis, but it wasn't frequent enough. Once eighth grade rolled around, my parents insisted that I give my system to a friend of the family. I didn't put up a fight because I really liked the kid and at fourteen, I understood that an eight-year old would get much more out of the system than I would. After that, there was very little in the way of gaming. The rest of middle school and the first half of high school were gaming free. I was so passionate about other things that I didn't mind. If my friends had systems, they were only used by younger siblings.

During the summer of my junior year, I moved back across the state to the same small town from which I had moved four years earlier. It's like I had gone missing for four years and reemerged. It was such an awkward transition, trying to pick back up with old friends as if nothing had changed. A lot changed - mostly me - and I was never quite happy. The one benefit, which still amazes me to this day, is that the high school I was going to attend was shut down for the first semester for asbestos removal. That meant that the high schoolers and middle schoolers had to share the middle school building. We all couldn't fit at the same time, so high school classes were held from 7:00am-11:00am. That's it. Every day of the first semester was a half day. I was playing soccer at the time, but we didn't start practice until 4:00pm. I had five hours to kill every day. My parents were both working and I should have used that time to study, improve my soccer skills, practice guitar, learn a second language, enhance my cooking abilities, get to know aging family members, and so on. But I was sixteen and those are things you reflect on later in life as "things I should have done with my spare time". Of course I didn't do anything like that. Instead, I hung out at Nick's house.

Nick had moved in the interim years as well, though his family remained in the school district. His parents were generous enough to let a group of sixteen year olds hang out in their basement for five hours every day. The size of the group varied, but there were three constants: me, Nick, and Zin. To be fair, we were very much into the other teenage pursuits at the time, especially girls. We made time for such things too. The beautiful part about having those half days was that we were gifted five hours every day. It was extra time. Time pulled from an ether that no high school kids should ever be granted. We didn't think of it as extra time. We thought

of it as a right. It was difficult to argue with that, since it was sanctioned by the school. So we still went out at night and on the weekends, but every afternoon was also ours.

My gang of friends - a mix of old and new - chose a safe route for our extra time. Nick had - thanks to his younger brother - a Nintendo 64. It is a fine system and remains the only Nintendo System that I didn't own. At first, we played a lot of FIFA. Nick, Zin, and I were all on the soccer time after all. If we weren't going to go to the back yard to get a few extra touches on the ball, the least we could do is simulate soccer. During breaks from FIFA, Zin and I would challenge each other to Mario 64. Playing Mario 64 for the first time was such a jarring experience because it was so unlike the Mario games that preceded it. For gamers who started in a post-Nintendo 64 world (or more aptly, started with Playstation 2 and beyond), Mario 64 would seem primitive. But compared to the Mario games from NES and SNES, it was a revolution.

The amount of time we played FIFA and Mario 64 paled in comparison to the number of hours we gave ourselves to the one game everyone cites when referencing the Nintendo 64: Goldeneye. To be fair, Goldeneye - which is loosely based on the first Pierce Brosnan 007 film - is not the best game for Nintendo 64. That would be The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time¹². Ocarina of Time is arguably the greatest video game ever. Its follow-up, The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, is also quite incredible. But I'm not talking about the best Nintendo 64 game here; I'm talking about the most important one.

¹² You might be wondering at this point, quite fairly, why I'm not writing a piece about The Legend of Zelda series instead of Mario, since I've cited the original Zelda as my favorite NES game and Ocarina of Time as my favorite Nintendo 64 game... I might as well mention that my favorite SNES game was The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past. There will be more Zelda love ahead too, but the two main differences are: I beat all those Zelda games and Mario is the face of the franchise. Another important distinction between Mario and Zelda is that Mario games are fun to play with others, while Zelda is a rich independent experience. Not that you can't enjoy it with others, but it's a one-player game and if you aren't fortunate enough to have someone in your life like my wife - who likes being my co-pilot during one-player games - then you always play Zelda by yourself.

Goldeneye is a far more important game historically than anything else released on Nintendo 64¹³. It's incredibly fun and it established the blueprint for a majority of shooter and multiplayer games that came after it¹⁴. It also helped to usher in the era of community gaming; Goldeneye was better when you played with four people; granted, all four of those people were on the same couch, but at least you knew the person who was trash talking you. I only ever played Goldeneye against friends. There very well could have been a story mode, but I don't know a single thing about it.

