Soy Bowser

**Super Mario 64, 1996**

I send Mario, the heroic plumber, flying up the staircase. You are a portrait at the top and no matter how far I run up, the stairs continue, endlessly rising. I must collect a certain number of Power Stars to storm your attic fortress. I must fight you two times and throw you into six bombs, watch you explode, fly through the air, scream and roar in concussive agony. I must wash my hands of these mutilations because this is a world programmed for pain.

You must bemoan your defeat— just temporary, of course, for I will never collect enough Power Stars, will never have the strength to topple the King of the Koopas. Your thick eyebrows frame your calculating eyes and your slicked-back, flame red hair is all confidence. Your arrogance must pose this challenge: “Try to stop me, try to win three times. I am the strongest there is.” Your villainy stretches across decades.

But I grow stronger. Collecting the stars is the perfect training for mastering the controls, the skills, the agility necessary to grab you by the tail and twirl you into destruction. Each star pulses power through my body. You are at your strongest already.

Yet, Mario must win: that’s the point of the game.

**Mario Party, 1998**

Mario and friends want to know who the toughest, wisest, most courageous Super Star is. They decide to set out on an adventure and test their righteousness against the true evil of the Mushroom Kingdom. They, of course, are referring to you.

They drop down a Warp Pipe in Mushroom Village and set out across seven worlds, collecting Power Stars and coins, evading the traps you set to keep them out. I pick from a variety of characters and dash gleefully through the hectic minigames. Every one of my achievements is a nail in your coffin.

At the end, I come to your mountain top. You barricade yourself in your volcano, hoping I go away, hoping for once I won’t rope you into Mario and friends’ sadistic games.

But I come for you with coins gleaming in my eyes and teeth, stars in my veins. What a fabulous party.

It doesn’t matter which character gets the most stars. Whoever they are, they use the power of the stars to blast you out of your mountain. You lie exposed to the world, a casualty. The Super Star climbs atop your body and poses.

When I was a child, I never noticed your wincing agonies, the pain in your claws.

I am crowned the best.

**Paper Mario, 2001**

I sneak captive Princess Peach out of her room, using the secret passage through her fireplace. Twink, the star kid, eggs us on. The passage comes to a rotating wall. Peach and Twink and I spin through. On the desk is a diary. Not knowing whose diary it is, Peach and Twink agree to read it as it could contain helpful information. I am curious, but what if we get caught?

*Today I went to Star Haven and stole the Star Rod. Now I’m invincible! Cool! I also captured those seven Star Spirits, so they won’t annoy me anymore. It was a hard day’s work and I’m feeling pretty bushed. Dinner was nice but a bit bland.*

They feign ignorance. But, really, who else could it be? Your clawed handwriting is a dead giveaway. They keep reading, without qualms. Peach only gives two options. I must pick: “Read” and “Only a little…”

*Today was great, diary! I used my castle to lift Princess Peach’s Castle way up into the sky! Then I barged into Peach’s Castle and beat up Mario! Yeah! Unbelievable, I know! So fun! And there’s more! After that, I kidnapped Princess Peach! I couldn’t be happier, diary! I hope she likes me…*

Now it is obviously clear. Peach puts her hands to her face in obvious disgust. Your love for Peach is no secret, you broken-hearted fool. Peach will never love you. Yet, you have wasted 16 years kidnapping her again and again. You idealize her: how she presents herself, the clothes she wears, her idealized femininity. Beneath your fascination I sense something else you want to keep hidden beneath your big-bad final boss persona. I understand.

Now here Princess Peach is, reading your diary, groaning at your yearning heart. Underneath that spiky, massive shell lies vulnerable meat.

Why is this suddenly not okay? I want to rip Peach away from the diary and kick Twink out the door. We shouldn’t be invading your personal thoughts.

Twink and Peach scurry on, languishing on the delectable details.

*Well, the Koopa Bros. got beaten by Mario, diary. He even set free that stupid Star Spirit I kept there. I'm so mad I can barely write! ‘Ohh, I'm Mario, I'm so big and strong and good and helpful...’*

To your private diary, you vent your disappointments and your frustrations. You entomb Mario’s haunting voice in words in order to process the animosity. Being the villain is lonely and you write these things to reach out. And here these infiltrators pillage your sole haven. I can do nothing but watch. The programmers have eliminated your privacy. I can’t believe Peach and Twink’s determination to conquer your secrets.

Peach instructs Twink to take their findings to Mario. Then you walk in.

“Oh no! I can't believe I left my secret diary lying out! It would be so embarrassing if somebody read that thing...” you say, so perfectly ironic. You see Peach standing before the open diary. She refuses to meet your eyes.

“Whuh... Wha... Whaaaat? What's the princess doing here?” You stumble backward and your arms windmill. Her guilt is all too clear. “AAhhhh!! You little sneak! You read my diary!”

My body flushes and my heart is racing. I am a part of this. I stood by and let this happen. I want to shred the whole scene. I want to rip it out of the storybook and burn it. You have no safe space to exist.

There is no hope for you in this game, either. I will lead Mario to collect the seven Star Spirits and overpower your stolen magic wand and fire breath. You will know the taste of sewer-splashed leather shoes and reinforced metal hammer. My hands will smell like steel for days no matter how much I wash them.

**Super Mario RPG, 1996**

Smithy has come to the Mushroom Kingdom and conquered Peach’s castle and yours. The typical narrative writhes in chaos. Mario and I come across you in the midst of a forest, crying. “I miss the good old days…” you sniffle, not looking at the camera. “Toadstool screaming in terror, Mario rushing in to save her…”

You turn and sees us watching your monologue. “Oh, Geez! It’s Mario!” You turn around and wipes your eyes. “Oops.. Okay, okay.. Calm down! Don’t let him see you like this! …” The text jumbles out, quivering. My heart is breaking. Mario is your enemy. You must be strong. You cannot demonstrate your weakness. I want to take you in my arms and tell you it’s okay, that I will stand with you, that you don’t have to internalize this grotesque narrative. You the villain, Mario the hero, and me the player who always brings you to your doom. These roles have always been imposed upon us. Mario is an agent and upholder of this toxic values system. What can you or I do but fulfill the parts we have always been forced to play? In this world, they have programmed us to behave and demand our participation.

You turn around miming confidence. “If Toadstool were at my castle waiting to be rescued… She’d be crying like a baby!”

You withdraw inside your protective shell of masculinity. I wish you would come out. I know that dark heft, the weight and safety of silence.

**Mario and Luigi: Bowser’s Inside Story, 2009**

Here you are at the end of the game. The Dark Star absorbed your DNA and you must fight a dark version of yourself in the midst of hurricane winds. This battle will give you everything you want: Princess Peach and the Mushroom Kingdom, and you will be able to take back your fiery castle.

I finally get to help you. It says right in the title: this is your story.

Unbeknownst to you, Mario and Luigi are inside your body right now, microscopically shrunken. They are helping you win, helping you defeat the dark force that has incapacitated the rest of the world, helping you until the moment they can escape and steal the glory. They manipulate your powerful body. Without your consent.

It is gross. They bonk and hammer your organs, poke and press where no body should be harassed. I am spinning dizzy.

When the battle is over and you step forward to claim the hero’s prize, the kingdom and the beautiful princess, Mario and Luigi burst from your body. You are finally the hero and the damned Mario Bros. ruin your triumph. They are here to ensure that structures don’t change. You are livid: “Having yourself some kind of hoedown in my body! MY BODY! I’ve never been so disgusted! No WAY do I stand for this!”

But the Mario Bros. proceed to thrash you. Two against one. Why can they never let you be? I am tired of hurting you, Bowser.

I have hid myself in my roles and obligations. I scoured the instruction manuals and fulfilled the secret challenges researched extensively the player’s guide. I finally see beyond the coding. It has taken 20 years to recognize how intentionally I have hurt you because it is easier to do so then defend your rights. I cannot relinquish my First-Player controller complex.

You retreat back to your tattered castle, beaten again. Your minions grovel at your feet. You decide to focus on rebuilding what you have lost. Remodeling isn’t evil.

Then a tiny bird flies into your window carrying a box from Peach’s Castle. It is beautifully wrapped with red ribbon and a thick, milky card. You are sick with the pain of fighting, heartsick, weary. You don’t want to open it. You know what it will do to you. I know this because your heart is mine. You know these gestures don’t mean anything, won’t go anywhere, shouldn’t be allowed to modulate in your head. You might hear my voice echo in your head: “What kind of person does this make me?” We have the habit of making meaning in the universe where there is none. You should leave the package alone. We both know. But I make you. Even now, I want to play until the final credits. Your hands slip the ribbon open and let the box fall away.

Inside is cake: delicious, sparklers sticking out the top, Peach at the top center, your face in icing in the middle, those terrible Mario Bros. on her left and right.

I’m tired of seeing this world beat you down. You are the easy villain, the target. I am tired of your isolated idealizations, your fantasies, your fragile attempts at reaching out to humanity, and the innumerable rejections you receive because they remind me of myself. I want to liberate you from these narratives that control your life. I want to absolve myself of my aggressions against you which is selfish. I want the me I see in you to be deleted because I am a coward. We could have validated each other.

You are not a cardboard character. You know this.

The cake glows on screen: thank you, Bowser.

I should have been a better person. The credits roll. It is too late for shoulda beens.

Game over.