The premise of the game is quite simple. You have to get from Point A to Point B, collect weapons, and kill enemies. The game put you in the perspective of James Bond. This was fun, of course, but nothing could compare to battling against your friends. The game allowed up to four people to play against each other in a single stage. It brought out the best and worst of our sixteen-year old competitive natures. There was a lot of cursing. There was a lot of trash talking. There was a good chance that a real fight would break out. Even though we were only in school for half a day, we couldn't wait for that last bell to ring so we could race to the parking lot and pile into Zin's Jeep and defy the speed limit to begin our daily Goldeneye session. Strangely, for how devoted we were to killing each other in Goldeneye, how intense and heated these sessions became, it never bled into our other social time.

¹³ To draw parallels, I'd consider The Legend of Zelda to be the Citizen Kane of video games; it wasn't the first game ever released, but it demonstrated the potential that games had all while creating a grammar for the industry. Super Mario Bros is the Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs of video games; it's a game that everyone can enjoy, even though it seems intended only for younger audiences; it also created modern video game culture. Goldeneye is the Bonnie & Clyde of video games; it's both familiar and new, straight-forward and Avant Garde, beautiful and violent.

¹⁴ Call of Duty and Battlefield are indebted to Goldeneye. As is every first person game; yes, Duke Nukem and Doom were out, but Goldeneye was for everyone. That's the advantage of being released on Nintendo. Also, online gaming habits - good or bad - stem from Goldeneye. I haven't played the game in more than fifteen years, but I imagine that it holds up. Modern gamers would "get it" right away.

When that semester ended in January and we went back to a normal school schedule, we lost those borrowed hours for playing Nintendo 64. Girls and parties took over. By the time summer came around, all of us were so busy working that we didn't have time for Goldeneye or Mario 64. It wouldn't be till after college that I would play games again.

Are There Games in the Real World?

Writers can live anywhere. I understood that concept. I just didn't care. The only place that I wanted to live after I graduated college was New York City. I'd devised a master plan early on: I'd live in New York for a few years, then eventually settle in California. My goal was to become a professional writer and I believed that the only place where that would happen is New York. I didn't want to move back to the small town from which I sprang because I was worried about getting too comfortable. I was twenty-two and I needed stories. What better place to find stories than New York?

During my final semester, I applied to over seventy-five jobs in New York and I heard back from one place. It was a teaching program and while it was never my dream to be a teacher, it was suiting my immediate needs of getting to New York; I also figured that if I was a teacher, I'd have time built into the day to write. So I went through the process and was on track to become a teacher in New York. How hard could it be?

There are many things that you learn in school. Valuable things too, especially if you apply yourself, regardless of subject. You could be an Engineering major and learn invaluable lessons from an acting class. You could be an English major and your best class could be Statistics. You should - hopefully this is obvious - learn a tremendous amount in all the courses related to your major. Whether you're at a small college or large university, there are many things to learn. The difference between high school and college is that high school teachers are required to care about you and do everything they can to assure your success whereas college professors are only required to present material and challenge you through assessments. I got that right

away. High school had its charms, though most of my enjoyment came from the social aspects; I was a solid B+/A- student, figuring out quickly the minimum to maintain that level. But I got into college. By the time I graduated, I thought I knew a lot. I thought I had proven myself. I thought I was special, somebody that was ready for the world.

It took about a month of being in the real world for me to realize I was nobody and if I wasn't paying attention, I'd be chewed up and spit out. This lesson was somewhat accelerated by the fact that I was in New York. Specifically, I was in the Bronx.

I found a one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a house on Cambreleng Ave., which was a thriving Italian neighborhood back in the 1940's. Robert Moses¹⁵ changed all that and it was now filled with young Black and Latino families struggling to get their start, though unfortunately, most were already caught in the vicious cycle of poverty (you know, the usual fun stuff of limited job opportunities and bad schools). I'd been assigned to a school in the Bronx and I figured that it would be best to live somewhat close to where I was working. I didn't have a car, nor did I want one, so I'd be relying on public transportation and my bike. When I fantasized about living in New York, I was always tucked away in a cool apartment with access to great restaurants and movie theaters and concert venues and every other convenience that best suited me. It turns out that Manhattan is expensive. Stupid expensive. I wasn't making much money

¹⁵ There has been plenty written about Robert Moses and he's quite easy to vilify. The man destroyed (this is no exaggeration either - his moves created the "The Bronx is Burning" Bronx, which is all many people still remember) the Bronx in order to build the Cross Bronx Expressway (only the first two words genuinely apply to what that road provides), the worst highway in the country; I used to take it every day and I would tense up when I approached it. To avoid it, you have to drive way out of your way. I said on many occasions, "If there's purgatory or Hell, I hope that Robert Moses is stuck in parking lot-type traffic on the Cross Bronx". Moses also tried to destroy Central Park. But I'm sure he was a real cut-up at cocktail parties. Do yourself a favor and read Robert Caro's incredible book *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. Even if History or Biography are not your things, you'll still be captivated.

from my teaching gig and my crumbling one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx was costing me half my salary. Living the dream.

The important thing was that I was there and I was doing it. It was pride and stubbornness mixed with a healthy amount of determination. All of which I needed to get through that first year. It turns out that getting good grades and writing good essays and reading lots of books in college does not prepare one for teaching ninth graders English in the South Bronx. I was a terrible teacher in a failing school and if it weren't for the fact that I met my future wife¹⁶ in the teaching program, I probably would have quit and sought out a job as a waiter or temp somewhere. I stuck with it because that's something you have to learn in life. Sometimes things suck; it can be your fault or the fault of someone else or some greater force, but things just suck sometimes. My first year as a teacher sucked because I sucked. I thought it would be easy and it

¹⁶ She will roll her eyes at this, but I love this story. We met at a job interview. That statement alone trumps most stories we hear from other couples and by the way, why do couples love/feel obligated to tell other couples how they met? Is that something people do everywhere? It's bound to come up early on and 98% of those stories are unspectacular. We met at work! We met at school! We met on a blind date! We met at a bar! Let me prepare my fake smile and laughter for this one; really, I haven't heard it before. For couples that meet through online dating services, do they just come out and say it? Or do they try to fabricate a story that others will find more interesting? I think people that meet online should tell other couples, "we met through the algorithm". It's not untrue. Nothing like a guy that complains about hearing "how couples met" stories and then drops his on you. Sue me. I'm a hypocrite. So yes, my wife and I met at a job interview and when we're confronted with the "how did you guys meet?" inquiry, I drop that line and people are already intrigued. My response is often followed by, "ooh", and at least half of the couple leans in to learn more. It wasn't a traditional job interview. For this teaching program, they held events that were similar to job fairs, but instead of just learning about places of employment, you were forced to go from table to table, sit down with a representative of that school, and interview. Imagine going on the most important job interview of your life and there are twelve people lined-up behind you waiting for their five minute interview and there are people to your left and right also interviewing for a job. It's as glamorous as it sounds. I worked my way through four interviews before landing a job. I knew nothing about the school, but I was happy that somebody took me. That final interview was on the second floor of Alfred E. Smith High School in what was once a home economics room. I was elated and ready to leave, but realized that I was near the library. I was an English and History major in college, so I loved libraries and my curiosity got the best of me. I decided to check out the library. It too was being used for interviews. There wasn't much to check out, since the space had been transformed into Job Interview Central, but a girl caught my eye. She was waiting in line for an interview and I didn't want to waste an opportunity to talk with a beautiful girl. It was the most inappropriate time to start a casual conversation with someone, but I couldn't help myself. There was something special about her. I was also quite confident because I'd just landed a job. So I pretended that I was interviewing for the same school as her and struck up a conversation. Thirteen years and three kids later, I'd say it was the big win of the day. After I spoke to her, I called my mom and told her. She listened politely as I went on and on about this great girl, then finally asked, "weren't you at a job interview?"

was impossible. I thought I'd write something so spectacular that I'd have a book deal by the end of the year and all I wrote was a bad novel and bad screenplay¹⁷.

My budding relationship was good and we were both going through the same thing: learning how to be teachers in tough schools and learning how to be graduate students. It was a stressful year and we were lucky to have each other. It was difficult because we rarely took time to relax. If we weren't working or in school or planning or writing essays, we were on the go, trying to do as much as possible to maintain a sense of normalcy. We needed a way to shut our brains off for a while. I didn't have a TV in my apartment. I didn't want the distraction and I also couldn't afford a cable bill, so it worked out for me. We watched movies on my laptop, but that always felt like a production in itself. We survived the first semester and were determined to figure out something else, some way that we could unwind.

We found it at Circuit City.

Somehow, in some inexplicable way, my wife and I had never talked about video games. We'd been together for eight months and the topic never once reared its head. It just didn't happen. While cruising through a Circuit City on a Saturday in January, we came across a sale

¹⁷ Just to give you some sense...a close friend from college had a cousin who was working in the film industry. She was just starting out, but clearly she was further ahead in the game than I was. I told my friend how I wrote a screenplay and he offered to connect me to his cousin. I was thrilled. She and I communicated via email and she was more than generous with her time. My friend had built me up as a writer and he wasn't wrong for doing so. I'd won a few awards and contests during my undergrad days - that was all I needed to be thought of as a legitimate writer. I asked her if I could send the script and she was delighted to read it; she'd spent some time reading scripts for a production company and told me that if she liked it, or at least saw the potential in it, she'd be happy to pass it along to someone. It took a week for her to respond and when she did, all it said was, "Give me a few more days...". Those few days felt like a few months. When her final email arrived, it said: "This is the worst script I've ever read. Hands down. I thought it was just me, so I sent it to an associate producer I worked with. He said, 'This guy should stop writing'. Sorry I can't help you anymore. I'm working on great projects that I feel passionately about. Best of luck." That was the last time I'd heard from her, though I did send a follow-up email, asking if there was any other advice to offer. When I spoke to my friend again, he apologized. To make matters worse, the two projects that she had worked on, that she had felt so passionately about, that were giving her greater purpose in life, that were proof that my script was trash, were *Norbit* and *Haunted Mansion*. Yes. My screenplay was so bad that the lowest points in Eddie Murphy's career were beacons of light compared to what I'd cranked out.

for the Nintendo Gamecube. Standing in the midst of Nintendo products flooded us both with nostalgia, prompting a delightful ten-minute discussion, resulting in looks from both of us that said (without uttering a word), “hey, I didn’t know you like games”. So we bought a Gamecube and four games: Luigi’s Mansion, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, Metroid: Prime, and The Legend of Zelda: Windwaker¹⁸. There was an absence of Mario, which amazes me to this day. It’s the only system that does not have an original Mario game for it and I think that’s one of the reasons that it didn’t take off. Nintendo without Mario is like Hall without Oates.

Even though we shared an affinity for Mario, we didn’t care that he was absent from the Gamecube’s world because VIDEO GAMES. We were two new adults that were going to spend a little time with VIDEO GAMES. We had papers to grade and essays to write, but VIDEO GAMES. We had friends and family to visit and VIDEO GAMES.

Our first hurdle to overcome was to get a TV. Buying the system put us over budget, but my wife had an old 13-inch TV at her parents’ house. We took that and the Gamecube back to my apartment and set it up in the bedroom; there was barely enough room for the bed, but we squeezed an old plastic shelving unit from my undergrad days in between the wall and foot of the bed. And so the magic began. We played a lot and it took our minds off the stress of being new adults. Not only did it help when we weren’t at work, it also made us better teachers. All of our students played video games and the topic of gaming became the bridge that separated us from them. It was fantastic.

The system became important for us as a couple. We’d lounge around and play on a lazy Sunday afternoon. We’d bond while playing games together. We challenged each other. We had

¹⁸ This is the only major The Legend of Zelda game I did not play, but my wife played it and I was her co-pilot. It was criticized at the time for its animation style, but it’s a fun game. Time will be kind to it.

fun. It's exactly what we needed. If we didn't stumble upon that sale, I'm sure we would have found something else, but it's difficult for me to imagine what that would be. It fit us and it fit the time in our lives perfectly.

The Gamecube ended up breaking during our move from Cambreleng Ave to Riverdale¹⁹, but we were making room for more important things anyway.

¹⁹ Not the same Riverdale from Archie Comics fame. This Riverdale is a section of the Bronx that's typically considered the "nice" section of the borough. And it is. That's how cities work. Some sections are nicer and more desirable than others, which means it costs more to live there. We felt like we were "moving on up" when we moved to Riverdale.

Gamer Dad

I never learned how to juggle. The literal kind of juggling, where someone tosses more than two tennis balls or flaming knives in the air and keeps them going. I thought I was a figurative juggler, as do most people. You'll commonly hear people begin a sentence with, "I juggle a lot of things," which is followed by a list of activities. I considered myself a juggler: I was teaching high school, college, and writing professionally simultaneously. I thought this made me busy. I thought I was juggling.

How wrong I was.

When my son was born in the fall of 2007, I realized that I had a light schedule. I wasn't really doing anything. That's what having a child does to you; it takes you out of your bubble and places you firmly in the eye of a hurricane. Everything you valued and considered important is probably trivial to you once you have a kid. And don't fool yourself into thinking that you're "ready" for a kid. It's like being elected President of the United States. There is no job you can work or title you can hold that can prepare you for what you'll do as President. Even being Vice President. That's the same thing with parenthood. Don't think for a second that because you once made a little cash through babysitting or had younger siblings you helped out with that you have what it takes to be a parent. Wrong. I wanted to be a parent. So did my wife. That's really the best qualification you can have going into parenthood. You don't know what's ahead of you, but you're open to the fact that *something* is about to happen.

As soon as that child arrives, you start to wonder all sorts of things. Why is there no manual?²⁰ How did my parents and grandparents raise children without the technology that I have?²¹ Is there a return policy?²² When will I sleep again?²³ Why is my wife already talking about the next kid?²⁴ How much are those diapers?²⁵ Will I ever socialize again?²⁶

Before long, you ease into a routine and realize that you're going to make it. Soon after this epiphany, you inch your way back to normalcy, whatever that happens to be for you. For us,

²⁰ This manual that everyone wants would be 30,000 pages, cost \$5,000, and everyone would buy it. It would instantly become the biggest selling book ever.

²¹ Don't worry. You won't have to ever bring this up because your parents and grandparents will talk about this ad nauseum. "When you were a baby, we didn't have car seats! No, we just strapped your basinet to the top of the car and laid you inside it. Doctors always used to say that babies needed fresh air. Who were we to argue?"

²² You love your child and you love the idea that anything is possible for them. But there will be a time when nothing you do stops them from crying and you think that the only thing they're going to do for the next eighteen years is cry in your ear and you'll think private thoughts of dropping them off on a convent's doorstep with a nice handwritten note.

²³ Never.

²⁴ If ever there was proof that men and women are different, it is in the wake of having a child. Women endure so much for nine months, carrying that child, distorting their bodies, getting uncontrollably hot, being uncomfortable always, not being able to sleep, having strange cravings ("you know what I could go for? A Big Mac. But I don't want the bread. What I want instead is for you to get me a box of Popeye's biscuits and make me biscuit Big Mac sliders. And I'd also like you to make a dipping sauce from Cheese Wiz, hot pepper sauce, and pancake syrup for me to dip my biscuit Big Mac sliders into. And I'll take a Diet Coke and tall glass of Grapefruit juice. NOW!"), and then going through labor. It doesn't matter if it's traditional child birth or cesarean, because there will be grueling pain before the baby is born or afterwards. And as the doting father-to-be, you will be put through a meat grinder multiple times a day, trying to figure out who this woman is that replaced your wife, and keep your fingers crossed that she will slightly resemble the person you knew prior to pregnancy. Once the baby arrives, you'll be elated, both by the fact that you have a child and by the fact that your partner will probably not be crazy anymore. Somehow, in some strange twist of the universe, the mother of your child will completely forget everything about the previous nine months and the experiences of labor and say, "let's have our next kid".

²⁵ Don't worry about the cost of kids. This might sound like terrible financial advice, but if you wait till you're financially "ready" to have kids, you'll never have them or you'll be too old to enjoy them. Trust me. You'll figure it out. Everything within the child raising industry is expensive, the same way that everything in the wedding industry is overpriced, but it's worth it. Believe me: your wife will want to buy a stroller that costs \$900 that is essentially the same thing as the \$200 stroller - even though she's done research and spent more time thinking about that stroller than she ever did about the car you bought - but you'll be smart and go along with her decision because you value your sanity more than that \$700.

²⁶ Yes, but it will be at little kid birthday parties and you'll be hanging out with other dads that you really don't know but will become instant best friends with and you'll wish upon a star that your wives choose to have play dates so you can hang out again. Or maybe that's a no. Sorry. It's been awhile.

the timing of our first child coincided closely to the release of the newest Nintendo console: the Wii.

The Wii officially become a thing like no other system. The original NES was a novelty item for many, attracting interest from all demographics. But the Wii was such a phenomenon that everyone was buying one. Young people, old people, and whatever label you apply to people between the ages of 3 and 100. The Wii was a hot news item and owning one was a sign that you were with the times. It was the first system that non-gamers bought. At frenzied rates too. All based on the simple fact that you could wave the remote at the TV and the avatar mimicked your movements. It was the promise - albeit somewhat crudely and simply - of virtual reality realized. The only game most people wanted to play was Wii Sports. It offered people five games (bowling, soccer, tennis, boxing, baseball) and an excuse to wave their arms ridiculously at the TV screen while onlookers laughed and shouted and anxiously waited their turn. The system never really took the leap beyond Wii Sports and the other two prominent systems at the time (Playstation 3 and Xbox 360) tried to introduce their versions of motion sensor gaming, but they were afterthoughts. Nintendo beat them to it.

We bought our Wii early on, chalking up the indulgent purchase to the fact that it was winter and we had a new baby and that essentially made us shut-ins. Why not spend our idle hours with VIDEO GAMES again? Our Gamecube was living in a trash heap somewhere and in our move to Riverdale, we upgraded to a 26-inch TV²⁷. And we had cable. None of that mattered because VIDEO GAMES and so we trekked over to Target on an early Sunday morning, bought

²⁷ I know that a 26-inch TV sounds ridiculously small and out-of-fashion now, because they make cell phone with 26-inch screens, but it was a big deal for us. It was a big purchase and we had to buy the floor model clearance version, but we got it. Still have it too. It doesn't matter that we haven't used it in six years or that it's in the garage. It was a smart investment at the time. And you don't throw away smart investments.

the Wii and two games: Super Mario Galaxy and The Legend of Zelda: The Twilight Princess. Nintendo course corrected itself by releasing a new Mario game with the Wii. They ended up releasing a few more Mario titles, most of them decent, and this helped make this particular console more memorable.

I enjoyed Super Mario Galaxy and loved The Twilight Princess and the other Zelda game (Skyward Sword) for the Wii, but what got me most excited was that you could now download the classic Nintendo games from the NES, SNES, and Nintendo 64. It was a total nostalgia trip and even better, I could play Super Mario Bros. while holding my son. And I did. Some fathers want to impart a love of baseball or woodworking or the music of Rush; I was leaning toward a more 21st Century approach to parenting. I became the modern dad, the dad that would play games side-by-side with his son. There wouldn't be fishing or camping trips; rather, we'd beat the snot out of each other in Street Fighter VII: Hyperlight Infinity Speed Edition²⁸. It's not all we would do, of course, but gaming would be a part of our identity. My son didn't quite grasp the concept of gaming at four months old, as I cradled him in my arms and held the Wii controller in my hands, but I could tell he was getting it. If anything else, he really enjoyed the Super Mario Bros. soundtrack. I figured, he's going to play video games at some point, why not let his old man introduce him to it.

My wife was more than okay with us playing Nintendo together, but when she got me the Playstation 3, I wasn't allowed to play while he was awake. It didn't matter that he was nine months old. She believed that he would somehow absorb the violence of Call of Duty. She'd

²⁸ Not a real game. Yet.

hired the Wii as a babysitter before letting me play the Playstation while my son was awake. Fair enough. Kids are sponges. I got it.

This didn't change at all when my daughters were born, the first in the spring of 2010 and the second in the spring of 2014²⁹. They too learned about games through Nintendo. Now we've upgraded to Wii U and they only play once per week, but they love Mario. My son is now eight and when I was his age, I was the only person in the house that played games. Now, we all do. It took twenty-five years for that to become the norm. I'll play video games with my great-grandchildren. They're ingrained in our culture. Even if people don't play them or think that they're a waste of time, they know what they are. People play games everywhere because they are everywhere. In our homes, on our computers, on our phones. This is true across socioeconomics and gender and ethnicity and race and age. I'm happy that they're a unifier.

What I'm not cool with is never beating Super Mario Bros. No, in the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter. I'm not a failure for never having beaten it. There are a lot of things I never did, like learn to play the piano or build a model car or travel to North Dakota, but those things don't bother me. I'm bothered by the fact that I never beat Super Mario Bros. because I spent a lot of time playing the game. I should have beaten the game at some point. Beating Super Mario Bros. is not necessarily the mark of a true gamer. There isn't a mark of identity for gamers, though I think beating the classics is important. Having reverence for what comes before is important. Sports fans and music fans are good at this. So I apply this to gaming.

²⁹ My grandmother's advice to everyone in life: "If you want to be happy, never get married and don't have kids." This is always followed by her saying, "Nobody ever listens to me." Guilty.

For no other reason than I think it's important, I'm finally going to beat Super Mario Bros. I don't know how long it's going to take. I don't even know if I have what it takes. But I'm going to do it.